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**Article**

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# Border Control and the Degradation of Labour

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## ABSTRACT

This article uses testimonies from private sector staff about their experiences of working in sites of short-term immigration detention and in facilitating deportation, to explore the material conditions of this form of custodial labour. Until now, most criminological accounts of criminal justice or border staff have paid little attention to them as workers. As a result, the connections between sites and practices of custody and capital have been obscured. Drawing on a range of scholarship about the labour market and the nature of work, the piece concludes by advocating for new alliances to challenge the precarity and poverty that both lead people into these jobs and justifies them and the exclusionary and divisive politics they engender.

**KEY WORDS:** Precarity, border control, labour, Dover, United Kingdom

## INTRODUCTION

On 17 March 2022, a small group of security guards from the little-known British private security firm, Interforce, boarded *The Pride of Kent* P&O cross-Channel ferry moored in Dover Harbour and informed its staff that they had two hours to collect their possessions and leave the boat; anyone who refused would be handcuffed.[1] P&O was terminating the employment of its entire 800-strong British crew (Duggan, 2022). Like the women and men employed on the ferry, the Interforce guards were local residents from nearby communities in and around Dover. Unlike those in P&O uniforms, however, many of whom had worked for their company for years and were on good salaries, the Interforce agents, who were 'security industry authority' (SIA) licence holders, were all employed on zero hours contracts. They would have attended

1 For the benefit of non-British readers, P&O operates ferries from a range of ports in the UK to Ireland, France and Holland. Those leaving from Dover travel to Calais, taking cars, freight, coaches, and pedestrian passengers.

just 4 days of induction training, during which, the company's job advertisements specify, they would also have been considered for 'role suitability'.

Before their part in enforcing P&O's cynical bid to push through new, and diminished, pay and conditions drew them to national attention (and widespread condemnation), Interforce had been quietly present on the Dover docks for some years. There, they have been contracted by the Home Office to perform a variety of tasks related to the other boats that come into Dover harbour, the dinghies which carry people across the Channel to seek asylum in the UK. Their deployment across these otherwise unrelated sectors highlights an important quality of the material landscape of border control, in which, together with other private security firms, Interforce provide the government much the same service they offered to P&O: a cheap, and above all, flexible set of enforcement options.

While there is a burgeoning criminological field of study on the privatization of border control (Bhatia and Canning, 2020; Prabhat, 2021; Bosworth and Zedner, 2022), scholars have spent little time on the effects of outsourcing this form of labour on those employed to do it. They have not, in other words, analysed border work as a job in its own right that is shaped by and contributes to wider market forces and social relations. Instead, much of the extant literature on immigration control, within criminology and elsewhere, has focused on its impact on those subject to border policing, detention, or deportation (Aliverti, 2013; de Noronha, 2022; Gerlach, 2023). A small body of research has examined the emotional impact of working in border control, exploring how officers make sense of their role and those whom they are paid to manage. Those studies, particularly in criminology, find that staff often compare their role with more familiar criminal justice operations. Thus, officers in detention centres reflect on similarities in their tasks to prison work, and immigration enforcement compare themselves to the police (Bosworth, 2014; Aliverti, 2020). Everyone, everywhere, relies on gender, as well as national and racial stereotypes, at least to some extent (Hall, 2010; Côté-Boucher *et al.* 2014; Parmar, 2018 Aliverti, 2021; Infantino, 2022; Lindberg, 2022; Bosworth, 2018).

This article builds on that scholarship to locate privatized border control within a constellation of other forms of poorly paid, precarious employment. It also contributes new material to criminological accounts of neoliberal penality, which, so far, have paid surprisingly little attention to precarity (Garland, 2001; Bell, 2014; although see De Giorgi, 2006; Cooper and Whyte, 2017). In so doing, it turns to older traditions of sociological and qualitative inquiry (Terkel, 1972; Sennett and Cobb, 1977; Willis, 1977; Reiner, 1978; Beck, 1992), and more recent anthropological and sociological explorations of work (Graeber, 2018; Kalleberg and Vallas, 2018) and its moral economy (Graeber, 2001; Fassin, 2020), to map continuities between this particular form of labour and others. Such material is supplemented by US studies of the ties between privatization, racial capitalism, and punishment (Gilmore, 2007, 2022; Story and Schept, 2018; Schept, 2022), which illuminate the economic impact and roots of carceral labour.

Drawing on testimonies gathered from Detainee Custody Officers (DCOs) and Managers (DCOMs) employed in sites of short-term immigration detention, I suggest that border control, for them, is 'first and foremost an employment opportunity' (Story and Schept, 2018: 17), even as it is inflected by ideas about race, gender, nationalism, and security. Most staff have few educational or professional qualifications; and very limited alternative employment options nearby. They have already experienced and very likely will face a lifetime of 'de-standardised labour' (Beck, 1992).

Under these circumstances, border control does not just make irregular migrants work hard and 'scared' (De Genova, 2013) to extract their labour (Martin, 2021). Like other forms of precarious work, it alienates those employed in this field, keeping their wages low, and obscuring what might otherwise be recognized as points of commonality with those in their care and control (Mezzandra and Neilson, 2013). The point is not to argue for equivalence of exploitation

or harm among these two groups. Nor do I claim that private security staff are natural allies in challenging coercive border practices; indeed, their salary depends upon them. However, as I will propose in the conclusion, public interventions by two of the unions representing state and private sector workers in late 2022 over the detention environment in the Manston Short-Term Holding Facility and the legality of plans to remove people seeking asylum to Rwanda, revealed that workers like these could indeed play a role in devising alternative futures, when concerns about working conditions, humanitarianism, and the law, briefly coalesced.

In building this argument, first I offer an account of the wider project of which this forms a part. Then I turn to Dover, and its role in British border control. In the following sections, I draw on staff testimonies from women and men employed by Mitie, Care & Custody on the Immigration Detainee Escorting Contract. In centring their accounts, I reveal extensive entanglements between border control and capital, before, turning briefly at the end, to map a possible future in which labour is neither degraded nor degrading, but where, instead, it offers the basis for constraining coercive state practices.

## DETAINEE ESCORTING: RESEARCH METHODS AND CONTEXT

The empirical component of this study began in late July 2019, after two and a half years of negotiation with the Home Office and two different private sector security firms. Just over 7 months into the project, research came to a halt when the UK went into national lockdown in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. For the next 2 years, the fieldwork stopped and started in response to the ongoing health crisis, including long periods when it was forced fully online. Matters were compounded by challenges at home and in my university caused by the pandemic, as well as by multiple changes in personnel across the sector over the research period, and by shifts in government policy and the law.

From the start, in other words, this has been a complex and disrupted project, in which as a solo researcher, occasionally accompanied by a research assistant, I have sought to document and understand the national 'immigration detainee escorting contract'. This part of the border control system in the UK has never been studied before. It is wholly contracted out to one private provider, currently Mitie, Care & Custody. Mitie, which also runs four of the country's seven immigration removal centres (IRCs), under a different financial arrangement, operates the parallel and intersecting systems known as Overseas Escorting (OSE) for deportations and In-Country Escorting (ICE) for everything else. 'Everything else' in this case includes custodial work in short term holding facilities (STHFs) in ports, airports, and immigration reporting centres, vehicle bases and vans which transport people under Immigration Act powers around the country and, somewhat confusingly, some enforced removals, where staff escort people onto a plane, but do not fly with them to their destination.

The escorting contract was awarded by the Home Office to Mitie in 2017 at an initial cost of £525 million to the public purse. It had previously been held by Tascor, part of the Capita Group, and prior to them, by G4S and Reliance. Before the government opted for a single provider model, they relied on multiple businesses and organizations to move people within and out of the country (Southon, 2007; Atwal, 2015). Changes in practice and contractual arrangements have, more than once, been triggered by tragedy. In 1993, for example, Joy Gardner died after being bound and gagged with four metres of tape by the members of the London Metropolitan Police deportation squad. Then, in 2010 Jimmy Mubenga suffocated on the plane prior to take-off to Angola, when the G4S overseas escorts placed him in a specific restraining hold that prevented him from breathing (Monaghan, 2013). More prosaically Mitie took over, after Capita, the parent company of Tascor, which had been roundly criticized by the 2016 Shaw Review, incurred significant financial losses and chose not to rebid for the contract (Shaw, 2016).

Methodologically, most of my study has involved non-participant observation of each of the tasks that workers on the escorting contract fulfil, from charter to scheduled flights, van journeys to collect people from prison and detention, and daily operations in short-term holding facilities. I have taken detailed field notes and have conducted formal and informal interviews. Over nearly 4 years, I have spoken to more than 200 members of staff, asking questions about the nature and impact of their work; their motivation for taking it on; and any concerns they have about it. I have, specifically, sought to engage them in questions about the purpose of border control and the impact of privatization, as well as probing them about race, gender and border control to better understand their moral and political views as well as their practical experiences. In addition to these observations, conversations, and interviews, I have been given various pieces of paperwork, internal reports and handbooks, and have gathered relevant legislation and policy documents, and followed parliamentary debates, logging mainstream and social media reports.

This article draws on that wider body of material. Reflecting the outsized policy impact of events on the South coast in Britain, it focuses on testimonies gathered from staff in and around Dover, to tease out local conditions, even as it makes clear that many of the issues raised there can be found elsewhere on the contract. This geographical area is a particularly important site for understanding border practices in the UK both because of the large numbers of people currently arriving on small boats from Northern France and because of the weight of history and symbolism attached to its 'white cliffs' and to the Castle above them (Hubbard, 2022). Dover, which has seen a steady economic decline over the past decades, that has only accelerated since Brexit, offers a glimpse into the social and economic factors that drive people to this career and shape their actions and beliefs. The kinds of 'solutions' that have been established in this region, including the increasing reliance on firms like Interforce, illuminate the links between precarity and permanently temporary solutions that define the neoliberal economy and its harsh border controls (Standing, 2011; Zwick, 2018; Fraser, 2022).

## ENDURING CRISIS (AND OPPORTUNITY) AT THE BORDER

As a key entry point to the UK, Dover has a long history of border enforcement. Its castle included one of the very first modern immigration detention facilities in the UK which opened in 1970, within the 19th century Officers' New Barracks complex. Remnants of this modest site, which reportedly had room for just 14 people (Evans, 1970: 3), can still be visited upon request to English Heritage, even though the rooms do not form part of the public museum. Notwithstanding its material traces, however, which include faded signage and dilapidated waiting rooms, this site is largely lost to history. More well-known is the Immigration Removal Centre further to the West, located in the Citadel, which operated from 2002 to 2015.

Although neither of these two institutions has held anyone for years, a number of places for detaining foreign national citizens operate nearby, within the Dover Docks, and since 2022, at the Manston Short-Term Holding Facility, which is twenty minutes away by car. Until recently, the dock sites were predominantly used for managing people caught trying to enter without appropriate paperwork (e.g. a passport or a visa) either hidden in lorries or arriving on a ferry. These days, by contrast, these units hold men, women, and children who travel ever more perilously across the Channel on small boats, colloquially referred to as 'RIBs' (rigid inflatable boats) by local staff; i.e. dinghies. According to the most recent Home Office (2022a) factsheet, 'From January 2018 to June 2022, Iranian (28%) and Iraqi (20%) nationals represented nearly half of all small boat arrivals'. From May to September 2022, however, there was 'a significant increase in the number of Albanians', accounting for 42 per cent of all arrivals. Nearly everyone claims asylum.

A glance at recent figures reveals the speed with which the situation in Dover has changed. Numbers increased rapidly from just shy of 300 arrivals in 2018, to nearly 30,000 three years later (Home Office, 2022c). These figures soon outstripped local structures and processes. Thus, on 26 October 2022, British media outlets reported that the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration, David Neal, had expressed grave concerns to the Home Affairs Committee about conditions and numbers in just one of the detention sites, at Manston, where 2,800 people were being held (Home Affairs Committee, 2022; Taylor, 2022,). One week later, the reported figures had risen further to 4,000 people (Tingle and Robinson, 2022).

To put these numbers into context – within the wider border control system in Britain, just over 2000 people in the year ending June 2022 were detained under Immigration Act powers across an undisclosed number of prisons, seven immigration removal centres (IRCs) and two Residential Short-Term Holding Facilities (RSTHFs) (Home Office, 2022b). Unlike Dover, where people are meant to be held only briefly before being moved on elsewhere in the country, officially most of those in IRCs are detained for the purpose of their removal or deportation. Manston is not just unusually large. It is also distinctive in its design, as people there are held in marquees rather than in buildings of bricks and mortar. Easy to throw up and quick to pull down, these shelters imply a temporariness to what otherwise appears to be an ongoing situation, without an end in sight.

Before Manston opened, people waited in the open air, no matter the weather, and then in tents in a rubble-strewn site known as Tug Haven on Dover's Western Docks (HMIP, 2020). They were later moved a few hundred metres away into a purpose-built facility at 'Western Jet Foil', constructed from prefabricated units that could easily be dismantled, and which, soon enough had to be supplemented by additional tents to manage the numbers of people arriving (ICIBI, 2022).

Well before they were hired by P&O in 2022, Interforce agents worked at Tug Haven, supporting Border Force. There, they had many roles, including guarding men, women, and children inside a white, stationary, double-decker bus, that was permanently parked behind a chain link fence to hold people awaiting coaches that would take them to longer-term accommodation. Interforce staff also secured the entrance and exits to tents within the wider site; a task they have continued to provide at Western Jet Foil.

The growth in the numbers of people arriving in Dover to seek asylum and the creation of new places of custody to hold them, has, undoubtedly, created new employment opportunities in a region where secure jobs are hard to come by. Some staff members I spoke to, like Nathalie[2], were optimistic about the opportunities being offered to her and her fellow workers. 'Come on, it's too obvious', she said. 'You know, Manston will be an IRC in a year or two years' time. That will take a lot of pressure off of London airports and holding rooms in London. And they can just be there for immigration purposes … I mean, there's plans somewhere, isn't there?' Yet, despite her hopes, the jobs that have been created for local people have remained precarious and temporary.

For example, whereas originally, Detainee Custody Officers (DCOs) employed by Mitie, Care & Custody managed all the onward transportation of those who arrived in Dover as part of the Immigration Escorting Contract (Bosworth and Singler, 2022), since March 2022 that work has been shared with Interforce. While Care & Custody employees drive unaccompanied children in their secure Mitie-branded vans the short distance from the Western docks to the 'Kent Intake Unit' on the overlooking bluff, or, once they have been 'processed' by the Home Office, from Manston to one of the Immigration Removal Centres (IRCs) around the country, Interforce has been contracted to manage all the other trips. As numbers of people arriving grew

2 This is not her real name. All participants have been given pseudonyms.

over the summer of 2022, these Interforce agents also began to guard people in Manston across a range of locations from marquees to a decommissioned gymnasium on site. Their job was to hold people waiting on a Home Office decision, or for space to open in one of the marquees managed by Mitie.

In October 2022, a third security provider in the Dover area joined in the process, when, as reported in *The Guardian*, the Home Office signed a new contract with the US private prison company MTC to work at Manston. This firm, which runs prisons and detention centres in a number of other countries, the paper suggested, will employ around 50 people who, like Mitie officers, will be accredited DCOs. As with those employed by Interforce, however, it seems that MTC staff will have minimal job security; since the company has been awarded a rolling contract, operating with just a five-week notice period to secure yet another set of tents (Davies, 2022). In contrast to Nathalie's hopes for long-term employment, in other words, border control jobs may simply amount to another stop-gap solution for local communities which have lost one in five of their industrial posts since 2006 (Dover District Council, 2021: para 7.5), and where wages lag behind national and regional averages (Thanet District Council, 2020: para 22, p. 12).

For the people in my study, employed by Mitie, such matters shape their everyday and intimate lives as well as their working life. Economic need and limited options nearby propel them to work and keep them in post, even as financial imperatives ensure that the outsourcing companies who employ them maintain a bare minimum of staff numbers and working conditions. As the next section will demonstrate, officers are not unaware of these connections between border control and capital, and their negative impacts. Yet they not only possess few means to resist or challenge them, but they are not always convinced it would be right to do so. In their words, we see how insecurity and uncertainty, as Kalleberg and Vallas (2018: 4) put it can 'have a profoundly conservatizing effect', not just because the means of collective action have been whittled away, but also because people's view of what might be possible has shifted (Bourdieu, 1998).

Relatedly, while staff members occasionally expressed unease about the treatment of specific individuals, or even of particular ethnic or national groups and thus what might otherwise be described as the racialized effects of border control, more commonly, they avoided thinking about or discussing their roles in those terms. Instead, women and men invoked national stereotypes and narratives about 'bogus' asylum seekers or referred to vague security threats to justify their work and to differentiate themselves from those in their care. Such frameworks not only helped them to overlook the violence of border enforcement, but also the structural disadvantages they shared with those subject to immigration control, as their precarity ensured a steady flow of capital to shareholders.

## PRECARIOUS WORK AND PERMANENTLY TEMPORARY SOLUTIONS AT THE BORDER

Nigel typified the older members of staff in the study. He had grown up in a nearby seaside town and, after leaving school with few qualifications, had performed a variety of manual labour in the area to support himself, cover a mortgage, and bring up a family; 'Although I left school with not a great deal, I achieved a lot', he said proudly. His children, however, were not so fortunate: 'My three boys have all moved away. My daughter's local, but she only works part time jobs. She works at like Dreamland [Amusement Park] and things like that'. His sons had left in search of more gainful employment, since 'there ain't really anything [here]. Everything's been … destroyed. We used to have boats, you could nip over to France and back on a ferry. We had freight coming in, ferry, we had an airport—it did passengers, did cargo freight. What is there now?'

This bleak economic backdrop was not limited to the UK's South coast, but rather was repeated across the country in or adjacent to many of the sites where Mitie operates vehicle bases, holding units, and other places of detention. DCOs everywhere had struggled to find consistent, reliable employment, before their stint in border control. While a small number had previously worked in nearby prisons or as police officers, most had no prior experience of custodial work before applying to become a DCO. Instead, their previous jobs ranged widely and defied easy characterization. Some, like Nigel, toiled at a variety of trades including coal mining, carpentry, building, metalworking, airplane refuelling, and butchery. Others, spoke of 'agency work' and zero hours contracts in warehouses. Still others had been on the factory floor in industries from meat packing to chemical plants, while a significant proportion had experience of the transportation sector, including driving HGVs, ambulances, and courier vans. Indeed, some continued in those posts alongside their role at Mitie. During the periods of national lockdown, in particular, many overseas escorts took on second (again, zero hours contract) jobs driving for Uber, Amazon, and Deliveroo to supplement their salary and fill their time when the planes were grounded and borders shut.

The night time economy was another common precursor to border work. Some people had managed pubs, or staffed their kitchens, other had poured the drinks behind the bar. Numerous men had 'worked the doors' at nightclubs and other venues. Women, by contrast, might have previously been home-makers, or have been employed in the privatized care sector.

In the overseas escorting side of the business, men and women had often held previous positions in the airport, as ground staff, airport security, baggage handlers or even, during the height of the pandemic, as air stewardesses who been let go when COVID-19 greatly reduced the demand for leisure and business air travel; 'It's not much different', they claimed, when I expressed surprise at this shift in career, before recounting stories of managing drunk, or difficult passengers, which they felt had given them transferable skills for this new line of work. Overseas escorts seemed to be more likely than others elsewhere in the contract to have served in the military, although less so than in the past. In the absence of official statistics, the absolute numbers are unavailable, but Mitie, like the prison service recruits from the armed forces. A number of the senior management team share this background.

There were also a handful of people who had university degrees, almost always in the field of criminology. For them, and for some others, escorting was seen to be a step on the way to a better job. 'It's good experience isn't it, for the police, or for Border Force?', people asserted. 'It looks good on a CV'.

Most of those I interviewed had been made redundant at least once before. Some were sacked by Mitie during the research project, while many more left of their volition. 'Staff attrition', as senior management refer to it, defines the sector as well as people's previous experiences of paid work. All these matters were particularly evident in Dover.

'I've been in retail all my life', Lee told me, 'so this is certainly a step outside the comfort zone'. Over 60, Lee had been apprenticed straight from school, and had been in continuous employment until, in 2022, he was suddenly and unexpectedly dismissed. The local firm he was working for 'went bust literally overnight. [I] got a phone call and no job the next day … . I've never been out of a job in my life', he remembered:

> "To suddenly get a phone call at half eight on a Sunday night to say that's it, your job no longer [exists] … it didn't sink in straight away… I was halfway through the third week and I think 'I can't do this, I can't be at home. I've never been out of work in my life', and that's when it started to hit home a bit, I think."

After a stint part-time as a delivery driver for a nearby supermarket, he took the test to become a DCO and, by the time I met him, had been employed in that role for 3 months.

Nigel, who was much the same age as Lee, described a similar pathway to border enforcement. Like Lee, Nigel had found himself unexpectedly out of work in his later middle age, after his semi-skilled manual job came to an end when the local business closed after Brexit. He turned first to the transportation sector, loading and unloading cargo onto a lorry. When his employer sought to vary his contract during a lull in the business, he resigned in protest; 'I don't do zero [hour] contracts', he insisted. His next post, still in transportation, however, was worse. The company kept him working 'under pressure all the time – you've got to get to destination, you've got to get it offloaded, you've got to get back. It's just pushing all the time … they went through a lot of drivers because they just push until you break'. When those conditions made him sick, he was sacked.

Whereas Lee and Nigel had spent long portions of their lives in periods of stable and sustained, albeit low-paid, employment, Owen, who was nearly 30 years younger, had never had any kind of job security or consistent paid work. The one thing he shared with his two older colleagues, was that he, too, had left school with no qualifications. For a number of years, he made do with odd jobs, helping here and there, and 'working the doors', until his wife set him an ultimatum; the aggression he was meting out at work as a bouncer and its night-time hours was changing him, she said, and she wanted better for their family than he had received from his. Around this time, Owen saw the advertisement for immigration custody work nearby.

None of these men, nor indeed anyone I interviewed, had aspired to work as a DCO. Many, were unaware of such jobs, up to the point of application. 'I didn't know this place existed to be honest', Lee admitted, 'and I live just down the road!'

At the time of writing, and after a pay rise in 2023, DCOs employed on the ICE contract, with 'London Loading' earn around £28,000 per year; those without make £4,000 less, while overseas escorts make a little more, at £30,000. DCOs in the north of England were particularly frustrated by the regional difference in remuneration, claiming that from April 2023, their hourly rate would be only 60p more than the minimum wage. Both versions of the salary remain well below the national median rate as reported by the Office for National Statistics (ONS, 2022). Equivalent to the wages of local and national bus drivers at National Express, they are considerably less than wages paid to public sector Border Force agents.

When asked about his quality of life that such a salary allows, Owen remarked dolefully, 'I earn enough to live on [in this job], I live, but not anything special. It's not enough to take a holiday, it's not really enough to even travel within the UK'. During a period when his wife was unemployed, he said, they had been forced to rely on the maximum amount of government support for families with two children, around £900 per month. Their future looked equally difficult. The pension he paid into through Mitie would not be enough to cover his bills; and, like most of those I spoke to who were under 50, he could not afford a mortgage.

In a holding unit in the North of England, Alicia disclosed additional financial worries. There was no question of taking a holiday. Her salary was not enough to repair her car; she had resorted to commuting to work by bus, and had deep concerns about her ability to cover her family's fuel costs over the winter to heat their house. Her husband only sporadically earned money, and had not been entitled to furlough payments during the pandemic. She was the primary earner, supporting him and their children. She had not finished school.

Under these circumstances, a key attraction of the post had been the simple fact that Mitie 'provided everything … The ad said all training was included'. By contrast, Alicia reported, 'All the other jobs I looked at needed experience or qualifications'. 'You do need basic maths, English, and common sense' her more senior colleague, Christian, interrupted at this point, clearly uneasy with this bald rendition of what was his job, too. 'There is a basic spelling check in the assessment day', he corrected her. 'All I remember', Alicia responded assertively, 'was that I had to show I could bend down and touch the floor. It was online because of Covid and I was

holding my phone to film myself doing it. It was difficult - I was worried I was going to drop the phone!'

Yet, notwithstanding concerns about pay and gripes about senior management and their (lack of) communication, many staff seemed broadly content with their lot, particularly compared with their other employment experiences. Mitie 'had looked after' him Nigel made a point of telling me, unlike his previous employer whose targets had caused him to collapse. Owen was even more effusive. He was 'very grateful' for his job, he told me. '[Mitie] had taken a chance on me and given me my first professional job … it was hard for someone … like me to get a good job and they had offered me an opportunity'.

For Christian, as with Nigel and Lee, being a DCO had provided much needed financial security for the period before retirement. 'It's ideal. It's comfortable', he said enthusiastically, gesturing around him to the narrow, cramped site in which he spent 12-hour shifts, 5 days a week. The holding unit where he worked alongside Alicia, like all sites of custody on the Escorting contract, had no natural light, and no privacy for staff or for the people they detained. It was small, cramped, dark, and airless. The only place for the DCOs to sit was at a narrow desk flanked by messy, overflowing, cabinets and shelves, overlooking two glassed-in custody rooms, which stood empty. Nobody was due to be detained by the Home Office for the next month. The days passed slowly.

Many staff were not uncritical of the neo-liberal forces that characterized their job. Despite his gratitude to Mitie, for example, Owen understood the cause of his low pay and reduced benefits in economic terms. It was caused by privatization: 'The problem is that the company is just a middle manager', he explained. 'They cream off the profit they make [from the Home Office] by not paying the workers very much'.

Yet, while he and many of his colleagues elsewhere diagnosed the cause of their financial situation, nobody saw a cure. Instead, Christian told me regretfully, the labour movement was weak, and there were few better alternatives nearby. Unlike previous times, when people had demonstrated against fuel rises or pit closures, to keep any job these days, he said, workers had to 'put up or shut up'. Indeed, he was not entirely sure he disagreed; if it was his business, he admitted, he also would not wish to pay for sick leave, or to offer too many benefits. For Owen, meanwhile, shift work, tedium and a physically and morally uncomfortable holding unit, was simply put, the best job he had ever had. 'This is the first professional environment I have worked in', he said. 'Here I'm working for The Home Office [sic] -- so it's professional'.

The inertia such economic realities inspired in the DCOs shaped their views of their job as well as their interactions with those whom they guarded, simultaneously diffusing difficult questions about race and inequality, while also embedding such matters in their daily routine. Thus, while officers frequently claimed that they too would go to great lengths to protect or support their families if they had faced the circumstances of the people in their care, they stopped short of explicitly acknowledging their shared (economic) precarity, turning instead to racialized tropes about desert and dangerousness to justify their treatment. Nigel's account was typical. 'Some of the guys are very nice', he began. 'Some are polite, some are chatty, some can speak quite good English … Others, they just think this country's a joke really. All the same age, all fighting age, all fit'. For Nigel, there was no question of class solidarity with these young men, destined to join the ranks of the precariat, young and fit as they were. Instead he dismissed them as ungrateful and dangerous, 'all fighting age'.

As with their views on privatization, staff were not always consistent. Nor were they totally oblivious or sanguine about locking up people seeking relief from a host of global inequalities (Bauman, 1998; Mezzandra and Neilsen, 2019). Owen, for example, was openly critical of what he perceived to be the preferential treatment that Ukrainian people received in the UK relative to others whom he confined in the short-term holding facility where he worked. Although

pleased that the Home Office had devised legal routes for Ukrainians fleeing the war, he thought it was 'disgraceful compared to how people responded to all the other countries. Is it just the colour of their skin?' he wondered aloud. 'What's the difference to Iraqis or Afghans or even in Africa when people are being slayed all the time [sic]. People should be sympathetic to all human beings'. Nathalie, likewise, wanted me to know that she believed 'there are some SAMs [single adult males] that are genuine', despite the generally hostile views her colleagues like Nigel (and politicians and the media) expressed about that population. She could 'have a joke' with the Albanians, she said approvingly. 'They aren't all bad'.

For the most part however, the women and men I spoke to avoided such thorny topics as race or racism, insisting on the limits of their personal influence or responsibility in the industry in which they worked. They were just 'small cogs' in a 'big wheel', they claimed; or, if they were in a more senior role, they would speak in the official corporate language, citing the needs and desires of the Home Office, whom they referred to as their 'customer'.

Such beliefs no doubt conveniently stripped officers of their moral responsibilities to those they detained, and thereby allowed them to minimize any discomfort they might otherwise have felt about the violence they inflict in so doing (Hughes, 1962; Bauman, 1991; Eriksson, 2016). However, their views and experiences were more than affective responses, or techniques of neutralization (Sykes and Matza 1957) of the kind that have documented in other parts of the border control system (Bosworth, 2019; Lindberg, 2022). Rather, they spoke to the realities of outsourcing where all outcomes are subject to financial scrutiny and penalties, and thus to the 'bottom line'. Staff are easily replaceable and they know it.

## MAKING SENSE OF BORDER WORK

The posts described by those I interviewed might be considered in Graeber's (2018) provocative terms as 'shit jobs'; characterized as they were by low pay, tedium, and poor working conditions. Indeed, given that short term holding facilities stay empty for weeks at a time, the vast majority of planned deportations are abandoned, and officers duplicate paperwork in hard copy and online, producing detailed records primarily destined to languish and be unread for years in a warehouse, these roles might even be defined by Graeber as 'bullshit jobs', with no clear purpose or effect, other than maintaining bureaucracies and the market logic that fills the wallets of their bosses while keeping their own wages low. Although staff often claim they interact with those they detain or deport, by playing card games with the men and jigsaws with children, on my visits, most appeared to follow Owen's pared down account: 'all I do is offer them food and try to do their paperwork.' Or, in the dehumanizing terms of his colleague Boris, 'I just keep them fed and watered'. Aside from a few individuals, or during sporadic moments of action or crisis, most officers I observed, sat still all day, staring at, but mainly ignoring the people arrayed before them, while chatting among themselves or scrolling through websites on their phone.

Yet, as Studs Terkel (1972) found in his interviews conducted half a century ago across the US, and as sociologists have replicated in studies since, people search for and find meaning in their work, no matter how banal, tough, distasteful, or precarious it is (Deery *et al.*, 2019). In their daily interactions employees also exchange value, build, and negotiate a normative worldview (Thompson, 1971; Graeber, 2001; Fassin, 2020). The political economy, is, in these ways, firmly connected to a moral one.

The people I interviewed were no different. Despite his financially precarious future, and the limited opportunities of his present, for example, Owen made a point of telling me with pride that his DCO salary, about which he was otherwise dissatisfied, had allowed him to arrange additional tuition for his daughter. She had been struggling to learn online during the COVID lockdowns, until he paid for extra help, in a move he hoped 'would make the

difference between her having a future and ending up in a dead-end job'. This was not merely a financial story, of being able to afford the maths lessons. Instead, Owen attributed his ability to provide for his daughter and his recognition that she needed help to the nature of his DCO role and to the beneficial effect it had had on him. His job had made him 'calmer and more sympathetic and empathetic', he said. His wife had told him that it had improved him as a partner and had made him a better father. It had even educated him about global inequalities and race relations: 'I used to be judgemental about people', he recalled, 'and where they came from'.

Existing literature on borders or custodial staff offers little guidance on how to make sense of such claims other than as a form of denial about the coercion and violence, however oblique that this man was undoubtedly inflicting on the vulnerable people he confined (Cohen, 2001; Mayblin *et al.*, 2020). And to be sure, it is important not to overlook that aspect of border enforcement. Even though they do not 'fight everyday', as Alicia rightly noted, officers retain the right to use force so long as it is 'reasonable and proportionate' as their training manual states (National Offender Management Service, 2014: 6). So, too, even when violence is not applied, its threat is omnipresent. In the tents at Manston STHF, not only did officers threaten segregation in a nearby parked cellular van to maintain order, but, in 2022, a man died of untreated diptheria. The experience of confinement feels painful and punitive no matter how brief. For the most vulnerable it can have deadly consequences.

A distinct, and wide-ranging body of scholarship on 'dirty work' (Hughes, 1962) offers another perspective. Owen's claims about self-growth and decency may well have helped him to manage the stigma of his profession (Thumala *et al.*, 2011; Löfstrand, *et al.*, 2015; Deery *et al.*, 2019; Press 2022). Officers understand that border control is morally compromised, or at least contested. Most claim they rarely speak about their work to outsiders, referring blandly to their role instead in deliberately broad terms as being 'in security', 'at the airport', or 'with the government'. The politicization of and stigma surrounding their duties constrains their everyday activities, in large ways and small, from acting as a barrier to socializing together because 'someone would always bring work up', to their use of local amenities: 'I won't go in a shop with my uniform', Nigel noted, 'Because it might upset someone'. It also lies behind common assertions of leaving their job and its concerns 'behind the gate', and 'blocking it out' as Nathalie put it.

Owen's claims about his personal transformation might also be considered a response to what Richard Sennett and Andrew Cobb (1977) labelled the 'hidden injuries of class' by which they meant those social and economic factors which had personally and structurally denied him the chance of autonomy, self-realization, and dignity including his inadequate and interrupted education and his enduringly precarious finances. In contrast to his past experiences, his job with Mitie, no matter its limitations, had taught him to aspire for more. In common with many of his private sector colleagues throughout the country, he concluded, 'I might have to go the long way around, but I'd like to end up working for Border Force', with its better pensions and job security.

It is here that the implications of Interforce comes back into focus, since as companies like it, with their zero hours contract model, or MTC and its short-term options, enter the border security market, Owen's aspirations for job security and career development are unlikely to come to fruition. Rather, these firms will drive down costs and conditions, which are already extremely poor, for those subject to border control as well as for those like Owen, who enforce it, by providing less to the workers and to those detained or deported on more flexible terms to the government. Such an approach, which promises a permanently temporary solution, reveals what it is at stake in the degradation of labour, as legal protections of the vulnerable are sacrificed in the name of sovereignty to shareholders.

## CONCLUSION: BORDER CONTROL, THE CARCERAL STATE, AND THE FUTURE OF WORK

The economic relationship between detainees and border guards, in which one provides the employment of the other, makes it difficult to create solidarity between them. Such divisions are compounded by xenophobic views and by the increasing securitization of border control and the attendant criminalization of mobility (Bosworth, Parmar and Vázquez, 2018). Yet, in the summer of 2022, the interdependence of these populations was unexpectedly laid bare when the Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS), representing Border Force agents and immigration caseworkers, joined forces with activists and lawyers over the 'horrendous, inhumane and dangerous' conditions at Manston (PCS, 2022). While similar groups in the private sector did not join this legal dispute, their union, the Prison Officer Association (POA), had already published a press release listing a series of 'concerns' about conditions and processes within Manston STHF: 'there have been days, where the facility have [sic] run out of food and drinking water … the marquees are crowded, levels of bedding on site have become inadequate, laundry facilities are inadequate, cleaning regimes are not adhered to as the number of residents does not drop to allow cleaning teams to attend, issues have been raised around high levels of condensation within the marquees that has led to mould and bacteria developing' (POA, 2022).

On the one hand, neither the POA nor the PCS is a natural ally in crafting an abolitionist future (see also Page, 2011) – and indeed, they did not demand the closure of Manston. Rather the POA called for 'A high-level solution … to move residents on in a timely manner and allow Manston to return to its core function, a short-term holding facility' (POA, 2022), while the PCS asked the Home Secretary 'to desist from holding detainees beyond the 24-hour statutory time limit at Manston' ((Taylor 2022b)). Yet, their actions formed part of a public outcry which did, ultimately, have a transformative effect. Having stalled for months, the Home Office rapidly moved people from Manston to alternative accommodation and briefly, emptied the centre. Although numbers have gone back up, the site is now subject to scrutiny and oversight in ways it was not previously.

The public condemnation of conditions and practices by those contracted to manage Manston, and its presentation by the POA (2022) as a matter of 'safety' as well as 'decency', offered a glimpse of a different kind of future, in which labour provides the basis of a shared, just society. While 'migrants' are the obvious product and target of border control (Martin, 2021), the union's intervention acknowledged that detention conditions constitute the working conditions of its members. The treatment of one, is thus, ineradicably linked to that of the other. While it is hard to be too optimistic, since the government continues to pursue ever harsher border control policies, these events reveal the possibility and, thus, the necessity, of new alliances and political solutions.

At Manston, after all, things could have been otherwise. The holding facility has been established on a former RAF base. An adjacent airstrip, which Nathalie hopes will one day be used for mass deportations, has been the subject of a longstanding application to reopen as a freight hub. The area around both sites could have been turned into affordable housing with schools and local shops. Investment in roads, drains, and other forms of infrastructure might have kept people like Lee and Nigel in the trades they had mastered, and allowed their children to live locally, while also expanding the capacity of the state to offer people seeking asylum homes and futures. That seems a vision worth pursuing for everyone.

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