

# Negotiating Worldly Relationships or Unionising for the Planet

## Commentary

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**United Voices of the World -  
Section of Architectural Workers (UVW-SAW)<sup>1</sup>**

### *Abstract*

Workers and nature are exhausted by architectural production. WE ARE TIRED. As a trade union of architectural workers in the UK, UVW-SAW members reflect on the project of workplace organising as renegotiating relationships: between workers, and the world.

Worker and nature exploitation are closely intertwined: both are subject to the extractive rationale of capital. Although an awareness of architecture's entanglement with environmental destruction is flaunted in academia, practice and professional institutions, little is done beyond the pledge. Across the sector, the green-washed discourse of necessary transformation still conceives of architects as the agents of change - without recognising the ties to capital which restrict meaningful action. Instead, we position ourselves as architectural workers: realising our crucial position in feeding planetary exhaustion through our own overwork. Radical possibilities emerge when recognising our plural subject position, inclusive of all workers implicated in the production of architecture, thus opening real opportunity for disruption.

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**1 - UVW-SAW is a newly-formed member-led trade union for architectural workers in the U.K. (2019). SAW members collectively take action and fight against the negative impacts of architectural work on workers, communities, and the environment.**

06 December 2020: Annual General Meeting of the Section of Architectural Workers trade union, UK. As the first year of our organisation comes to an end, we reflect collectively on our achievements so far. In the last 18 months we have joined picket lines, self-trained in employment law, formulated press releases denouncing the fraud and abuse in our workplaces, stood up to the employers that were taking advantage of us, and organised support networks with our colleagues and peers. On the Zoom slideshow, a printed graphic of a weary eye, a clock in lieu of the iris, serves as a reminder of where the project began.

Of all the possible things architectural workers wanted to change about their jobs, overwork seemed as good a place to start as any. “WE ARE TIRED” was among the first slogans we stuck onto placards to promote the cultural shift we wanted for our industry, calling out burn-out culture, its pervasiveness and glorification. Our friends in the Marx reading group kept noticing descriptions of Victorian factories that sounded strangely like contemporary architectural offices. *No 9-to-5 mentality. The working day contains the full 24 hours, with the deduction of the few hours of rest without which labour-power is absolutely incapable of renewing its services.* The game of guessing which was which (Dezeen Jobs or Das Kapital?) did not distract us from the realisation that workers today are still living out the logic of maximum labour-power extraction. *It is self-evident that the worker is nothing other than labour-power for the duration of their whole life, and that therefore all their disposable time is by nature and by right labour-time, to be devoted to the self-valorisation of capital architecture.*

Never far from the exploitation of the worker lurks the exploitation of nature – another resource equally subjected to the extractive rationale of capital. Every practitioner, school and professional institute today flaunts their awareness of architecture’s capacity for environmental destruction: from the production, transportation, construction of material elements, to energy consumption throughout a building’s lifetime. Over the last few years in the UK alone, architectural workers like many others have joined the protest movements demanding immediate climate action. Petitions and declarations abounded, and every firm expressed its “commitment to addressing the climate and biodiversity emergency.” Yet despite all the pledges, it seems that the initial impetus is running out of steam. Major design practices are already reframing their individual responsibility to the environment to suit their commercial ambitions, green-washing their way back into business-as-usual. And it is in no way surprising. After all, the discourse of necessary transformation in the face of environmental collapse still conceives of *architects* as the agents of change, when in fact architects cannot so easily grant themselves the autonomy from capital they require to have a meaningful effect on the climate emergency.

Meanwhile, the fundamental link between natural and worker exploitation remains untapped. Once we realise that architecture’s social and



ecological damage is only made possible by our labour as workers, that planetary exhaustion is indeed fed by worker exhaustion, then radical possibilities emerge. Just imagine if all of those who marched for the climate and expressed support of a Swedish pupil going on a school strike, also refused to work on projects that opposed their beliefs and ethics: prisons, airports, high-end housing, unsafe construction sites... “WE ARE TIRED - ON STRIKE FOR SOCIAL & CLIMATE JUSTICE!” The site of the struggle against ecological breakdown is not the parliament nor the street, but the workplace; and agents of change are therefore not the architects but the architectural workers, a term inclusive of all those



ANOTHER LATE  
NIGHT?



NO MORE  
UNPAID  
OVERTIME

necessary for the production of architecture: the receptionists, the drafts-people, the assistants, the office cleaners, administrative staff, clerks of works, security guards, technicians, construction workers, BIM managers, document controllers, bid coordinators, architects... the list goes on. The distinction is subtle but profound, as it shifts our attention towards a plural understanding of agency, where power relies not on individual deeds but on collective responses to collective issues. This holds the possibility of a radical restructuring of power relationships, in the workplace and in the worlds produced in these workplaces.

To build such collective political agency among workers necessitates a particular kind of infrastructure, one we might call a worker-led union. We have been coming together as the Section of Architectural Workers (SAW) for the last 18 months and call upon all workers to join. SAW does not exist independently of us, its members, and therefore cannot act on our behalf: it is merely the vehicle of our empowerment as architectural workers, a space to autonomously organise and negotiate our professional and worldly relationships – in the workplace, across society, and indeed at a planetary scale. Through our union we upskill each other and develop the resources necessary to organise collectively, in order to effect the changes we want to our working conditions, to the city and the environment. In concrete terms, we train and support each other through workplace disputes and legal battles against our employers; we organise ourselves to obtain better terms of employment; we develop our connections to other organisations and campaigns, to support them and find common ground; we map the world of work and develop the appropriate language and tools to navigate existing power structures; very importantly we broadcast our voices to inspire other workers to take action for themselves and in solidarity with others.

For this is the project: to transform the landscape of architectural labour, with ramifications beyond the boundaries of our industry. It is about ending the endemic exhaustion of human and earth resources, the reproduction of overwork, precarity and discrimination, and rebuilding the balance of power from the bottom-up, in order to produce, at last, the responsible architecture that we are capable of.