

**Beyond a bad attitude?
Information workers and their prospects through the pages of *Processed World****

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It's now thirty years since the first issue of *Processed World* (*PW*) hit the streets of San Francisco. Hunt around on the net, and you can find a snippet of film footage showing three editors of *PW* pacing the Financial District sidewalk, dressed in outlandish costumes (a computer terminal, a can of nuts, and something else – a punch card? the corporate ladder?), waving copies of their magazine (Shaping San Francisco 1982). A year or so later, the *PW* collective would organise a lively bus tour of Silicon Valley, visiting points of interest that made plain the military connections and dubious management practices of the rising computer industry. But to fail to look beyond this, dismissing *PW* as no more than a zany eighties 'anti-tech' revisiting of the Merry Pranksters (Beshner 1984), is to misunderstand the project altogether. From its inception, the journal 'with a bad attitude' worked to promote workplace rebellion amongst 'the majority of the work force, i.e. information handlers' (Cabins, 1983a, p.9), employed – typically in an office setting – to 'file, sort, type, track, process, duplicate and triplicate the ever expanding mass of "information" necessary to operate the global corporate economy' (Athanasίου 1981, p.16). Whilst ultimately failing in its goal, *PW* proved to be an innovative undertaking on a number of levels, from its critical account of information work for capital and the resistance this engendered, to the ways in which the journal sought to mobilize the printed word and graphic design to its ends.

Within the space of a few short years, as the Reagan era ushered in a new phase of conformity in both workplace and society, it became clear to editors and readers alike that the premises that had originally inspired *Processed World* were more and more difficult to realize in practice, at least in the short term. Without abandoning either its left libertarian stance or its concern for the sphere of paid work, its editors chose to broaden their field of view in search of what one of them would call an 'aesthetics of resistance' (Med-O 1986, p.53). Issues continued to appear into the nineties and beyond, although with decreasing regularity (the latest was published in 2006, after a five year hiatus, and may have been the last).

Processed World's circulation may never have topped 5,000 (Gee 1993, p.245), although that figure was respectable for a publication positioned outside the mainstream culture and media of its time. A continuing if subterranean influence within left libertarian circles in North America and beyond, the journal has since been remembered as part of 'a little-recognized punk culture golden age for alternative publishing' (Solnit & Schwartzberg 2000, p.35), and as a 'legendary magazine [that] covered the growing pains of white-collar office work in the pre-Internet information economy throughout the 1980s' (Ross 2003, p.267). In terms of its contributions to popular visual culture, *Processed World* can also lay claim to hosting some of the earliest work by cartoonists such as 'Tom Tomorrow' (Dan Perkins) and Ted Rall. Yet *Processed World* is not simply of historical interest. Examined from the perspective of 2011, it can be argued that many of the questions around information work and workers raised in the early years of the publication continue to be relevant, making their revisiting timely.¹ For not only have information and information technology continued to infuse present day work settings, but that sense of

ambivalence – ambivalence concerning one’s identity, the prospect of a ‘career’, communication with fellow employees, indeed the very possibility and/or desirability of finding fulfilment in paid work – underpinning the flow of words in the pages of *Processed World* remains an all too common feature of information work today (Armano 2010).

This article will explore the images of office workers that emerge in the first fifteen or so issues of *Processed World*, as its editors and readers attempted a collective self-portrait, centered upon the new generation of temporary staff (temps) then being recruited to the swelling ranks of white collar employees. In the process, I want to address *PW*’s reading of information work, its analyses of office work regimes (including the deployment of technologies within the latter), as well as some of the individual and collective snapshots provided of the white collar workforce, above all as these were conveyed in letters, poems, stories and articles. In addition, I also want to examine the question of advocacy as this arose within *PW*. I will argue that even if the term itself was largely absent, advocacy was nonetheless addressed within the magazine in two related senses:

- the relationship between those who saw themselves as politically engaged (or in the more prosaic language used by Christopher Winks (1983, p.24), ‘all of us who are able to name our misery and even analyze its socio-economic origins’) and the broader constituency of information workers;
- the question of what *PW* stood for, i.e. what it ‘advocated’.

‘hello out there’

Rebellion can be fun, and humor subversive (*Processed World* 1981, p.ii).

With hindsight, it’s not difficult to lay out the place-specific elements that came together in and around the Bay Area to make *Processed World* possible: a broad and well-entrenched alternative scene, underpinned by a (not always easy) convergence of social and political subcultures; a booming FIRE sector (finance, insurance, real estate), symbolised by San Francisco’s burgeoning downtown skyline; last but not least, the proximity of a new locus of accumulation, which has since come to be known throughout the world as Silicon Valley (Braunstein & Doyle 2001, McGovern 1998, Kenney 2000).

Once the mass movements of the sixties had receded, leninist perspectives would dominate those US circles that continued to self-identify as revolutionaries (Elbaum 2002, O’Brien 1977-78). While the San Francisco of the time was no different in this respect, its political scene was also notable for the presence of a lively left libertarian subculture, within which different brands of anarchism and libertarian marxism variously co-mingled and collided. If a common thread could be found running through many of these circles, it was a certain fascination with the Situationist International (Knabb 2007, Carlsson & Leger 1990, pp.15-17)). In the Bay Area of the seventies, a situationist-influenced stance could manifest itself in quite different ways, from the often inwardly focussed intensity of ‘pro-situ’ grouplets, to more public forms of engagement through satirical street performance and the production of ‘detourned’ leaflets and posters. In certain ways, indeed, *PW* can be seen as one attempt to break out of a milieu which had become increasingly self-absorbed by the end of the seventies: or as one critical

voice put it, where theoretical rigour and an often well-justified disdain for unthinking political activism too often came at the price of practical irrelevance (Not Bored n.d.).

For *PW*ers, taking up clerical work a generation ago was not inspired by the sort of zeal that had motivated certain leftist groups of the time to direct their members to ‘colonize’ workplaces deemed to be of strategic significance (Taylor 2007). For the most part, office work was simply something that many in the *PW* circle fell into when a new flow of income was needed (Med-O 1986, p.51).² For those with some experience of tertiary education, a circumstance that described many of the journal’s founders, the office was an obvious place to look for employment; after all, some of them would soon argue, one of the main (one of the few?) aptitudes bequeathed by a close encounter with universities was precisely ‘a rudimentary ability to “handle information”’ (Cabins, Holz & Michaelson 1982, p.55). In any case, in a period of dramatic industrial restructuring and relocation such as gripped North America in the late seventies and early eighties, white collar work was one segment of the job market where the demand for labor continued to be strong, drawing increasing numbers of women and minorities alongside white male college graduates into a complex new workplace hierarchy (Glenn 1985). From this perspective, then, producing *PW* offered a means to make sense of a world of paid work that many of the editors and their friends regularly moved in and out of; it offered a way of making contact with other dissident information workers; finally, it offered ‘a creative outlet for people whose talents were blocked by what they were obliged to do for money’ (Processed World Collective 1991, p.231).

The first issue of *PW* provided a clear sense of the project to be developed. The cover showed a human torso with a computer terminal and keyboard in place of a head, and posed the question: ‘Are you doing the processing? ... or are you being processed?’ A brief introduction entitled ‘hello out there’ presented the journal as a ‘contact point’ created explicitly for those office workers who, already less than impressed with their lot, desired ‘something better’. The articles that *PW* sought to publish, the reader was informed, aimed to ‘challenge the assumptions upon which this society is built’. Since capitalism was destructive, alienating and innately boring – circumstances epitomised by the modern office regime – that ‘something better’ could only be created through struggles that must be collective, yet also ‘fun’. A fundamental prerequisite for such mass struggles was some means of ‘breaking down the barriers’ that currently kept separate the common lot of all those with nothing to sell but their ability to work (PW 1981, p.ii). Or as one of the editors would put it elsewhere in the same issue, ‘For those of us who work in offices the first step toward a better life is communication with each other’ (Cabanas 1981, p.14). With this in mind, the *PW* editors ended their introduction with an entreaty for readers to use the publication as a vehicle to share not only their experiences of wage labor, but also their ‘dreams’ (PW 1981, p.ii).

These sentiments were restated eloquently in the journal’s opening piece, ‘Manuscript found in a typewriter’ (Winks 1981a). Written in the first person like many of *PW*’s subsequent ‘Tales of Toil’, the article expressed conflicted sentiments upon returning to paid employment. The picture painted of office work was a deadening one, where the drab uniformity of the clerical labor process rendered each workplace indistinguishable from the next, particularly for the growing number of temps circulating from one firm to another. Insult was added to injury for those, like the author, with an evident love of language, obliged to take dictation where this could only mean having to ‘transcribe bullshit, useless, pointless bullshit’ (Winks 1981a, p.6). In such a

setting, everything that mattered must be ‘in writing’, so that ‘The word becomes an accessory to concealment instead of expression’, and the passive voice reigned supreme in managerial pronouncements (Winks 1981a, p.4).³ In the face of all this, the author asked, what could ‘freedom’ mean for clerical workers? The best that could be done under the circumstances, it seemed, was to define a starting point for an anticipated ‘new spirit’ of ‘rebellion’, grounded in trying to maintain

a minimum of self-respect ... From the many acts of resistance, however insignificant, that we would engage in to prevent ourselves succumbing to resignation and boredom, a new spirit could very well emerge (Winks 1981a, p.7).

The format of the inaugural number set the scene for issues to come. Not only were there to be articles devoted to analysis and critique, but also short stories, poetry, and fake ads – even the fotonovela genre would make an appearance in later numbers. Soon a letters section would become a central feature, at times taking up nearly a quarter of the pages in an issue. As a consequence, *PW* often read (and looked) more like a fanzine (Triggs 2006) than a traditional leftist publication – to the delight and amusement of many readers, and the consternation of others, including some fellow radicals. Most strikingly, the humor in the new publication was of a notably different type to the somewhat heavy-handed sarcasm of the local pro-situ scene: frequently in dubious taste, it was altogether more playful in style and intent, as epitomized by the jokey pseudonyms commonly chosen by contributors (‘Mal Testa’, ‘Zoe Noe’, ‘Gidget Digit’, ‘Nomda Plume’, ‘Ana Logue’). While there would be little talk of morality (as opposed to morale) or ethics (although ‘the Protestant work ethic’ came in for a regular hammering), at stake was a fundamental clash of values, one that counter-posed ‘subversive behavior’ against ‘the present global “order”’ (Anon 1983, pp.34-35).

Just a cog in the wheel?

OFFICE HAIKU
Inside
Overloaded
Workday
Of constant noise
And paper answers (Clavir 1983, p.20).

The early issues of *PW* laid out a sustained and deeply hostile depiction of the modern office, ranging from the nature, purpose and organization of the work conducted within it, to the technologies used along the way. In the process, editors and letter writers sought to make sense of the white collar workforce: not only what its members were expected to do in exchange for pay, but what many of them actually did, and how all this connected to their trajectories and aspirations.

As a prelude to examining *PW*'s stance, it might be useful to consider a couple of the early eighties' more important academic studies of office work and workers, the first of which was undertaken by Rosemary Crompton and Gareth Jones (1984). Seeking to extend the discussion of clerical work outlined in a chapter of Harry Braverman's (1974) classic *Labor and*

Monopoly Capital, these authors insisted upon the gendered nature of the office environment, and concluded that

The deskilling, routinisation, and fragmentation of non-manual work is not a trend that will be reversed, and that the ‘office proletariat’ of the future is likely to include an increasing proportion of men, as well as women (Crompton & Jones, 1984, p.250).

Much of the significance of this British study lay in its efforts – in contrast to Braverman himself (Gambino 1979) – to pay some heed to what *Labor and Monopoly Capital* (1974, pp.26-7) had termed ‘the modern working class on the level of its consciousness, organization, or activities’. *White-Collar Proletariat* was also of interest for the attention it gave to the impact of computerisation on the office regime, and for its scepticism as to IT’s capacity to restore “‘meaning’ and ‘purpose’” to contemporary clerical work (Crompton & Jones, 1984, p.48). All of this was conducted within a social definition of skill and skill hierarchies that saw these categories as partly bound up with the degree of control over one’s work, and partly as the outcome of workplace resistance to managerial efforts at ‘diluting’ existing skills levels (Crompton & Jones 1984, p.59). In the process, three broad layers of white collar employees were identified: a mass who performed their tasks, with little apparent discretion, under the direction of rules; those at the other extreme with considerable ‘self-control’ over their labor process; finally, a middle stratum that combined some elements of discretion with external regulation.

A key (if still numerically minor) component of the expanding white collar workforce in the late seventies and early eighties was computer staff, about whom Crompton and Evans had provided only a brief if informative discussion. Interestingly, one of the more important scholarly reflections on IT workers written in the period was similarly influenced by Braverman’s writings, this being Philip Kraft’s 1977 book *Programmers and Managers. The Routinization of Computer Programming in the United States*. As its subtitle suggests, Kraft’s study saw the largely male population of programmers and systems analysts as fighting a losing battle against the taylorisation of their work. Or perhaps ‘fighting’ was altogether too strong a word, since according to Kraft (1977, p.106), the ‘carefully cultivated individualism’ of such employees had to date left them unable to counter the growing deskilling of their profession, with few indications that this situation was likely to change any time soon.

Seen in the light of these studies, the accounts of information work printed in *PW* offered fascinating insights into the social construction of the office pecking order of that time, including the meaning of control within the workplace. The latter was understood not only in terms of the relative status and pay associated with various job roles, but also the degree to which the volume of output could be regulated by employees themselves. For if the editors of *PW* and many of their correspondents tended to agree with the likes of Braverman, Crompton, Jones and Kraft that the great mass of office workers were employed to perform highly routinised tasks, this did not mean that these employees lacked the means (individual and/or collective) to limit their productivity in a number of important ways, and develop agendas at odds with those of their employers.

A first significant theme in *PW*’s portrait of office work was that of bureaucracy. Here the arguments advanced recalled in certain ways Jaroslav Hašek’s critique of the juggernaut that was the Austro-Hungarian war machine of the First World War. As Ian Johnston (n.d.) has noted,

Hašek's novel *The Good Soldier Švejk* is more than a satire of military hierarchy or the absurdities of mechanised warfare: rather, it is an attack on 'bureaucracy itself ... the very idea that such a way of doing things confers any benefits whatsoever'. *PW* was no less sparing in its account of office work in the early eighties. In the article 'The Office as Metaphor for Totalitarianism', for example, unflattering comparisons were drawn between the internal structure of the US corporate office and the organization of society as a whole within the Eastern bloc (Winks 1981b), while one correspondent observed in the following issue that 'The idea of having a machine made of humans is not a good idea' (C. D. 1982, p.12). As poignantly expressed in a poem from the journal's eighth issue, this 'machine made of humans' had a knack of overlaying and warping relationships between individuals, attempting to bend them to its own goals:

MY LEAD AT WORK

She's not a real boss
Not really.
She does the same work we do.
She can neither hire nor fire.
She shares her food
Sometimes brings something
(licorice malted milk balls
a homegrown tomato)
especially for you.
She's nice. She gardens.
Will not tolerate a racist joke.
Has had a hard life:
Her husband left her on Valentine's Day
Her neighbors throw garbage in her yard
Alone at night she hears strange noises.
She will give you a ride home
Rather than see you wait alone
on a dark corner of a bad street
For a bus.

But, when she's there
No one talks about the price of gas
Or how the light from the machines hurts our eyes
Or how we don't get paid enough
How food and apartments cost too much
There are no complaints
In fact we don't talk about anything
When she's there (Shellorne 1983).

Working through the letter pages of *PW* makes clear that in their critique of bureaucracy, a number of readers shared Winks' fascination with the distinctive use of words that prevailed in the contemporary office, and all that this said about power, submission, and meaning (a theme to which Winks (1982) would return in issue 5). As one programmer/systems analyst confessed to

the journal, 'I'm particularly interested in the high falutin' language members of both the business and computer establishments employ to conceal the truth and mask the basic emptiness of what they appear to be saying' (P. M. 1983, p.9). Nor, in the estimation of correspondents and editors alike, was language the only thing to be co-opted by bureaucracy, with articles also devoted to the efforts of some organizations to harness many of the impulses of sixties unrest, starting with the women's and gay liberation movements (Marks 1983, La Place 1983).

The problem with contemporary office work for *PW* was not simply its form of organization, however, but its very purpose. An increasingly crucial aspect of capitalist circulation, most white collar jobs simply lacked any meaning when removed from the context of buying and selling in pursuit of profit. Indeed, judged by different standards, such as those of 'human well-being', 'office work in general' was an 'irrelevancy' (Cabins 1983b, p.18). Any concerted effort to construct a society based on different values to those of accumulation, therefore, would have to contemplate not the democratisation or self-management of the typical white collar working environment, but whether such work even needed to be performed any longer:

a great deal of work that is today required to keep the system going could be immediately done away with. Whole sectors like banking, insurance, and marketing – the three largest clerical employers – would be unnecessary. Jobs designed merely to supervise and control the population would be eliminated. Millions would be freed to learn and share other tasks, along with the formerly unemployed (Athanasiou, 1981, p.22).

The early *PW* contained three sustained discussions of the labor process, culture and behaviours – in other words, the class composition⁴ – of employees engaged to work with information and information technology, centered upon the North America where the journal and the majority of its audience were based. The first article, in the second number, focused upon temps. Penned by Lucius Cabins (Chris Carlsson), 'The Rise of the 6-month Worker' examined the reasons why, within the context of the wage relation, many firms – but also many employees – might choose to engage with short-term, casualised work contracts. From a management point of view, the article stressed the flexibility that temps could provide in the office, acting to meet seasonal fluctuations in labor demand, as well as absenteeism from ongoing staff. Beyond this, it was argued,

Bringing in temp workers also helps to cement and augment the hierarchy in the office. Lowest-level permanent workers are permitted to enjoy the responsibility and authority, as petty as this may be, of supervising the temps. In return the company may demand greater loyalty and commitment from permanents who are relieved from the most tedious and boring tasks (Cabins 1981b, p.10).

From the point of view of an individual with nothing to sell but their ability to work, temping could also hold certain attractions. This was particularly so for the many temps who were young and indifferent both to the goal of an office career and the kinds of job benefits that accrued to certain fulltime positions in the postwar period. From this perspective, temporary work raised the possibility of securing, after some months' employment, sufficient income to leave the white collar labor market altogether for a period of time, and undertake more interesting pursuits instead. This could mean a shot at another kind of paid activity, more attuned with the temp's

inclinations, or perhaps just ‘stay[ing] out of the work-world as much as possible’ (Cabins 1981b, p.10) – at least until the money ran out, and the cycle must needs begin all over. Thus, as another of *PW*’s editors ended one ‘Tale of Toil’,

to my immense joy and relief I was laid off. Now I’m safely on unemployment and wondering how long I can stretch it before once again I’m compelled to enter what so many people think of as the real world (Highwater 1982, p.27).

That this portrait resonated with readers of *PW* is evident from the magazine’s letter pages. *PW* 6 contained the following sent from Ottawa:

Me, I’m a secretary with some word processing. Till the beginning of this month I worked in a “permanent” job with a computer consulting company — then after many attempts to force me to resign, my old management gave up and fired me for BAD ATTITUDE. Yippee! Now I’m doing temp for a university ... In real life, though, I’m a writer (J.M. 1982, p.10)

Another Canadian, faced with what they saw as the hypocrisies of a life forced to revolve around the grinding routine of a 9 to 5 existence, likewise spoke of finding their true vocation in writing, adding ‘Yes, it’s depressing being unemployed, but it’s even more depressing to sell your time for money’ (L. T. 1985, p.2). For some readers (and at least one editor as well – Cabins 1986), self-employment offered a possible escape route from wage labor, although this too came at a price, as one sign-off attested: ‘Got to go (freelancing means, among other things, that you always have either not enough work or too much work — I’ve yet to figure out which is worse)’ (D. E. 1983, p.5). Finally, the theme of ‘really being someone else’ also struck a chord with some readers who did not define themselves as temporary workers. The fourth issue reprinted a missive from L. S. (1982, pp.4-5) in Ohio, who aspired ‘to be involved in teaching and communication’ rather than working as ‘a Systems Software Clerk for a large oil company’. However, as a single mother with two young children to support, undertaking fulltime (but unpaid) study for a teaching qualification appeared too much of a gamble – so, as unpalatable as it seemed, it was better to keep working in the office and to study on the side: ‘My dream is to have that BA degree before 1988 — (part-time takes forever!’).

A more wide ranging view of information work and workers than simply the temp world could be found in the essay ‘Roots of Disillusionment’, which appeared in the sixth number. Penned by three *PW* editors, it charted the various courses by which the baby boomer generation and the computerised office ultimately came to cross paths. The backdrop was the heady days of the sixties and the various social movements to which the baby boomers gave mass form. If the failure of these movements to overturn the fundamental power structures in society had mutated instead into the passive consumption of artefacts associated with ‘alternative lifestyles’, the sixties had nonetheless left some legacies, such as a ‘gut-level distrust for authority and government that millions still feel’ (Cabins, Holz & Michaelson 1982, p.54). The flipside of the restructuring of industry in the seventies had been the marked expansion of the information-dependent FIRE and related sectors, and it was here that so many of those born after the Second World War had come to find employment, engaged in ‘countless hours of boring, uncreative toil’ (Cabins, Holz & Michaelson 1982, p.61). Thus ‘Roots of Disillusionment’ devoted much of its space to a survey of the ‘variegated, complex and overlapping hierarchies of pay, status, and

function' that underpinned this new class composition of white collar workers. The reading provided was not unlike the three-tiered depiction of British office workers advanced by Crompton and Jones (1984), if more lively and colorful. At the bottom were 'information processors' involved in data entry; above them was an array of 'secretaries and "support staff"', and at the top various levels of managers (Cabins, Holz & Michaelson 1982, p.59). This ladder was shot through in turn with hierarchies based on gender and ethnic divisions, with the make up of employees becoming more white and male the higher one climbed. The authors were particularly interested in the middle layer, given the emergence within it in recent years of what they characterised as 'new-style secretaries':

in most offices the secretary or administrative assistant still has rather more variety and more pay and rather less direct supervision, than her number-crunching colleagues downstairs. And it is in these secretarial and "support" jobs that a large proportion of "sixties rebels" have settled (the ones who have learned to type anyway — others have found their way into less-automated clerical niches like the mail room). Lacking the drive to manage, but educated and versatile enough to avoid the data processing departments, they have become the new breed of secretarial worker — restless and mobile, if not officially "temporary," and far less identified with the job than their traditional counterparts. If *Processed World* has a typical reader s/he is one of these (Cabins, Holz & Michaelson 1982, p.60).

As for the prospects of such employees, *PW* was prepared to wager that the misery of performing information work for capital might well spur 'the muddled and sometimes easily coopted hopes of the Baby Boom generation' to collective action. If this was by no means a certainty, nonetheless the current climate of increasing work intensification for all office workers offered the real possibility of an alliance with other layers of the clerical workforce up and down the corporate ladder (Cabins, Holz & Michaelson 1982, p.63).

'Roots of Disillusionment' prompted some sustained discussion in the letters section of *PW*, with two contributions remaining of particular interest in terms of the analysis of class composition. The first of these concerned the question of the hierarchy within the white collar world, and the costs associated with aiming *PW* at a specific segment of employees within this. While praising the editors for their honesty in seeking to connect with those information workers with whom they had most in common culturally, socially, and politically, one correspondent reminded readers in *PW* 8 that the middle layer identified in the article was much more diverse and extensive than the journal's current target audience:

On the one hand that means doing your best to educate yourselves and your "typical readers" about how other office workers see things, how they struggle, resist, get co-opted, etc. On the other hand, that means reaching out to "un-typical" readers/workers who have their own language, humor and styles of resistance, which may clash with your own but are no less valid. I don't mean trying to reach some non-existent generic office worker rebel by sanitizing your style, but somehow trying to consciously "stretch" it in order to unify people. Unity means conscious struggle amongst ourselves, not waiting for the nasty bosses to unite us (J. G. 1983, p.6).

More than this, J. G. (1983, p.7) concluded, the magazine needed to pay the same attention to race-based hierarchies within the working class that it had already shown to divisions predicated on gender, if it was to ‘increase possibilities for Asian, Black or Latin workers to contribute to *PW* themselves, and to deepen the dialogue we need so desperately’.

The second letter, from the journal’s previous issue, addressed the longer term prospects facing casually employed information workers, especially within *PW*’s target audience: just how long could a ‘bad attitude’ be sustained, and at what price? Because of the questions it raised, J. C.’s reflections are also worth quoting at length:

I like *PW* because it does attempt to deal with work from an “existential” perspective, that is, *PW*ers realize that above all work must be lived in all its frustrations, boredom, anxieties and contradictions. There are very few jobs that can actually be “liked,” yet if one hates their job then they can only end up hating themselves.

Yet if one likes their job on some level or other one still sees all that one is giving up so just below that level of liking there is an element of self-hatred. Yet as you so clearly expressed, what can we post marginals do? The socio-political, but above all economic basis for marginal survival is gone. In Canada, in terms of constant dollars, there is 40% less money being put into unemployment expressed as the amount spent on the average claim. We as conscious marginals survived on that 40%.

But we can’t go back and we don’t want to go ahead. With no ambition to even strive to rise in the ranks, not to mention that there is not much room at the top any more, what does one do when one finds oneself marking time on the job? One develops a lot of cynicism, apathy, and anger to which there is no outlet. The dreams of escape, standard proletariat thought that I won’t be here in thirty years like these others around me, are often the only escape. How long can one use “political activism” as a psychological escape, as a means of validating our existence, of differentiating ourselves from the “mass worker” to whom we have so many contradictory feelings?

Keep up the good work. There is so little material that speaks to our concerns as workers as opposed to simply trying to develop a theory about the working class (J. C. 1983, pp.11-12).

The last significant early *PW* text on the class composition of information workers appeared in ‘SIL.VAL: The Chips Of Our Lives’, one of a series of firsthand accounts by Dennis Hayes which would later be reworked for his 1989 book *Behind the Silicon Curtain* (published, coincidentally, in the same year as the first Dilbert cartoon appeared in print). While converging in certain ways with the analysis in the earlier pieces, here the focus of attention was upon the IT industry in Silicon Valley and those employed in it. The story was a grim one: the detrimental impact of semiconductor production and its waste upon the local ecosystem, the intersection of commercial and military interests, the poor working conditions of local blue collar and most white collar employees, and the even more difficult circumstances of Asia-based female ‘unseen offshore workers’ (Melquiades 1984, p.22) engaged in chip production. If anything, the fissures separating each section of the workforce were more pronounced than those examined in earlier issues of *PW*: office staff, for example, were divided between those on wages and the salaried,

with the latter expected to perform long hours of unpaid overtime. The social landscape was equally despairing: against a backdrop of high housing and transportation costs, ‘There is little or no sense of community where one lives or shops. Even if you have money, there simply are not very many interesting things to do with it’ (Melquiades 1984, p.28). And yet there were signs of hope, located for Hayes amongst the Valley’s IT technical employees. While agreeing with Kraft (1977) that members of this stratum were largely unfamiliar with mass challenges to the status quo, they were still the layer already most ‘accustomed to taking risks — like drinking the water at their workplace — and to occasional individual rebellion — like quitting a job because of an unreasonable workload or boss’: even, for that matter, hacking into corporate information systems in their leisure time (Melquiades 1984, p.29). Given that within the present job market

[t]heir labor is in most demand and least expendable to employers ... [t]echnical workers are the weak link. Rarely have so few held such enormous potential subversive power ... If technical workers’ loyalties continue as they are, there may be little hope for much of the rest of the world, so concentrated has the control of technical knowledge become in so few brains. The technology itself has become so powerful that control over technical knowledge is crucial to the outcome of any sweeping social change. After all, who is better qualified to safely dismantle a missile silo, a breeder reactor, a chemical waste dump, or a Pentagon supercomputer than the people who design, build and maintain such technology? (Melquiades 1984, pp.22, 31).

Would these proto-Dilberts rise to the occasion, linking up with other information workers and together working to undermine the rule of capital? – this was the question that would haunt Hayes’ article, along with *PW*’s original project itself.

PW on PCs

‘I believe “the revolution” is already happening. It’s the computer revolution – the most profound change in the way we live and think that has occurred in at least a century. If that sounds like a commercial for Apple Computer, it’s because Apple is pushing this particular revolution for all it’s worth ... The prime question on my mind is this: are we going to talk about a revolution that isn’t happening while the one that **is** happening rolls over us, or are we going to jump on board and try to control the thing? I favor the latter (J. S. 1983, p.15).

According to Thomas Haigh (2006, p.19), ‘office automation’ became an increasingly insistent theme within the US managerial world from the middle of the seventies onwards. By the time that *PW* appeared a few years later, many office environments that availed themselves of computers still largely depended upon mainframes and dumb terminals to provide most of their central IT infrastructure. Some standalone devices were beginning to creep in, but largely without the flexibility of purpose and function that would characterise desktop computers by decade’s end. New job titles were also appearing – some of which, such as ‘word processor’, would later disappear again, along with the dedicated machines with which they were associated. Compared with today, there was typically little flexibility in terms of what could be done through the keyboard and monitor that increasing numbers of office worker then confronted: perhaps some clandestine letter writing could be performed, but no surfing the net, and very likely nothing in the way of games – for the most part, therefore, just work. With these prospects, perhaps it

wasn't too far fetched for one *PW* editor to wonder 'What office worker hasn't thought of dousing her word processor with a cup of steaming coffee' (Digit 1982, p.19).

Much of the sustained analysis of information technology in the pages of *PW* was written by Tom Athanasiou. His contribution to the journal's first number was consistent with the deskilling thesis made popular within left circles by Braverman, which envisaged the inexorable extension of taylorist principles of work organisation from the blue collar environment into the office. On the one hand, the growing number of commercial and financial transactions that characterised contemporary capitalism sparked a commensurate demand for white collar employees. This growth of employment amongst office workers was a contradictory process, however. Since the intent behind the commercial application of new technologies was a reduction in labor costs and employee discretion over the tasks performed, the longer term promised only job losses, from which not even the more privileged layers of the white collar world would be spared:

In the office of the future, even middle managers and computer programmers will become unthinking drones. Since they make their living by pushing information, they are prime candidates for "job redesign" – in other words, job elimination for many, tighter control and more boredom and repetitiveness for those that remain (Athanasiou, 1981, p.16).

With the benefit of hindsight, perhaps the most surprising aspect of Athanasiou's analysis was less its prediction of mass unemployment for office workers – after all, few at that point in time were able to envisage how a debt-driven cycle of accumulation might 'financialise' capitalist development in the West, bloating the FIRE sector in the process (Foster, 2010; Artesian, 2010)⁵ – than the relatively benign image advanced of information technology itself:

Though automation threatens livelihoods by eliminating and degrading jobs, there is nothing inherently bad about computer technology. In a different society, it could be used to improve our lives in all kinds of ways (Athanasiou, 1981, p.20).

The implication here was that IT must be understood as a tool whose function and purpose was shaped by its user. In the hands of capital, it threw people out of paid work, and enabled greater control over those lucky enough to retain their jobs; directed to other ends, it could yet realise its 'liberatory potential' (Athanasiou, 1981, p.26) by facilitating the democratic coordination of decision making within a new society based upon production for use rather than profit. Since information technology could serve different masters, the ends towards which it was directed under capitalism need not apply in the future:

automation, like computers in general, would mean something entirely different than they do today. Instead of being used to throw millions out of their jobs and squeeze more and more work out of the rest, it would be applied to eliminating necessary but repetitive and boring tasks, and to reduce the amount of less-than-enjoyable activity required of everyone. The time freed could be spent learning, playing, socializing, traveling ... (Athanasiou, 1981, p.24).

In conclusion, knee jerk responses to automation had to be rethought, since ‘The new information machines are bringing changes that call for more than simple opposition’ (Athanasίου, 1981, p.26).

The article ‘New Information Technology: For What?’ provoked a furious response in the pages of *Fifth Estate* (then as now an articulate platform for anarcho-primitivist perspectives), where Athanasίου and his co-thinkers were characterised as ‘unconscious mouthpieces of the new technological totalitarianism’. In refusing to question technology more deeply, it was argued, Athanasίου unwittingly mimicked the positivist logic of marxism-leninism; if his plans for a new society were ever implemented, the results would prove as disastrous as the experience of the USSR:

Massified technology, production and distribution remove the power of individuals and communities to determine their own destiny and places it in the hands of an apparatus ... Anarchists and libertarian communists have traditionally opposed authoritarian Marxism from the perspective of anti-authoritarianism and anti-statism. But the state is only one structural element—albeit an integral one—in a totality which is the bureaucratic-technological megamachine. Opposing the state while at the same time defending technology or remaining indifferent to it is comparable to opposing the police force while saying nothing about the military. They are part of a unitary whole (Bradford 1981).

As time progressed, it became evident that the editors of *PW* held quite differing opinions as to the ‘liberatory potential’ of IT, as did many of the journal’s correspondents. At least some readers, it seemed, sympathised with arguments like those of Bradford, with Nebraska (1984, p.4) arguing in issue 11 that

If computers had anything to do with an egalitarian and free society, they would not exist. Our struggle is not to take control of the computers (or government), but to eliminate them.

A more nuanced stance than that of Athanasίου was offered by *PW* stalwart Maxine Holz (Caitlan Manning) (1983, pp.7-8). Responding to one letter writer, she would argue that the form of technology, no less than its purpose, could be profoundly shaped by the circumstances within which it was produced and used:

I generally agree with you that computers are “tools” and can be used “positively.” However, most forms of modern technology can clearly not be disassociated from the social organization that accompany their applications (including most uses of computers). In other words, some tools correspond closely to the way they are currently being used. Part of the danger associated with nuclear power is the oppressive and hierarchical security apparatus that goes along with the installation of power plants. Developments in numerical control computer technology which have been applied to automating machine tooling goes hand in hand with workers’ alienation and their disempowerment by management. Furthermore, looking at computers simply as “tools” obscures the productive process they currently involve, i.e. tens of thousands of intensely exploited workers throughout the world. It’s all very well to speculate on how modern technology could be used if it was in the right hands, and applied to projects of direct social value. But the fact remains that aside from some significant advances in fields such as health care and library science (and even

here there are plenty of examples of adverse effects of modern technology), the immediate results of widespread implementation of much of modern technology are disadvantageous to workers and others directly affected. I think it is important not to lose sight of the current reality of conditions created by these tools.

Along these lines, *PW* paid ongoing attention to concerns raised by workplace activists in the US and elsewhere (Huws, 1997) regarding the health and safety implications of office technology: above all the potential dangers of working with ‘video display terminals’, to use the terminology of the time (Anon. 1984a, 1984b). And within the journal’s continual flow of fake ads, the use of IT as a weapon against workers was a theme that built from issue to issue, culminating in the justly famous advertisement by Louis Michaelson (Adam Cornford) entitled ‘Keep Jane’s Fingers Dancing!’, which promoted PRESS (‘Performance Reinforcement Electronics and Software System’), capable of applying ‘a healthy 1-second jolt of 50 volts pulses out of her specially modified keyboard’ whenever Jane’s keystroke rate fell below the management-designated acceptable threshold (Michaelson 1985, p.44).

The quotation that opened this section was penned by a self-employed IT professional, whose long and considered letter both praised aspects of the *PW* project, while chiding its editors for what he saw as their misplaced political convictions and too ready dismissal of the potential inherent in the new technologies. As he proudly proclaimed in opening his missive, ‘Computers don’t do things to me; I do things to them’ (J. S. 1983, p.12). In an equally impassioned response, Linda Thomas (1983, pp.17, 16) defended *PW* against the charge of being anti-technology per se, while suggesting that this dichotomy of ‘doing/being done to’ stood at the heart of capitalism itself:

I like the way I can get information easily through the use of computers, and when I worked on one, I enjoyed it sometimes. However, jumping on board and controlling the thing is, my dear, and you will realize this probably too late, nothing more than being sucked into the vortex and becoming “processed” into that world. Under the present system, no worker will ever be in a position to effect change. Our place is underfoot ... Organizing does no good unless it is on such a massive scale as to be paralytic to the entire business community.

Voice or exit? Responding to the work regime of the modern office

Just a cog in the wheel. But a wheel without a cog cannot turn (Frye, 1983, p.63).

Given its critique of the information workplace, what did the *PW* seek in its place? And how did they hope to get there? It is in answer to these questions that the meaning of advocacy for the journal’s editors can best be addressed. As with so many other issues bound up with *PW*’s analysis of information work, however, here too mixed feelings were often on display.

From the outset, the *PW* collective (1981, p.ii) had posed a question to their readers: ‘What kind of world would you like to live in? What would you do with yourself if you could do what you enjoyed instead of what you’ve been forced to do to make a living?’ When the journal’s editors attempted to provide their own answers, they commonly spoke in terms of a classless global society bereft of states, markets, and patriarchal families, and where decision-making

(facilitated by computers) would be organised through networks of direct democracy. As for differences in their vision, one of the more marked concerned the timeframe required to establish such a dramatic reorganisation of daily routine, with a number of editors dubious that these changes would occur within their own lifetimes (Thomas 1983, p.16; Ana Logue 1985, p.4). In terms of reaching this goal, the biggest challenge in the short term was the inability of many workers, in offices and factories alike, to envisage that such a world was possible in the first place:

It's hard to believe in a vision of a world based on free cooperation and sharing when our daily experience tells us that most people are either competitive and power-hungry or else submissive and flakey.

On the other hand, it was precisely by acting together in struggle against capital, in the workplace and in society more broadly, that the dream of a world without bosses could find traction in working people's daily lives (Holz & Michaelson 1982, p.23).

Many letter writers in the journal made it plain that they held anarchist or libertarian marxist convictions not unlike those of *PW*'s founders, and tended to focus on collective solutions to the first half of the original question ('What kind of world would you like to live in?'). Others – congruent perhaps with their sense of who they 'really were' beyond any definition imposed by wage labor – often addressed the second half of the question ('What would you do with yourself if you could do what you enjoyed instead of what you've been forced to do to make a living?'), as we have already seen, in terms of their individual fate. There were exceptions to this – for example, consistent with the legacy of the sixties New Left in the US (Rossinow 1997, 2001), a number of correspondents talked of workers' co-operatives as legitimate vehicles of social change, which also provided a possible means for escaping wage labor in the here and now (W. R. 1982; J. F. 1985). But if the real power of so many letters printed in *PW*, as with the 'Tales of Toil', stemmed from the vivid insights they offered into the condition of individual clerical employees, the flipside of this continued to be that hopes for the future were so often framed in terms of personal flight from the condition of wage slave. In the terms made famous by Hirschman (1970; cf. Virno 1996b), in refusing loyalty, exit was chosen over voice. And this despite the editors' own insistence, as one of them told an Italian left libertarian journal, that 'we are convinced that global transformation, big changes, can only be the outcome of collective action'. What complicated matters, Med-O (1986, p.50) continued, were two factors. On the one hand, certain information workers held enormous power as individuals to disrupt the labor process (for example, they could cancel the debt that a person owed a bank), so that somehow, a means had to be found by which such actions against power structures could assume a collective form. On the other hand, traditional types of 'collective mass response' such as unions were – where they even existed at all in the modern US office – by their nature inadequate to the task of overturning capital and the state. Indeed, as a number of Bay Area industrial disputes documented in *PW* indicated, in the difficult climate of restructuring and rollback that was the early eighties in the United States, 'most unions cannot even guarantee "the basics" like protecting jobs and improving working conditions' (Cabins 1983c, p.51).

Med-O's arguments touched upon two aspects of *PW*'s approach to office work that raised the most controversy in its early years: the critique of unionism, and the significance of sabotage. For anyone familiar with libertarian left politics, the arguments posed by most *PW*

editors in seeking to construct new forms of organization outside and beyond the unions were familiar enough. The problem with unions, it was argued, was not simply that they divided workers along trade or industrial lines – or that they were bureaucratized, and so required a democratic refurbishment to make them responsive to the needs of their members. These observations, common enough in radical circles of the time, did not far enough, since they failed to grasp the nature of unions as brokers of the wage relation. The bureaucratic and conservative practice typical of union leaders had to be seen not in moral terms (such as the ‘betrayal’ of rank and file members’ interests when industrial action threatened to go beyond the limits of what was acceptable, such as with wildcat strikes and other forms of direct action), but instead as a necessary consequence of the unions’ role in negotiating the sale of their members’ labor-power. Trapped within this function, unions were by their nature unable to question that commodification of a person’s ability to work that stood at the very basis of capitalist accumulation. This state of affairs was evident in the very first workplace conflict examined in *Processed World*, involving a union (the Office and Professional Employees International) that ‘accepts the “necessities” of the marketplace, i.e. that costs must be cut for Blue Shield to remain competitive’, and workers who ‘tried to break out of the confines of the union’s tactics’ (Cabanas 1981, pp.10, 12).

What was most striking therefore about the *PW* discussion of unions (typically penned by Carlsson: e.g. Cabanas 1981, Cabins 1981a, Cabins 1981b, Cabins 1982) was the care taken in drawing out from the concrete struggles of white collar workers in San Francisco and elsewhere both the creativity that can emerge when employees seek to organize themselves against their bosses, and the propensity of union machines to dampen militancy and keep workers divided. Not surprisingly, given this, some of the most animated debates in the letters section of early issues of *PW* (e.g. numbers 3, 5 and 10) involved disagreements with union activists as to the prospects of working within the existing structures of the labor movement (although not everyone within *PW* seemed to rule this tactic out *a priori* (*Processed World* 1982, p.2)). Thus, when information workers did indeed seek to organize themselves directly in the office (although not so much in revolt against union bureaucrats, as in the absence of unions altogether), the journal gave space in its pages to publicizing their efforts (IBM Workers United 1984). Furthermore, the editors argued in their fifth issue, if endeavors like these were ever to come to fruition, they would be obliged to move outside the confines of the office:

We all agree that the revolt which *Processed World* has analyzed, chronicled — and, hopefully, contributed to — has to extend beyond the limitations of the workplace into an attack on the entire complex of social institutions and relations we encounter every day. This involves the development of new kinds of organization, reflecting the diversity of experience and circumstances in modern society. Be they termed councils, unions, assemblies, or affinities, these forms could be the precursors to a situation where everyone could decide on the fundamental questions of work, play, creation and enjoyment (*Processed World* 1982, p.2).

In the eighties, *PW* achieved a certain notoriety for its association with sabotage as a legitimate tactic of industrial conflict (Beshar 1984). Examined more closely, it’s evident both that a certain amount of hyperbole surrounded much of the talk of sabotage, and that a range of views on the latter existed in and around the journal. As with the original debate decades before amongst French syndicalists and American revolutionary industrial unionists, here too important

differences existed regarding what the term and practice actually meant. The issue was first raised at length in the fifth number, where the editors acknowledged ‘the intense debate’ then underway within their own ranks. The key text was Gidget Digit’s ‘Sabotage: The Ultimate Videogame’, which noted that with new office technologies came ‘new breakable gadgets’. Having identified this vulnerability, and placed it within the context of ‘[t]he impulse to sabotage the work environment ... [that was] ... probably as old as wage-labor itself, perhaps older’ (Digit 1982, p.19), the author went on suggest that a deeper sensibility was needed, one able to turn IT against command in the workplace and throughout society. Subversion rather than destruction was the refrain, and if in some sense sabotage was advocated, this did not seem out of line with the extremely loose definition advanced by the editor of the anthology *Sabotage in the American Workplace*: ‘anything you do at work that you’re not supposed to do’ (Sprouse 1992, p.3), with the proviso that this ‘anything’ be directed towards a collective undermining of the dominant social relations.

PW played with the imagery of sabotage (‘It’s as simple as pulling a plug’) in some of its fake ads here and in later issues, and the theme resonated with a number of readers, although how much this was fantasising by the latter is anybody’s guess (‘“Igor like Sabotage – make Igor sweat”’ – D. E. 1983, p.5). Then again, judging by accounts from the mainstream press as occasionally reprinted in *PW*, sabotage in the office was already a well-documented practice in some white collar settings.⁶ As for the varied nuances to the word provided by editors, Primitivo Morales, who worked as a bicycle courier – a key job role for circulating information within the financial district of a city like San Francisco – stated bluntly in *PW* number 14 ‘I advocate sabotage’, which was then defined as ‘on-the-job direct action’, before musing that ‘The greatest sabotage would be a reshaping of what is made, and how, and by whom’. Since such a revolution may never eventuate, it was concluded, ‘even petty sabotage helps us maintain morale and helps us wear them down’ (Morales 1985, p.6). Writing in the same issue, Cabins (1985, p.8) implied instead that the concrete practice of sabotage – at least as relayed to that point in the pages of *PW* – should be read more as compensation for the absence of mass struggle, rather than a necessary step towards it:

It’s true that since about *PW* #5 or so we have avoided explicit tactical advocacy. What emerged, by default, were accounts of individual actions for emotional and psychic survival in the office. One part of this is anti-management agitation, another part is sabotage. This reflects our experience that most people are not involved in collective responses to the modern office. But it felt different when the magazine started.

In light of the elaborate hierarchies that *PW* identified within the class composition of information workers, what missing element(s) *could* provide the necessary spark able to prompt all the layers of the white collar workforce into collaborating against capital? If the solution did not lie in some vanguard organization, however enlightened, then only mass struggle offered the gateway to collective self-emancipation: as James Connolly had written nearly a century before, ‘None [are] so fitted to break the chains as they who wear them’. From this perspective, a number of *PW* editors placed their hopes in the compulsion provided by the looming threat of restructuring and unemployment, without suggesting that information workers would simply organize themselves spontaneously in response to such a worsening of work conditions (Athanasίου 1981, Athanasίου & Amigos 1983, Mead-O 1984). Issue 10 (publication date

February 1984), however, made plain the growing realisation that *PW*'s hopes for a new collective subject of information workers was unlikely to emerge anytime soon within North American offices. Instead, the editors would now state that

we have confirmed the obvious – there simply aren't hordes of fellow wage-slaves who share the same outlook. The lack of a recognizable revolutionary movement leaves us somewhat isolated with our desires (Processed World 1984, p.2).

By issue 15 (Winter 1985-86) they would go further. Although successful in its own right as a publication that could boast a growing audience and increasingly 'professional' production values, *PW* 'has gone in a different direction than the one its founders intended'. While many of the difficulties facing 'organised resistance at work' could be blamed upon the workplace offensives led by the likes of Reagan and Thatcher, '[w]ith office work in particular, the problem goes even deeper':

PW has always distinguished its "take" on workplace organizing from more traditional approaches by pointing out that most work in the modern office is *at best* useless in terms of real human needs, and at worst (as with real-estate, banking, and nuclear and military contracting) actively destructive. Rebel office workers, sensing this, *don't identify with their work*. They generally change jobs often and work as little as possible. Their revolt takes the form of on-the-job *disorganizing* — absenteeism, disinformation, sabotage. They seldom view as worthwhile either the risk or the effort involved in creating a workers' self-defense organization. Moreover, rightly or wrongly, they believe that most workers, who identify more with their jobs, also identify with management. As a result, the rebels tend to be as alienated from their co-workers as they are from the boss (Processed World 1985, p.2).⁷

Such a desolate analysis did not spring from nothing; certainly there were many hints in earlier issues of *PW* to indicate that a number of the journal's readers – even, on occasion, some of its regular writers – did indeed find it difficult to communicate with their workmates, as a key first step towards joint activity against management authority. For some it may have been a case of timidity: 'Yours for more courageous actions' signed off one warehouse employee, who had been disciplined at work for adding anti-war messages to a package destined for the military (R. F. 1984, p.3). But at least a few correspondents did not hide their contempt for fellow employees: in the same issue, M. L. (1984, p.3) closed an account of a former life as a Silicon Valley programmer this way: 'Judging by the overwhelming motivation of the workers in my valley company, if released from work-hell, most of them wouldn't know what to do. I would'. Others, more commonly, expressed a strong sense of isolation that risked overwhelming any effort to challenge it: 'I don't meet many people here with this "attitude"', wrote A. (1985, p.4), while J. F. (1985, p.5) confessed that

I'd personally love to distribute *PW* and help sow dissent among the other workers at the office, but I find it's very difficult to have any conversations with anyone at BofA about important things, like values, politics or alternative lifestyles. Seems everyone is really paranoid about losing their jobs, so the conversation is limited to mundane talk about the weather, sports, how busy everyone is, or plans for the weekend.

At least one letter writer, on the other hand, pointedly identified the problem as residing less with ‘other workers at the orifice’, than in the reticence of some within *PW*’s orbit to engage with their fellow employees. In response to the poem ‘My Lead at Work’, E. (1983, p.15) would relay that:

I’ve been in the position of her “lead.” Chances are, she thinks the same way Dorthy does, but Dorthy will never know it if she “don’t talk about anything/When she’s there.”

Alan Liu (2004, pp.278-82) has asserted that the *PW* ‘bad attitude’ was at bottom no more than ‘style’: a posture, a pose. I have tried to show, by contrast, that a careful examination of the journal suggests otherwise. At the same time, Liu does have a point when he points to the dangers inherent in one reading of the *PW* project – a reading that at least some of its correspondents constructed, against the journal’s own insistence upon finding ways to connect with workmates – where opposition to capitalism remains trapped ‘within the most interior of all cubicles, one’s own head’ (Liu 2004, p.280). This is illustrated by the case of Gidget Digit herself, fired from an analyst position when her managers linked her to a manuscript copy they found at work of the article ‘Sabotage: The Ultimate Videogame’. As Digit (1982, p.18) wrote in introducing the piece to *PW* readers,

There was a subtle dissimulation in the way I presented myself to the people I worked with. I’m sure most of them were shocked when they found out why I was fired. After having worked there for a year only a few people knew that I consider myself a radical. Virtually no one was aware of my past political involvements or that my ideas about what’s wrong with the world didn’t spring full blown from the CRT screen. My problem wasn’t that I failed to convince people but that I was dishonest.

The same problem extends to the way *Processed World* handles the question of who we are as a group. “Office dissidents,” “malcontents,” “nasty secretaries” are all vague ways to respond to those who inquire about our politics. Like me, most of the members have definite political backgrounds that stretch back for years. (This is not to say that *PW* is a monolithic political organization. While we all consider ourselves anti-authoritarian, we differ from each other substantially in our political points of view.)

Our relationship as marginals, radicals and “revolutionaries” to the people we are approaching should be analyzed. Perhaps if I had been more open about my ideas at Bank of America I wouldn’t have been so isolated when I got caught with my theory showing.

There was a certain ingenuousness to aspects of this interpretation,⁸ at least as it applied to the journal, since for all the absence of references to Marx, Bakunin or Debord, let alone of much conventional leftist vocabulary, it would have been difficult not to recognise upon a first reading the subversive intent that underpinned any given issue of *PW*. Against this, the argument about how an individual radical could and should relate to office colleagues touched upon a fundamental dilemma, one that was particularly acute for those employed in workplaces that – as with the majority of the offices in which *PW* hoped to find some echo – were intolerant of open dissent. Here the concerns, expressed by Winks (1983, p.24) in a slightly different context, seem especially apposite:

The plight of Konrad's city builder – and the dilemmas he faces – are similar to those confronted by all of us who are able to name our misery and even analyze its socio-economic origins, but who are prevented by our isolation and ingrained habits from developing a consequential opposition to it. Overwhelmed by the weight of circumstances despite our best intentions, we often repress our knowledge that our work, our time, and even our deepest thoughts contribute to an intolerable situation. Unless we use this knowledge to speak openly about the objects of our labor, and about the system that benefits from them, we will be reduced to silence, or at best impotent rebellion answered only by general indifference (Winks 1983, p.24).

Conclusion – ‘hello out there’ take 2?

The vast majority of white collar workers have inherited a workaday life consisting of repetitive, meaningless tasks, subordination to petty, coercive authority and grinding anxiety ... It is not hard to imagine that in the very near future most people will carry out their jobs in front of TV screens (Cabins, Holz & Michaelson 1982, p.59).

In seeking to articulate a project of collective self-organisation amongst information workers, starting from the continent where it was based, *PW* soon encountered the profound structural obstacles of its time. This was a period when some of the strongest protagonists of workplace militancy – from miners in Britain, to autoworkers in Italy and the US, via shipyard workers in Poland – found themselves under sustained attack through industrial restructuring, repressive legislation, and a state-sponsored ideology that ‘there is no alternative’. Little wonder, then, if white collar workers with few if any experiences of open class struggle might display limited interest in making a similar target of themselves. Nor did those place-specific cultural convergences, which had originally made the *PW* project seem feasible, prove immune to the broader normalisation of US society: as one former member of *PW* has lamented recently, ‘San Francisco on the eve of the Reagan era, where unruly discourse and unkempt design was common currency—has vanished’ (Roscoe 2009).

In what ways, if any, therefore, does *PW*'s dream of collective upheaval in the world of information work hold contemporary relevance? While the growing importance of both blue collar and white collar workers in China and India may well bring ‘the labor question’ back into the public eye in coming years (Gurgaon Workers News, 2006-; Mezzadra & Roggero, 2010; Ross 2007; Silver, 2003), for the moment, the image of a self-confident, self-organised movement of office employees is still largely confined to the pages of speculative fiction, with the Information Workers of the World Wide Web (the ‘Webblies’) first introduced in Ken McLeod's 2000 novel *Cosmonaut Keep* making their most recent appearance in Cory Doctorow's *For the Win* (2010). Since the mid-1980s, the politics of information work and workers have become, at least on the surface, vastly more complicated (Huws 2003), and resistance too often remains within Švejk's shadow (Fleming & Sewell, 2002). IT is now ubiquitous, infiltrating the home, the great majority of workplaces, and all points in between, a presence that has raised questions about the boundary between information work and work in general, as well as the boundary between ‘work’ time and ‘free’ time in particular (Bologna 2007). If wage labor continues to predominate, other forms of employment – starting with the self-employment explored here and there in the pages of *PW* itself – are increasingly common amongst certain sectors of information workers (Bologna 2007, Armano 2010). Not only are computers seemingly

everywhere, but most are networked, throwing up a whole range of issues in both the workplace and outside it. In these changed circumstances, the past generation has also seen the emergence of practices such as free/open source software production, as part of a broader ‘mass amateurization’ of knowledge production. While the networks producing free/open source software have been portrayed in some circles as a concrete anticipation of the kind of classless society evoked by *Processed World*, others view such enterprises instead as the privileged playground of modern day Dilberts, ‘a thwarted technocratic elite whose libertarian world view butts up against the established proprietary interests of capital-owners’ (Andrew Ross, in Lovink, 2007), while remaining unable or unwilling to take on their bosses in any but a clandestine and atomised manner.

With all this in mind, the experience of *PW* might yet hold relevance as one attempt to come to grips with a workplace setting where any open space for the mass refusal of managerial authority would seem nonexistent. In such a situation, it may well be that working to establish ‘the cultural preconditions ... [for] ... real revolt’ (*PW* 1985, p.2), as *PW* chose for its primary emphasis from the mid eighties onwards, is a more than worthy use of one’s time. And it may also be the case that there is still much to be mined from an exploration of the ambivalence that appears inseparable from office-based wage labor today, no less than in the past. Will it be possible, this time round, to move past the blockage of which J. C. (1983, pp.11-12) had written in *PW* 7 – ‘But we can’t go back and we don’t want to go ahead’ – so that all the pent-up ‘cynicism, apathy, and anger to which there is no outlet’ can finally find open, massified expression within the workplace itself?⁹ On this front, perhaps further reflection needs to be devoted once again to pondering the various pathways by which ‘the opportunism of the disinherited’ might ultimately mutate ‘into open conflict’ (De Carolis 1996, p.51, Virno 1996a, p.33). On a parallel thread, it may also make sense to explore the assertion of Romano Alquati (2000) that the potentially explosive roots of this ambivalence can be found within the nature of labour-power (the ability to work) itself, given its function as the one commodity able to animate the capitalist golem.¹⁰

When all is said and done, it is worth asking how far we have come from the point at which Dennis Hayes (1989, p.159) ended his book *Behind the Silicon Curtain* more than two decades ago. If with hindsight Hayes’ opening assertion concerning the devastation wrought by the current ‘Information Age’ now appears unnecessarily pessimistic (or at least premature), the basic premise of his argument still rings true. If anything has changed – and it is a significant change indeed – it is that the number of workers involved has increased by an order of magnitude or two in the intervening years:

The Information Age has stripped us of our social sensibilities, but it has not consigned us to a new dark age. For all the ennui it has brought us, our infatuation with electronics technology has also placed the levers of social change within reach of those previously declared powerless or marginal. An indomitable power to subvert economic and political policy now resides in the consoles of over 30 million computer workers who process the fiscal, economic, and social alchemy that is late capitalism. It is a lever contemporary social critiques largely ignore; perhaps rightly so. For without the political will, or at least a glimmer of collective self-consciousness, the lever cannot be pulled on behalf of meaningful and popular change.

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¹ Material from *PW* can be found on a number of websites, beginning with www.processedworld.com. PDF scans and other digital formats of the original publication are held at the Internet Archive website < <http://www.archive.org/search.php?query=creator%3A%22Processed+World+Collective%22>>, making it possible for anyone with net access to explore the journal for themselves. A useful anthology in hard copy is Carlsson & Ledger, 1991.

² It would be interesting to compare this with the practice of ‘jobbing’ common amongst young German radicals of the same era: ‘to do any old shitty job for a short time, in order then to have time for ourselves, for political struggle and for pleasure’ – Wildcat 1997.

³ ‘Mistakes were made’, to quote a popular Ronald Reaganism of the mid eighties.

⁴ For those unfamiliar with the term, class composition analysis seeks to explore the potentialities for social conflict latent within historically specific forms of the capital-labor relation (Wright 2002).

⁵ In fact many individual FIRE firms were not at all immune from the sort of job loss anticipated in *PW*, but this occurred within a sector where employment overall continued to grow, although less and less on a traditional full time basis – see e.g. Farber 1997, p.19.

⁶ Sprouse 1992 provides many such contemporary accounts of workplace sabotage and its implications, taken from US media and academic sources, along with stories from self-defined practitioners.

⁷ There are certain obvious affinities here between these office workers and the Italian autonomist factory workers described in Tripodi (2007, p.55), whose hatred of the work regime likewise led many of them to flee their places of employment in the seventies. If there are obvious contrasts between the two, these lie in the autonomists’ rather different relationship with many of their co-workers, and the fact that their ‘exit’ generally occurred only in the aftermath of the defeat of mass struggles.

Writing in 1990, two editors of *PW* (Cornford & Carlsson 1990, p.11) would suggest that specific changes within the class composition of the US white collar workforce – in particular, the employment of ‘immigrant women’ fleeing social upheaval in their homelands, as well as the broader ‘growth of two-income households and the massive entrance of working women’ – had further marginalised that project of a mass radical office politics underpinning the journal at its inception. What is striking about this line of argument is its absence from discussion within the pages of *PW* itself during the period under examination. In an essay that traces a far longer timespan, Glenn (1985) examines some of the processes raised by Cornford & Carlsson, while placing different emphases on them and drawing different kinds of conclusions.

⁸ An interpretation that would be developed at some length and with considerable invective in Digit 1986.

⁹ An altogether more pessimistic take on IT technical workers’ capacity to challenge capital today is R. Lucas (2010).

¹⁰ Here Alquati (2003, p.43) refers specifically to the work of Mario Tronti (1971, p.56), where it is argued that ‘the working class must discover itself materially as *part* of capital, if it wants to counterpose *all* of capital to itself; it must recognise itself as a *particular* aspect of capital, if it wants to be the latter’s *general* antagonist. The collective worker counterposes itself not only to the machine as constant capital, but to labour-power itself, as variable capital. It must reach the point of having total capital—and thus also itself as part of capital—as its enemy. Labour must see labour-power, as *commodity*, as its own enemy ... [so as] ... to decompose capital’s intimate nature into the potentially antagonistic parts which organically compose it’.