

Benjamin Anderson - The Forgotten Labour of Craft

Benjamin Anderson 00:01

Today I'm going to be speaking about my research, which involves craft-- or excuse me, labour in--in craft and artisanal industries, which I'll--I'll define shortly, but I'm gonna start with a little anecdote. So, a year ago, excuse me really quick, I just realized I did not start my timer. A year agoP in November, workers at Vancouver's Parallel 49 Brewing Company began meeting with organizers from the SEIU Local 2, which represents custodial, retail, and brewery workers in Canada. Union sentiment had been growing in the brewery since a failed union drive five years earlier. This time around front of house staff were leading the charge and in November had started mapping their workplace and talking to their colleagues. The effort was actually looking quite hopeful and many employees were motivated by frustrations of--over favoritism, sexism, transphobia, and homophobia in the brewery as well as an abusive ownership and managerial team. Unfortunately, as is sometimes the case, word of the organizing got out to management and workers began to disappear, being fired for a variety of reasons. Those fired tended to be amongst the most precarious, so servers and retail associates mostly. And although I don't have a clear um-- I don't have clear information on how many people actually lost their jobs, what we do know is that it was a sufficient number to cool the campaign and put the idea of unionizing the brewery on hold for the second time in five years. Craft brewing is perhaps the most recognizable sector within what we might call craft industries- small scale local quality oriented productive enterprises, often staffed by highly skilled small workforces.

Craft firms are often lauded as being more socially conscious, sustainable or community oriented, standing out as an alternative to the faceless corporate monoliths that many picture when envisioning the 20th century consumer culture. Perhaps unsurprisingly, these assumptions begin to break down when we actually speak with workers in these industries, especially workers who fall outside of this artisan category. The experiences of service staff and highly skilled artisans seem to be very much at odds. Over the last year and a half, I've had the opportunity to speak with over two dozen workers, makers, and business owners about the labour conditions and workplace cultures of craft industries. My focus in this research was primarily on the labour process of craft breweries, and the entrepreneurial attitudes of self employed makers and craftspeople. Although today I'll draw on the latter for examples and counterpoints, I'll primarily discuss craft brewery workers' attitudes about their jobs, how they relate to their own class position, and what tactics they have begun to employ in organizing their workplaces. Built up around the methodological orientation of workers inquiry, my goal on this project was twofold. First, I wanted to understand the class dimensions of craft industries and how ideological narratives of entrepreneurialism and creativity obscure these. Secondly, however, the goal of the project was to give workers a platform to speak on their own conditions and interests, in order for--in order to provide tools for current and future efforts to build solidarity and organizing capacity for workers in these industries. As such, with my limited time today, all pay particular attention to the latter, with only a brief foray into the former. So, before we delve too deeply into these conditions and interests, let's pause to further unpack the assumptions that seem to inform much of the discourse around artisanry, craft, and making. By now we've all likely observed the preponderance of locally made craft commodities from handmade leather goods, tools and furniture, to beer and sourdough, craft objects have become an interesting reassertion of materiality in our increasingly digital world. As Australian cultural theorist Susan Luckman argues, the rise of craft and making activities is actually driven, at least in part, by the proliferation of digital platforms. We see this on one hand in the so called Maker Movement, where amateur enthusiasts and professional craftspeople come together to use both traditional physical tools and new digital ones like laser cutters and 3D printers. We also see the connection between the popularity of craft and the development of craft oriented internet platforms, notably for Luckman, like the craft marketplace, Etsy, which gives aspiring crafters and artisans a venue through which they can gain public attention and sell their goods. What arises in the latter instance is a form of aspiring labour, where the crafters crafting activity is supplemented by the imperative of self promotion. And the individual crafters creativity is often the discursive bedrock upon which their self brand is built. It's in this sense that we can identify one of the central ingredients of popular notions of craft production, that its labour is inherently creative, and that as create as creative labour, it is singular and individual. At first glance, this might seem appropriate when considering the making activity of say, the craft--craft entrepreneur who makes things from home on their own

time. Where it doesn't hold up, however, is when we consider scalable craft industries like breweries. The brewery, as many of us know or assume is usually more than an individual operation, instead, depending on workforces of varying sizes. According to the Brewers Association, the definition of a craft brewery is one that makes beer, produces 6 million barrels of beer or less per year, and is not owned or controlled by a larger alcohol industry player, a very broad definition. What this means is that a craft brewery could have a workforce in the hundreds but maintain maintain its craft designation and all of the assumptions about quality, localness, and creativity that come with that. And that is precisely what happens as craft brewery--as craft brewing, rather, continues to grow globally, and especially in places like Canada. What's particularly relevant here, though, is that the craft brewery workforce is heavily weighted toward the service side. So, while a brewery might have 10 production staff, including their creative virtuo--virtuosos the brewers, they might have four times that many workers in front of house and support roles. As such, the craft brewing workforce is internally strate--stratified, with brewers, who are predominantly white and male, enjoying greater institutional benefits and higher pay and support staff, service staff, and retail staff--much, much more diverse groups, by the way--often left out of consideration altogether. But I don't want to belabour the definitional aspects of this research as I really want to get into some of my findings, especially as these relate to the potential of class consciousness and worker organizing in these industries, and specifically in brewing in this case. One initial observation that arose from my interviews is that brewers and other brewery workers increasingly see themselves as factory workers rather than as part of a creative enterprise. For years, the brewing industry has billed brewers especially as passion driven creatives, but many see themselves as workers. And most of those I spoke to value job security, benefits, the right to organize and the like much more greatly than they do the more ethereal characteristics of creativity and passion. In this sense, these workers might find some unexpected common ground with front of house staff, who many of whom did not seek out craft brewing specifically, arriving in the brewery or tasting room via previous work in food service. And, as it turns out, in this latter group, and sorry, excuse me, it is this latter group that really holds the key to understanding the branding of everything as craft. As we've seen, this group outnumbers the artisanal workforce to a large degree in scalable craft industries, which suggests that the creative labour of making the thing--the bespoke jacket, IPA or what have you--is heavily dependent on this legion of so-called unskilled workers. And just as we observe in the typical Taylorized workplace, in craft breweries the menial but essential support roles-- packaging, warehousing, serving, and retail sales-- are massively devalued in many cases fall cases falling to part time temporary, or otherwise precariously employed workers. The craft brewer, in a sense, stands out as the age old labour aristocrat in a highly stratified workplace. And increasingly, these support workers, what in my work I term crafts' workers rather than crafts people, the infrastructural foundation upon which craft industries are built, these workers are acutely aware of this

inequitable workplace organization. Some of these are ready to fight and to organize with others simply wait-- sorry, excuse me with others, simply waiting for the opportunity. So, I started today with a story of the twin failures at Parallel 49. I want to end with two hopeful examples of worker organizing in BC brewing. The first returns us to Parallel 49 in Vancouver where something interesting happened over the summer. In July, two Instagram accounts appeared one called "Not our Matchstick", which refers to an artisanal coffee roaster, the other "Not our Parallel 49", or "Not our P49". Both of these accounts highlighted reports of racism, sexism, and transphobia in the respective workplaces, as well as instances of bullying, managerial incompetence, and unfair terminations. I'm going to skip forward a little bit because I planned for 15 minutes, unfortunately. But the problem with these accounts is they highlighted stories mostly from former workers who had either quit or been fired over the last five years or so and led to very little ability to mobilize that momentum on the ground in terms of organizing. The more hopeful development is just two weeks ago, when SEIU Local 2 announced that workers at Turning Point brew--brewery had voted in favour of unionization. And this is an interesting case, because Turning Point is a--is not exactly a craft brewery, it's what we might call craft adjacent, in that it is what's called a contract brewery--breweries. So, they actually make beer for breweries that don't have the capacity to make the volume that they need in house. So, so in a way the--this is a non-craft brewery that makes craft commodities. And so the um-- there's--there's interesting potential that comes from that, because they actually have very close relationships with a lot of craft breweries. And I think what I have to do is unfortunately end there I'm not sure, well, where are we on time? I'm sorry. Got a chat here. Okay. Yeah. So, I'll--I'll wrap it up there by just reading a quote from my interview participant from--from that campaign, because that campaign took a month from idea to vote, which is incredible for 80 workers. So, he--he told me kind of ended our conversation with this. "With the right determination, people can organize really fast. I was amazed at how fast we organized. within one month, we've got the vote. Now we're prepping for bargaining. No one expected the pace or such a positive response. If you have loyal employees who want to remain loyal, but who feel they deserve better, organizing is just going to happen". So, I'll end it there but I look forward to the discussion.