



The Workers'
Observatory



Worker
Support
Centre



Cat's Cradle
EDUCATION AND ORGANISING

Building Groups on Tricky Ground

How to make precarious
organising worth the time
and worth the risk.



Introduction

This is a guidebook about helping people in precarious circumstances to act together. Some organising methods focus from the outset on taking action to achieve winnable demands. While this approach works in some cases, we wrote this workbook to investigate the problem that in many settings people are struggling to build power with traditional organising tactics.

There are many reasons why it is difficult to build collective power. They include a lack of material resources, restrictive immigration status leading to reduced rights and power, dispersed workplaces, control by employers (sometimes called 'monopsony'), or precarious rental markets that mean people must often move around. How can groups form despite these difficulties?

The three organisations who made this workbook have a background working with people who have migrated to the UK. This has given us experience of organising in challenging circumstances, in workplaces or neighbourhoods where there are not established collectives such as unions or tenants' organisations. Our experiences are relevant to the question of how migrants might organise, and we believe they also shed light on organising in the UK more broadly, in our tricky context of deindustrialisation, deregulation, increased migrant precarity, and austerity.

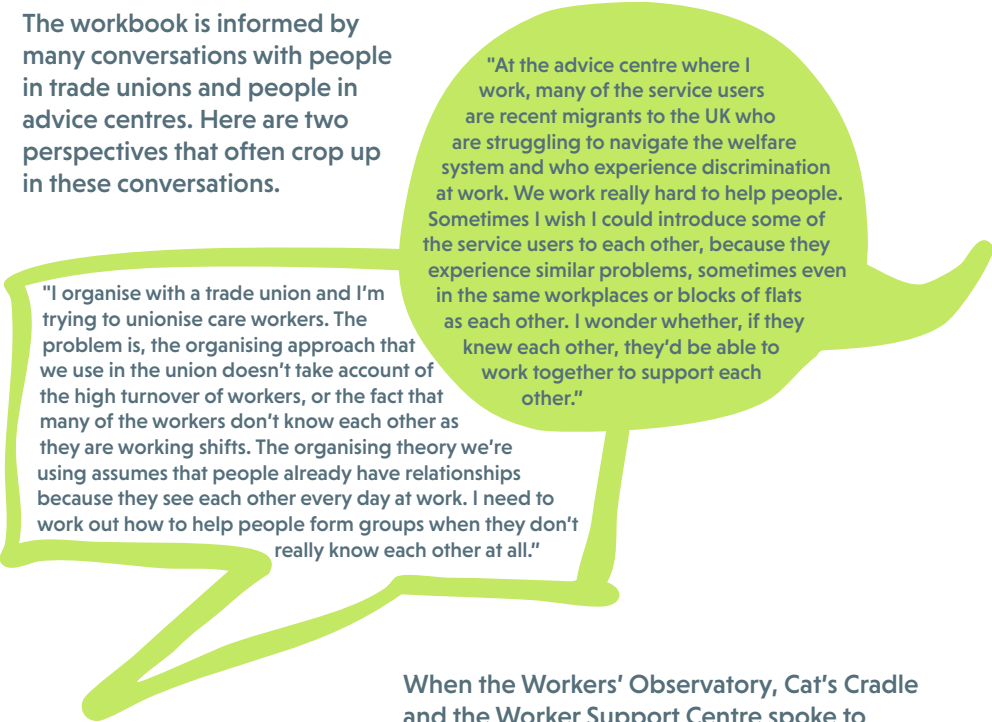
Anyone looking to experiment with these methods are welcome to contact us at any time.

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Two Perspectives:

The workbook is informed by many conversations with people in trade unions and people in advice centres. Here are two perspectives that often crop up in these conversations.



"I organise with a trade union and I'm trying to unionise care workers. The problem is, the organising approach that we use in the union doesn't take account of the high turnover of workers, or the fact that many of the workers don't know each other as they are working shifts. The organising theory we're using assumes that people already have relationships because they see each other every day at work. I need to work out how to help people form groups when they don't really know each other at all."

"At the advice centre where I work, many of the service users are recent migrants to the UK who are struggling to navigate the welfare system and who experience discrimination at work. We work really hard to help people. Sometimes I wish I could introduce some of the service users to each other, because they experience similar problems, sometimes even in the same workplaces or blocks of flats as each other. I wonder whether, if they knew each other, they'd be able to work together to support each other."

When the Workers' Observatory, Cat's Cradle and the Worker Support Centre spoke to people in advice centres and unions to investigate the problem, we developed some hypotheses:

→ **'Casework' models** don't always leave room for collective power. Individual advice journeys sometimes end after a meeting or two. Longer cases that take up lots of time can still hit brick walls. Casework is seen not as a route to collective power but an end in itself. Yet issues related to structural problems may not have individual resolution.

→ **'Organising' models** sometimes wrongly assume that a collective already exists. They assume for example that the workplace draws people together, or Capital organises workers into groups in each industry, or because people talk about things that affect them all. In reality, groups often do not exist, or else lack power because members – such as migrants – have few rights or find themselves far from where power is held.

Proponents and practitioners of each model can learn from each other. Organising does not mean abandoning casework. Casework can be the foundation for building collective strength. To show how, this guidebook focuses on the importance of the early development of a group.

Worth the Time, Worth the Risk?

People working in advice centres, unions, community organisations, and charities can all help people to form groups, even if 90% of their work involves helping individuals.

But developing groups is time-consuming, as every organiser knows. Usually unions only put resources into organising precarious worker groups after making careful judgments as to how it will lead to winnable demands and sustainable membership dues. Meanwhile, in advice centres and legal centres, people often have little time for anything but casework.

For precarious workers, developing groups is also risky. The prospect and consequences of retribution can be swifter and sharper for migrants than for other workers. Individual casework or anonymous collective casework is often preferred to avoid such risks.

Patiently developing collectives might not always yield short-term wins, but it can lead to long-term power. And sometimes risks can be reduced, or spread among many.

This guide suggests how, in these circumstances, we think collectivising is worth the time and worth the risk.

First, it steps back to see the changing kinds of work done by those who lack power.



Race, Class, and the Global Context

The UK needs a migrant workforce to provide low-waged labour and labour on-demand.

When companies are able to outsource labour, they produce goods or services where labour is cheap, in countries that have long been subordinated to richer nations for this purpose. When companies cannot outsource labour because it needs to happen in a particular place, they tend to hire a migrant labour force from countries of 'cheap labour'.

In the UK, Brexit has made this easier by enabling Government to make the case for new low paid migrant categories that maintain people in a constant state of precarity and enable recruitment of labour from poor countries where people have few options.

It's in the interest of anyone who believes in human dignity and flourishing to help however they can in the liberation of this labour force, whether in the Global South or with migrants in the UK.



Precarity, Power, and the Local Context

In the UK, the kinds of work that are disproportionately done by migrants include: food delivery and Uber; social care; domestic and commercial cleaning; live-in childcare; seasonal agriculture and poultry; meat processing and packing; construction; hospitality and catering; travel and tourism; manufacturing and fishing.

When people who have migrated to Scotland have an issue at work, where do they turn? You might say that they should turn to a trade union. In many cases, for many reasons, there is no union to turn to. The organisations filling this union gap take many forms. They include advice centres, mutual support networks, trade union-backed community projects, and worker power organisations like ours.

The Workers' Observatory and Worker Support Centre work to build migrant workers' power in a context where power dynamics are always shifting, depending on factors like:



- Level of workplace control over workers' lives
- Ability to negotiate working terms and conditions
- Ability to change place of employment
- Mental and/or physical health
- Rules and restrictions of the immigration system
- English proficiency
- Support networks
- Educational status
- Class, as well as financial or professional security in countries of origin
- Dependency on employers to access healthcare, housing, food, and other necessities

Vital Moments

The challenges that migrant workers face in building power also apply to others. That is why this workbook is a resource for anyone facing challenges in organising collectively, whether due to people being dispersed, a high turnover or flow of people in and out of communities, a high degree of fear about organising, or low confidence about forming and maintaining a group.

The next section of this guidebook shares two examples where workers were supported to form groups, and reached that vital moment when individuals who did not know each other well decided to form a group that takes its own decisions and builds power on its own terms. Some principles and good practice are then outlined at the end.



Case Study 1: Workers' Observatory

In Edinburgh, as in most cities, food couriers working for companies like Deliveroo, Just Eat and Uber Eats are mostly migrants. Their work and conditions are controlled by the apps that these corporations use to manage the industry. Working 'through the app' means that many couriers have little contact with each other, and lack collective power to address their common issues.

The Workers' Observatory assists these workers to investigate their conditions and develop their collective power. A few years ago, some of the workers who were involved with the Workers' Observatory joined an independent trade union, but it became clear that a pre-packaged union approach did not seem to make sense for them. There were a number of reasons for this:

- **Workers were legally self-employed, so not entitled to the rights of union members in other sectors like public transport or hospitality.**
- **Workers seemed unable or unwilling to pay for membership or attend meetings under the union rubric and rules.**
- **The England-based union showed little awareness of local and national dynamics in Edinburgh and Scotland.**
- **The union did not provide substantial resources to foster a local branch.**

So, workers tried to do something different.

They began to organise a network at a **slower pace**, with more fluid involvement, and less of a sense of urgency to build around specific issues or demands. When people got involved, there was no push towards taking any kind of collective action. **The process was more patient.**

This also meant that the group avoided risks that were particularly sharp for precarious workers who could be ejected from the app platform, and potentially from the country, with little notice.

The group took time, and avoided risk.

But this raised more problems: with workers not taking risks, and with the process taking so much time that members were joining and leaving, how did they build relationships and trust?



Join the Club

Instead of risk-taking and confrontational action, different dynamics developed.

Partly, there developed a spirit of **mutual aid and generosity**, through sharing of information, advice, and suggestions for how to work in a better way.

Equally important, people began to feel that they were becoming **part of a club, which had a brand, an identity, a rhythm of meetings**, and a degree of public but anonymous identity. Stickers, logos, badges, videos, social media posts, and write-ups in local media all helped.

In a sense, the agency of workers was focused on **building identity**, often through different forms of media. It was mediated and was not immediate. Because of the risks of immediate agency and action, this mediated agency seemed like the best way forward.

This approach enabled the workers to overcome some of the big barriers and challenges to building collective identity:

➔ **Isolation:** they worked via the app, so rarely communicated with each other

- ➔ **Digitisation:** the app turned their work into a solo data-driven game
- ➔ **Migration:** they lacked the status to securely take action to improve their conditions
- ➔ **Alienation:** many workers thought of themselves as individual 'entrepreneurs' and so did not relate to other workers as allies. In fact they often regard other workers as competitors, seeing themselves as alienated from other working people.

In non-dispersed work, people constantly discuss work and their collective understanding of it. In a dispersed workplace there is no collective consciousness of how it is organised.

All of these factors – greater migration-related risk, dispersal, isolation, alienation – led workers to an alternative approach to building up a collective identity and network. What we learned was that in situations of high precarity, making a collective among dispersed workers requires extra steps compared with building up power where workers are more secure.

This happened through the formation of ROOM...

ROOM to Organise



ROOM was formed when a group of about 20 food delivery workers in the Workers' Observatory network met for two days of workshops.

Participants were mostly migrants, many of Indian and Spanish origin, as well as Scots. They had become connected to the network through face-to-face meetings with other riders, and also via social media – Facebook, Rodeo, Redditi, Whatsapp.

There were two important resource related elements to these workshops:

- 1 One rider was paid for a few months to coordinate the outreach work.
- 2 Workers were compensated for the time away from work to attend the workshops.

Having a delivery rider as part of the Workers' Observatory team was vital to building trust. And compensating workers for their time, while not indispensable, certainly made everything much easier.

Workers were invited to gather and explore their issues at work. Through these discussions, they decided to undertake investigations together, and developed a common sense of the roughest conditions they wanted to challenge. For many workers this was their first involvement with the Workers' Observatory. They didn't come with a clear sense of what it was or how it worked.

The Workers' Observatory was **clear about the limits** of what it was up to as well. It was clear that while it would use the results of the workshop to illuminate, publicise and

challenge poor working conditions, it was **not a union-like organisation** that would provide support, services, or representation. As the end of the second day approached, some of the workers began to talk about taking steps of their own beyond the workshop. They asked questions like:

- How do we keep this discussion going?
- How can we get other people involved in this?
- What kind of structure would we need?

The conversation turned more practical: we need a name – what shall we be called? We need a logo – who will design one? We need a Whatsapp group – who will create one?

The structure of the workshop shifted to make time to address and answer these very practical questions of collective-building that the workers had raised. They decided to create a group called ROOM – standing for Riders Observatory and Organising Movement – echoing the fact that space in the city to meet, gather and share knowledge was key to what they wanted.

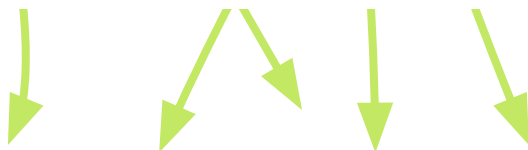
What ROOM symbolises is not winning on an issue, but creating the basis for keeping the new relationships and new rhythm going.

ROOM is now a virtual place where workers make sense of things they have been seeing and plan how to respond together. It is a starting point for a longer-running process of building up a durable collective. And it is developing a longer-term demand for a physical space in the city, which city councillors in Edinburgh are now supporting ROOM and the Workers' Observatory to advance.

A few ingredients were necessary for this moment to be reached:

- **Identifying the issues that workers are facing and deciding collective priorities among them.** This was instrumental in breaking down barriers among workers with diverse cultural backgrounds, and also in building confidence about certain tacit knowledge and assumptions they made about the workplace.
- **Learning from other struggles, observing other workers going through the same problems.** This involved researching examples of how workers in other cities are tackling similar issues, what strategies they are using, and examples of victories elsewhere that offer hope.
- **Understanding the organisation we are addressing.** Investigating the companies demystifies the power hoarded by the platform company, the business or 'boss', revealing how it works.
- **Spending time together, giving some space to socialise through the workshops.** Multiple sessions over two days, or regular sessions over a few weeks, achieve a more cohesive group than short one-off sessions.

When they reached the point of forming ROOM, workers understood themselves to have power, but only to the extent that they were aware and acting together. That required empathising with other workers' expectations at work, as well as their wider needs, that lead for instance to their compulsion to work for longer hours, at a more intense pace, and at a rate below minimum wages. This led to an enduring potential where, when feeling supported, workers have been deciding what further steps to take.



Case Study 2: Worker Support Centre

"The journey can happen quickly. People can come with individual problems, but begin to think as a collective. That journey from never having considered solutions to proposing suggestions and actions took only a couple of hours."

The Worker Support Centre works with people in seasonal migrant farm work, and migrant care work in Scotland.

Seasonal farm workers are in complex situations. Their visas are usually tied to a single Scheme Operator, or labour recruiter/provider, who supplies them as labour to a farm employer. They have a high dependency on both the employer and this Scheme Operator. The Scheme Operator dictates whether or not they can change place of employment in line with their visa requirements, and the employer determines their working conditions and pay, and most often provides their tied accommodation, transport, and access to services such as healthcare.

Many people have paid very high rates to travel to the UK relative to the earnings potential of this up-to-six month visa, with illegal fees alongside regulated visa charges and travel costs reaching thousands of pounds up front. Migrant care workers on the Health and Care Worker visa are sponsored by their employer and have no recourse to public funds. Care workers and dependents face high risk of exploitation connected to high recruitment fees, low wages, non or under-payment of wages, fewer hours than promised, and unsafe working conditions. Changing employer is extremely challenging, and the dependency on the employer and sponsor for their stay in the UK creates a significant imbalance of power whereby challenging the employer's practices and asserting rights may result in the worker's stay and livelihood being jeopardised.



WSC's prevention work is structured around our **Early Exploitation Prevention Model**, which spans five pillars: policy change, organising, welfare, enforcement and rights (**POWER**). We have developed, and continue to evolve, this model with people working on the edge of exploitation, facing daily abuses and continuously making pivotal choices about how and whether to defend their rights.

1 Policy change: supporting workers to claim space to change systems

2 Organising: worker collective and community oriented engagement

3 Welfare: direct casework support and referrals

4 Enforcement: increasing capacity to deter abuses and exploitation

5 Rights: including information and tools to help workers uphold rights

This model is underpinned by WSC's core values of solidarity, equality, safety, collaboration and creativity.

WSC's frontline staff speak the languages of workers, and have lived experience of the immigration system, precarious work, and of working in seasonal agriculture and social care.

When a worker calls the centre or one of WSC's peer support or case workers, we assess what can be done to help together with workers, thinking about different agencies, and legal, regulatory, and political possibilities.

Most workers who engage on welfare related issues also engage across many of the five areas of work set out in the **POWER** model. WSC seeks to **co-create trusted, safe and inclusive spaces** in which workers can come together in a group to talk about what they are experiencing, but to also **develop collective strategies and solutions**.

These spaces are created in community centres close to places of work, on

WhatsApp groups, and at trusted existing community spaces including places of worship. They can be worker led, or collaborative with existing community groups, constantly seeking to build solidarity and understanding.

At the heart of WSC's model is active listening and solidarity; our organisation and staff team act in partnership with workers, and help them to build a movement behind their leadership. We develop tools and information about rights together with workers, in order to ensure inequality in access to information is tackled.

Our work connects policy change with this direct engagement, supporting workers to influence and change systems that are obstructing rights or causing harm.

In 2025-26 we worked with people in both seasonal agriculture and social care to develop **worker-led roadmaps to policy change**. These roadmaps articulate the **structural barriers** preventing workers from finding decent work, and propose solutions at a wider level.

To achieve these aims workers have taken steps including calling meetings with policy makers about core issues they are facing, setting out their steps for change.

One such example is in social care where workers are facing many barriers to re-employment when they are 'displaced' after their visa sponsor loses its license due to Home Office action. People working in social care have grouped together each time this happens, by workplace, and across workplaces, to talk about specifics and collective system issues. **This work led to a Scotland-wide care worker meeting with the Scottish Government to directly influence a package of support and policy levers taken by the Government to prevent displacement.**

Worker power is a key part of the model. The way we do meetings changes with sector and time. We've gone from more structure to less structure, responding to the needs and focus of workers, and by adapting the way we do meetings.

Both our approach and our POWER model seek to 'hand over the pen' ensuring that workers are taking the lead and in control. One good example of this was during a meeting of care workers when, at one point, there was a very exciting moment when there was a kind of common resolution, a ripple effect, that led them to assert themselves for the first time as a collective, independently of WSC. **The assertion of independence is a step towards self-organising.**



Principles for Strong Group-Building

1 **Building Trust:** Sharing experiences Consistent social media engagement

There's no magic shortcut for building trust. But incentivising the exchange of working knowledge and experiences helps to create a common view of the burdens of work, and for workers to develop mutual understanding about the situations they face. Keeping a Whatsapp group active, and promoting a culture of sharing resources on mutual aid basis, helps to develop these kinds of bonds.

2 **Building Community:** Food Socialising

Create spaces where workers may get to know each other outwith working hours, break down barriers, and learn about shared interests. Food is always a great social lubricant, and fostering these spaces can be as easy as a regular pub meeting in a place and time agreed by the workers. Strategising how to get more workers involved is something that will also help to get the group growing despite high turnover.

3 **Building Purpose:** Worker-led workshops Shared priorities

Seasonal and app-based work can be divisive, isolating workers by design and making them feel that they are competing among themselves. Developing shared issues is a good first step, acknowledging that exploitation comes from companies and not from other workers in more difficult situations. Collectively setting priorities is

what will define what's next, and advance a group to action. (For ideas of how to build purpose at early meetings, see our guidebook 'Issues, Demands, Slogans'.)

4 **Defining roles:** Task allocation

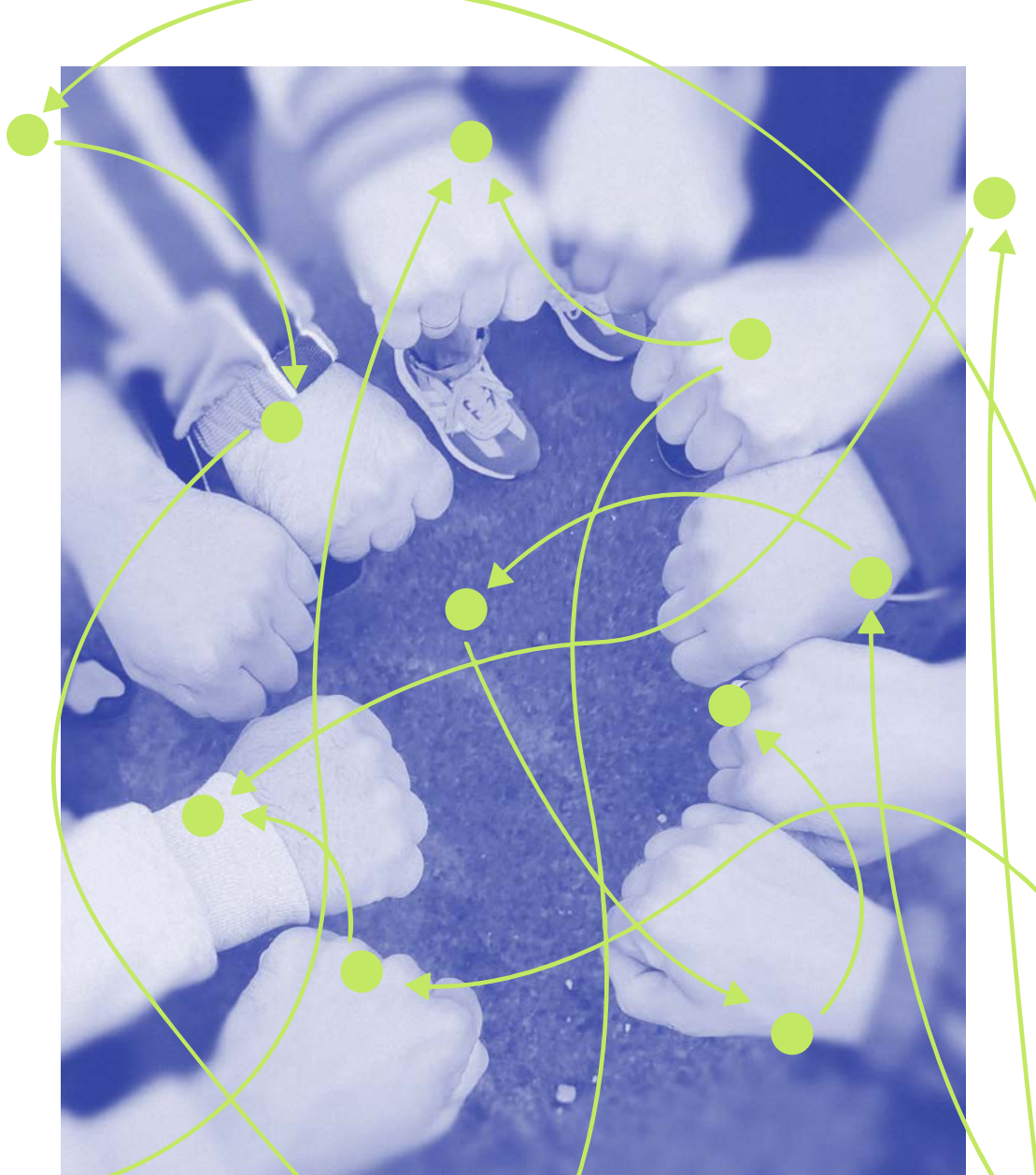
Workers must not only be in charge, but also take and feel responsibility. Allocating tasks that people feel comfortable performing is good – "I'll send this," "I'll draft that," "I'll create this post," "I'll design that logo". It's also important that new skills are learnt in the process, and also that while the work is carried out for the collective good, individuals can come to see certain areas as their focus or role.

5 **Defining steps:** Clear next steps

Before ending the first meeting – and any other meeting – agree on next steps and a timeframe. This might include, among other actions, setting up channels to communicate (e.g. Whatsapp, Facebook group), a time and place for the next in-person meeting, and a strategy to reach out more workers.

6 **Defined identity:** What is the group? What do members have in common?

Considering initial discussions, and based on the common interests, the group can define why it is important to keep in touch, and what the core values are that underpin its cooperation and identity.



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This guidebook is published by the Workers' Observatory, Scottish Charitable Incorporated Organisation number: SC054988. It was funded by the New Organising Conference and the research project 'Consolidating Scotland's Gig Worker Voice'.