Dear Silvio,

Our submission to the Entreprecariat issue of the Pervasive Labour Union zine is a series of experiences of precarity while working as designers.

The texts recount micro-aggressions, insults, danger, as well as having to hide one's reactions, or having to cover for abuses of power from those higher up in the pecking order.

We have been sharing our frustrations with work as Evening Class since we first met as a group, it’s one of the reasons we came together. Realising that others have experienced something similar or equivalent has been a form of support, peer-to-peer advice has helped guide us as to what to expect and how to conduct oneself in the face of unfair treatment. Having a space to critically discuss conditions within the design industry – which often purports to be more ‘free’ and ‘non-hierarchical’ than other industries – is something that is not easily available to most, as there is no dedicated designer’s union (yet).

These anecdotes were gathered in order to be performed at our event *Dependent on Experience: Tales for an Accelerated Workforce,* which was part of *Antiuniversity Now* festival earlier this summer. We imagined that they could perhaps be interspersed throughout the zine, as interventions or breaks between the other items? We would also like to design our contribution if you were open to this? Let us know what you think.

Also, this piece would be the latest in a series of things that EC has published in other publications on various occasions, so would it be ok if we entitled it/them EC Bulletin #4?

In solidarity,

Evening Class

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One of my jobs when I was quite green was for design company based in –––. I worked remotely but had to travel there at least once per week from London. I was wildly underqualified. In hindsight the fact that I was managing research with no training, should have set off alarm bells. Very little about the company made sense. I was spectacularly out of place in so many ways. I later pieced together that my role was basically in order to meet requirements for tax breaks related to R+D companies. Because it was my first job of this type, I just thought that this is how things worked and that I needed to adapt.

I am working on a new project. I later learn that the entire purpose of this project is to create designs which will never be made in order to block competitors filing for intellectual property. I start to seriously question my life choices.

I am attending a meeting with the board of a major pharma company. During this meeting parties discuss how best to bribe NICE (the organisation deciding on purchasing for the NHS) without being too obvious. I begin to dislike myself.

I have been sent to ––– to meet with a pharma company to discuss some design proposals. After around half an hour of confusing discussion with the secretary, phone calls to both my boss and the people I am meeting with, I learn that not only have I been sent to the wrong place, I have been sent on the wrong week. Next week, following a trip to a different part of –––, I find out the meeting is cancelled when I am at the station.

The CEO, beckons me over to look at something. He is looking through the scope of what looks like a sniper rifle. I am quite uncomfortable with this. He explains that he can shoot accurately from over a mile away. There is a strong feeling that any betrayal of the company won’t end well. Following the end of my employment, some web searching reveals that he was previously arrested on firearms charges but never convicted.

In the end, I did manage to avoid being shot, but I was stiffed out of a five-figure sum in unpaid invoices. The company is now in administration.

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“Dear –––,

I am writing you very bluntly, as to be honest, it’s been incredibly difficult to set up this collaboration with –––, and frankly I am beginning to question the premise of will.

It’s not within my desired work-atmosphere to receive a mention a “design fee” when talking about a short Skype to brief you on the project. Since we are printing the first part of –––– on Monday, we should really nail down a design template prior to this, and since I believe in non hierarchal structures, I’d love for you to be included in the editorial strategy for this too. I believe you expressed interest in this during our previous Skype.

So. Here are some questions.

1. Do you want to come?

2. Can you send me your design-fee stipulations?

3. How many hours a day are you expecting to work?

4. Do you only want to do design? Hence the word design-fee you mentioned?

5. What logistical issues are you talking about? Please email ––––– regarding all logistical issues.

6. Aren’t we paying for your flights and a fee, as well as provide you with accommodation and food? What more do you want?

Just to update you on my role, I actually also run the entire educational programme and part of the public conference. So I’d rather explain to you our programme, mission, collaborators, the building, etc. prior to –––––– than when on the spot.

I am OK with 5.30 / 7.30 PM today.

I do not have a ––– phone that works. Where is the problem on Skype-ing?

Thanks,

––– ”

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During an academic break I worked at an old, small design studio consisting only of two partners and myself. This was my first foray into the 'design industry'.

One day, one of the partners, who I had noticed seemed perennially on-edge, was agitated for some unknown reason and approached me:

'What brands do you like?' he barked.

'Erm...' I reply, caught completely off-guard.

'Come on. You're a brand designer now' he declares. 'What brands do you like?'

'I don't particularly like any brands' I reply.

He then leant towards me and grabbed the shirt I was wearing by the chest, pulled on it aggressively, and demanded an answer in a confrontational tone: 'What brand is this?'.

I quit the next week.

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A couple of weeks earlier, the same partner was due to go to a meeting in the morning before appearing in court in the afternoon (he had been prosecuted by HMRC for taking illegal dividends out of the company during the previous financial year). To fill the time between these commitments, he had scheduled an engineer to visit his nearby apartment and install his television. Someone must be present for this installation to take place.

In the morning he opted to drive to his meeting as he always did (he refused to use public transport), and planned on getting home in time for the engineer, before driving to court. However, he illegally parked his car outside the client’s office during the meeting and it was towed while he was in their offices, throwing his already dubious plan into doubt.

Myself and another designer received a panicked, shouty call from him early in the afternoon explaining the situation. He decided he would retrieve his car in order to make his court appearance and ordered my colleague to be present at his apartment to greet the engineer. My colleague did this, but there was another problem – it transpired that the partner had also failed to arrange parking for the engineer. At this point, my colleague was instructed to drive the engineers van around central London (uninsured) for however long it took for the engineer to complete his duty.

Almost unbelievably, the partner was able to make his court appearance satisfied in the knowledge that his new television had been installed.

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Making and eating lunch together as a studio, while it’s ostensibly ‘nice’, has caused me a lot of anxiety in my time. It doesn’t feel great being an unpaid intern, preparing lunch for everyone, including their potential boss. I have seen this end up with unpaid interns cooking ambitious things at home and bringing them in, not to mention potential interns coming to studios with homemade cakes or bread (I even once heard of someone buying a studio a toaster?!) in order to get an unpaid role.

What starts as a notion of equality and sharing often ends up, in my experience, with women and the lower waged / positioned bearing the responsibility of keeping a studio ‘nice’ – whether that’s doing the cleaning, cooking, childcare or looking after animals (I have done all of these while ostensibly working as a designer).

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I was working in a well respected and well known London graphic design studio, and for the first time felt like I could say this was my profession, and proud of it. No more squeezing in bits of design here or there, around my retail jobs, or doing numerous unpaid internships. No, here was a *real* job, one I could regurgitate with a smile when faced with the inevitable question ‘so what do you do?’.

When I started I was hired as a full time junior designer on a salary of £16,000 (this was big money to me, coming from a 5-hour odeon cinema contract), and along with me the studio hired another designer to work part time as a freelancer 3 days a week. To cut a long story short the senior designer seemed to take a personal dislike to the freelance designer, for reasons unknown, I guess not everyone gets along. A tense atmosphere soon came to a head when the designer was asked to ‘come downstairs for a coffee’; later that afternoon walking home together she translated this for me; the boss had essentially told her they could no longer afford to pay her the rate she was on, which was around 100 a day, relating to studio finances but also to her abilities as a designer. They also used me in comparison to her skills as a designer, and others in the shared studio who always stayed past finish. This was what a good employee does, it was implied. She was given an ultimatum: accept a lower fee and continue working or leave the studio. As she was already planning to leave by the summer's end to start a residency she thought it best to accept the reduced fee and finish up her projects to improve her portfolio (I imagine I would have done the same).

A couple of weeks into this new arrangement and things are still tense. I feel sorry for someone who has now become a good friend, and struggle to understand why she is being given such a hard time (she essentially is doing the same job as me, comes from an almost identical academic and working background to me, and from all I had seen was a very capable designer). One day a young South Korean girl who had emailed the studio a few days before with her portfolio comes to visit the senior designers. The studio is incredibly small, and we share with another studio. The meeting takes place literally inches from where me and my friend are sitting, and we are both confused, glancing nervously at one another. Walking home again she turns to me, anxious, ‘is that girl going to replace me?’. I try to reassure her as I am genuinely convinced it must have been some sort of feedback for a student. The next day the senior director turns to my friend and asks her to ‘come downstairs for a coffee’. She manages to negotiate staying on for another two weeks, they wanted her to leave pretty much immediately, but she asks to finish the work she’s started. They try to frame the firing with insidious niceties; ‘we think you have improved so much since we last spoke, but unfortunately we can’t afford to raise your fee back to what it was right now’. How unfortunate. As if losing your job in this way isn’t bad enough imagine the cruel logic when the following day the other girl turns up to start her first day at her new job. As the studio is so small my friend has to share a desk with her replacement. The potential for more humiliation pushes my friend to leave a week earlier than expected, and we remain in touch.

I later learn the new *intern* is being paid £100 a week. She works full time, and is a brilliantly skilled designer. She is quiet and very hard working, she stays late, later, latest. My salary has recently gone up to £18,000 (wow, I actually feel rich). The pay rise is two months later than originally promised, my next one is due at my eight month mark. I’m struggling to work with one of the senior designers, it seems his attention is placed firmly on me now my friend is gone.

It’s month eight, I’m eating a sandwich in the courtyard of a local church (I try and leave the studio for my lunch breaks, everyone else eats at their computer, and I feel judged for my rebellion). The senior designer I get on with the most comes and sits down next to me. I’m surprised he’s left the studio, and that he knew where I was, I offer him some of my sandwich. ‘I’m afraid it’s not good news’. My heart sinks and I know the rest. To his credit he looks visibly upset about having to break the news to me, I’d really enjoyed working with him, and this shaky delivery makes me feel that was reciprocal. I feel embarrassed and unable to process what is actually happening. I thought this was my dream job. They tell me they want to open a publishing imprint as part of the studio, and that my salary will allow them to do so. Fair enough, I think. It’s taken me a long time to reflect on this, and what was always an inspirational and amazing learning experience is ultimately defined in some way by my rejection. I recently learned that the intern is still working there.

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The job centre is supposed to support the unemployed with benefits they are entitled to until they find work in the industry they are qualified in. My experience as a graduate who was struggling to find design work was that instead of support as a jobseeker, I was encouraged to be realistic and duped into looking for bar work so they could get me off benefits as soon as possible. Though in my case it gave them grounds to punish me with benefit sanctions for not applying to work at enough pubs, even though I had no experience in this field. One time I had to sign on before I got on a train to have (internship) interviews at some London studios. I had my luggage and portfolio with me, but because I turned off some setting on their archaic universal job match system and forgot to turn it back on, they were unable to view my job diary. I was sanctioned despite my protest and proof that I was going to London. I think the supervisor took a dislike to me over time probably because I took exception to being talked down to (she was the one who sanctioned me for not looking for bar staff jobs) and I always argued back. I was fortunate to still be living at home so I didn't rely on these benefits to live. The appeal system is a long process that can take weeks, and during that time your benefits are halved. This is also a delayed process. I imagine many people desperately relying on this money have to bite their tongue and take crap from someone who feels superior and is on a power trip being in this position of authority. Not everyone who works at the job centre is like this obviously, they have their own targets imposed by the Department of Work and Pensions which they need to meet. These include a minimum target of nationwide sanctions that need to be met and I imagine for some employees it’s morally stressful. Anyway, I went through the motions searching for design work and bar jobs, at times this itself felt like a full time job for my measly £75 per week allowance. When I did find a potential 6 month design placement at an art space, a bureaucratic mishap meant that I could not apply for it properly even though I was personally in touch with the employer and they wanted me for the role. However, the nature of schemes like this is that the job centre gives a grant (or something similar) to the employer and they pay YOU using this money. Basically, you are working for your benefits. I signed on for a total of 6 months but left shortly after as it ended up being compulsory for me to sign on every day. This meant that my job search activity was under daily scrutiny. After 6 months dealing with this every two weeks, having to do endure it everyday was not good for my mental health. This was also a chance for them to try and force me into taking on mandatory courses to 'improve' my chances of employment. For example, I had to talk my way out of doing a CV writing course one time. I asked them to point out what was wrong with my CV – they highlighted that it was the design. An opportunity presented itself. I negotiated to redesign it for next time since I was a designer and would flesh it out a bit more. I couldn't deal with this much longer though, I knew at some point I would be passed on to the work programme – similar to signing on but more strict (a major new payment-for-results welfare-to-work as described on gov.uk). When you are on the work programme you are also technically employed which helps to improve government unemployment statistics. So I chose to leave, went back to London and successfully found a low paid (£70 per week) design internship while crashing on a friends sofa. After the past 6 months I was just grateful to be working and apart from the insultingly low pay it was a good experience that actually led to more freelance due to being an active member of the studio and in contact with a publisher. I now hear that the studio pays interns minimum or London living wage which is a positive thing I guess. So, from my experience the dole didn't really help much at all. I‘m just fortunate that I had the support plus friends to find work on my own terms, as this option isn’t available to everyone. But by purposefully signing off I helped the government reduce (and improve) their unemployment statistics...

The design studio I work for created an identity for a restaurant in Xxxxx. It’s part of a larger chain, but each has it’s own ‘bespoke’ identity, a veneer of individuality. From the outset the approach was compromised, but it paid well. So we (or at least, I) sucked it up and quietly complied with the changes that would pile in each month. This arrangement was bearable for some time, until a new ‘Brand Marketing Manager’ arrived, intent on putting their own ‘mark’ on the place.

After much tedious discussion, endless back and forth and design from the sidelines, the relationship was strained to breaking point. I received the following email in response to a poster we had made for them:

Hi Xxxxx

I did have a look, I didn’t think it hit the mark and I have briefed it to a different design agency now. We are just in need of much more creativity for Xxxxx.

Warm regards,

Xxxxx

This was infuriating, not because I was hurt that they didn’t like the design (I also hated the design), but because this person was in a position of power, they had the option to express that actually things weren’t working out. I was of course very much aware of this, but my position within the design studio / designer / client hierarchy dictated that I should just keep calm and carry on.

After this we entered into a dispute with the company. They wanted us to supply them with design files (which they believed they were entitled to). In the end we managed to explain that they had no rights to these under our original agreement, but that we could sell them at an extra cost. Needless to say we never heard from them again.

Warm regards indeed.