



From The Factory Floor

George Bidwell

From the Factory Floor is a story of industrial disputes set against the backdrop of the government's recent attacks on striking workers.

The novel follows Clyde, a dyed-in-the-wool socialist with decades of experience on factory floors, Milde, a recently promoted line-manager with no commitment to the company or the union, and H, a radical communist kitchen hand. Our narrative begins with the failure of the factory's packer union to establish a mandate for strike action. In response, the current and ineffective union representative steps down. Clyde is pushed by H and Milde to campaign for election as the new, militant union representative in an attempt to reignite the previously hardline packers' union which has been quelled by decades of legislation and inactivity. Meanwhile, H attempts to unionise the cafeteria staff. Both campaigns face resistance and tension that results in lost friendships, questions of allegiance, and ultimately managerial retaliation in the form of shutting down the cafeteria altogether. With H and their fellow kitchen staff unemployed, the newly energised workforce must kick into action in order to save the kitchen and improve conditions. The extract presented constitutes the prologue to this novel.

PROLOGUE

There in the fields of East Anglia, standing solitary, is the building. Neat, tidy. A box of industrious walls giving out a hum, a hum so gentle it becomes all sound. It is the cows that groan, and the tractors that plow; it is the rush of unbroken wind. Flatlands surround it without break or challenge.

Inside, everything is processed. The floors reek of ammonia, and the walls appear bleached by the substance. Industrial fans hang heavy from the ceiling and push dust into the air. Glass cabinets line the walls, and contain products produced through the heavyweight doors at the end of the lobby. They feature sugary drinks and condiments made without natural ingredients, they are children's snacks peppered with e-numbers, they are sachets of porridge in haphazardly constructed cardboard boxes that unpack at the seams and creases. They are products produced elsewhere but packaged in this factory, in the East of England, where a worker could step away from the machines and into unbroken farmland.

Nothing fresh has ever lived in this building and nothing fresh ever will. The vending machines, rusted brown at their joints, display advertisements for the rolling out of double strength squash concentrate. They hold food designed to taste good at the expense of your body. The workers indulge in droves at their moments of rest, paying half of what they would at the supermarket just a kilometer to the west. They stand to eat at lunchtimes, unable by regulation to eat at all within the factory and so are relegated to a cafeteria that sits only half of them. Those that can't fit eat in cars, or on the damp fields, even in winter. Today the fields are empty, the lobby holds only the receptionist and her jam-jar glasses.

Behind the doors lie the production lines. All twelve of them, separated by aluminum dividers and a walkway through the middle. Each line exactly the same, each line subtly different. The technology does not whizz or whir or rush or roar. The technology trundles. The sound of clanking metal and repetitious buzzes do not fill the air but inhabit it; inhabit it so that it does not register, so that it does not reveal itself but continues regardless. Workers stand in spots marked out for them, they stand by unfinished cardboard boxes near the pallets made for packing, by the tail of machines that throw out finished products, by the drill made for pushing on precision placed bottle caps.

Behind steel shutters lies the warehouse. It is where forklifts carry pallet to truck and carry boxes from truck to pallet. The rhythm infiltrates even the operators who tap buttons in time, unaware of their function, but following the motions of those who worked here first and taught through demonstration not explanation. The growl of the vehicles hides in the air, drawing no attention to itself and is disturbed only occasionally by thuds and smacks, shatters and wallops.

Except today, the production lines are empty. Today they do not run, and the ring of silence draws attention to the droning soundscape that typically drives production. The walkway is filled. Worker after worker line up, they turn the open space to a navy sea as their uniforms bleed into one. The hairnets only further standardise them. Replacing silence is babble, and natter, and hustle, and whispers, and hushes, and tittering. Laughter that is muted, smiles that are muted, conversations that concern anything but the immediate present. Occasionally, heads turn towards the door, waiting for someone to step into the factory and offer them answers.

A suited man steps to the front of the walkway. He wears no hair net. In a second, every eye in the building is fixed firmly upon his face, bloated and red. The suit is perfect. Professionally tailored. When he speaks, he does so with a Mancunian accent but choppy, as if every word concludes a point. Now, workers' feet shuffle, their elbows poke and eyebrows raise. He inhales and begins: "After counting the ballot four times," he turns to the crowd and gently shakes his head, "the union and all of its members have agreed not to proceed with the planned strike action." He is cut off by the raging crowd and begins to shout over them: "We will not proceed with the planned industrial action on the 5th and 6th of September!"