

# The Irish Working Class Today

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## Introduction

In an article in the *Irish Times* last October, Fintan O'Toole declared the return of the working class:

“A spectre is haunting Europe, and much of the rest of the developed world. It is not communism. But it is a force that was once strongly associated with it: the working class. It's back. Rumours of the death of the proletariat are turning out to have been highly exaggerated. As a consequence, people who have been exploited, disempowered and (as immigrants) often demonised now have more potential power than they have had for decades.”<sup>1</sup>

He correctly points to the manner in which the pandemic showed that workers make the world go round and that tightening labour markets after it have increased their power. But he also perpetuates some myths which associate the working class with “the old-fashioned grafters who do tough physical jobs” and the idea that the children of the old working class have “either managed to scramble up the ladder into higher education and got jobs that used more technical and intellectual than physical skills, or they fell downwards into...the precariat.”<sup>2</sup> By either promotion or demotion, the workers in question are said to have fallen out of the working class. This perpetuates a very narrow view of what the working class is and who is working class. If one rejects this view, as I do, and argues for a broader understanding of the working class, then it's possible to argue that it has never gone away. Indeed, over time it has got bigger.

When O'Toole talks about the return of the working class, he is talking about its capacity to stand up for itself and demand “that indispensable thing they have been so carelessly denied: respect.”<sup>3</sup> He is in fact talking about the subjective dimension of class consciousness and the preparedness of workers to fight. But as his piece shows, this is very much affected by objective factors such as the need of society for the products and services workers produce, the strategic location of some workers in the capitalist labour process and changing labour markets. These changes in the structural development of capitalist society affect what Erik Olin Wright has called the *structural capacity* of the working class. This sets limits to its *organisational capacity* constituted by its conscious organisation and willingness to fight.<sup>4</sup> This mirrors Marx's distinction between the working class as a *class in itself*, defined by a common relationship to the means of production, and as a *class for itself*, organised in active pursuit of its own interests, and makes the point that it is objective features of capitalist society that determine your class: “Class thus conceived is objective: it is formed within the relations of production, and does not arise from individuals' consciousness; indeed it may clash with that consciousness.”<sup>5</sup>

This article is focussed on the objective dimension of the Southern working class and is an initial response to John Molyneux's call for a "a Marxist analysis of who the modern proletariat is, where they are located and which are its key sections from the point of view of potential power and militancy."<sup>6</sup> It seeks to identify who the working class is and argues that a narrow view of the working class does not reflect the reality of modern capitalism and that a Left that dwells on a narrow view of the working class, or which writes off all white-collar workers as middle class with interests separate to manual workers, is unlikely to engage with the changing issues facing Irish workers or understand where the power to change society lies. There are limitations on space in terms of what can be covered here, but in what follows I set out a Marxist approach to understanding the working class before going on to identify some key features of the changing Southern working class. The full implications of what's presented here for the class struggle and left strategy will be dealt with in future pieces.

### **Understanding the working class**

Much analysis of the working class, often seen as a relatively marginalised group, concentrates on its relative disadvantaged position within society. Summing up data from the *Growing Up in Ireland* research project, the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) says that "children's wellbeing is still largely shaped by parental circumstances and social position, resulting in persistent inequalities despite improvements in health, education, and other areas in Ireland over time."<sup>7</sup> Working-class people are likely to die earlier, have poorer health, have less access to education and health services and more generally have less of what is valued in capitalist societies.

Most mainstream sociologists would not argue with this, focussed as they are on the impact of social position, including class position, on what they call *life chances*. They work, drawing mainly on the approach of Max Weber, with what has been called a nominal approach to class.<sup>8</sup> Their main concern is to *describe* differential life chances between groups in society. They therefore tend to focus on differences between social groups and use a range of criteria, including educational attainment, skill, the nature of the work you do (e.g., manual or non-manual), as the basis for mapping unequal life chances across society. This focus on the differences between different kinds of workers leads to an argument that many workers, especially white collar, have now become middle class and that the working class, as conceived by Marxists, no longer exists. One such analysis of the Irish class structure in the 1980s concluded that over half of the workforce was middle class, with the working class constituting only 45 per cent of employees and 22 per cent of all those at work.<sup>9</sup>

While some of this work is useful for showing the inequalities across capitalist societies, it is limited in that it does not dig deeper to give us any real understanding of the underlying mechanisms shaping class society. As St Croix has argued, Weber's account of classes presents them as lacking any relationship with one another. They are not "dynamic in character but merely lie side by side...like numbers in a row."<sup>10</sup> In contrast, the Marxist approach sees classes in relation with one another. The purpose is not just to describe social graduations but to explore the deeper structures of capitalist society, the mechanisms by which exploitation takes place, and how they can be changed.

While not unconcerned with the injustices and inequalities of capitalist society, a key focus is on how the structures of capitalist society shape the capacity of the working class to change it. As Terry Eagleton puts it:

“It is its place within the capitalist mode of production which is most decisive. Only those within that system, familiar with its workings, organised by it into a skilled, politically conscious collective force, indispensable to its successful running yet with a material interest in bringing it low, can feasibly take it over and run it instead for the benefit of all.”<sup>11</sup>

Through its sheer size and its central place in capitalist economies, which, as O’Toole recognises, has been starkly illustrated during the COVID-19 pandemic, the working class has the potential to transform society and socialise the means of production. The very organisation of production and the advance of capitalism help them do so, as they have replaced “the isolation of the labourers, due to competition, by their revolutionary combination, due to association.” As such, capitalists create their own gravediggers.<sup>12</sup>

### **Exploitation**

So for Marxists, class is essentially about exploitation. As St Croix has put it:

“Class (essentially a relationship) is the collective social expression of the fact of exploitation, the way in which exploitation is embodied in a social structure. By exploitation I mean the appropriation of part of the product of the labour of others...A class (a particular class) is a group of persons in a community identified by their position in the whole system of social production, defined above all according to their relationship (primarily in terms of the degree of ownership and control) to the conditions of production (that is to say, the means and labour of production) and to other classes.”<sup>13</sup>

Exploitation within capitalism involves the extraction of surplus value from workers who, having no means of production of their own, are reduced to selling their labour power in order to live.<sup>14</sup> There is a “structured antagonism...in which the workers’ ability to work is deployed in the creation of a surplus that goes to another group.”<sup>15</sup> This creates a permanent conflict whereby the employer seeks to maximise the surplus by making workers work longer hours or by intensifying the production process. The purpose of this is to minimise the labour time necessary to reproduce the worker and maximise the proportion of working time that goes to generate a surplus. Thus, the labor process is organised hierarchically and employers build relations of control into the structure of it. Class struggle is hardwired into the structure of capitalism. Some things follow from this.

Firstly, in simple terms, the working class can be understood as being all those who, lacking means of production, sell their labour in order to survive. This means that we do not only identify those directly involved in the production of goods as workers but rather all those involved in the creation and realisation of surplus value. The creation of surplus value is dispersed across a chain of activities. As productivity has increased in manufacturing and as manufacturing has globalised, many workers in developed economies have been expelled from manufacturing and

reabsorbed into jobs in the service sector, many of which produce commodities that generate profits for capitalists and involve routine and manual work. Further, many jobs that were integral to manufacturing operations in the past, such as cleaning, transport and canteen services, have been outsourced to the services sector. Without so called “knowledge workers” or workers in banking and commercial services, surplus value would not be created or realised.<sup>16</sup>

Further, the production of surplus value requires the creation of a physical and human infrastructure which facilitates economic activity. Capitalists need the continual reproduction of a healthy and educated labour force with the appropriate attitudes and skills to sustain capitalism. Thus, we have had a massive expansion of jobs in health, education and welfare. While many of these have been outsourced or privatised in recent times, many of these workers still work for the state but are increasingly subjected to the logic of budgetary constraints which are the functional equivalent of the downward pressure on labour costs deriving from capitalist competition in the market. The provision of these services can become a focus of the class struggle. As Social Reproduction theorists have pointed out, the desire of workers to meet their needs runs up against the need of capitalists to create conditions whereby “meeting human needs is subordinate to accumulation. They must constrain and control the wages and social spending that pay for the renewal of the workforce.”<sup>17</sup> Through struggle for better social provision, workers thus have an impact on the composition of the workforce and the structure of the working class. So, for example, the NHS, an important achievement of the labour movement, was the fifth largest employer in the world in 2019, employing 1.5 million people.<sup>18</sup>

Secondly, due to the antagonism between workers and employers and the ongoing quest by employers to maximise the extraction of surplus value while keeping ahead of their competitors, capitalism is an extraordinarily dynamic system. Rather than seeing the working class as some kind of fixed entity (as Eagleton puts it, “Male, brawny and handy with a sledgehammer”<sup>19</sup>) that engages in particular forms of work or works under particular conditions, we need to appreciate how the working class is shaped and reshaped by the processes of capital accumulation.

As Kim Moody has argued, “The terrain on which the working class and the oppressed fight necessarily changes as the structure and contours of global and domestic capitalism changes.” This creates problems as centres of working class militancy are dismantled, but also new possibilities as these are replaced by “new and mostly different geographic patterns and structures of concentration with the potential for advances in working-class organisation and rebellion”.<sup>20</sup> Given the current importance of just-in-time distribution systems, Moody points to logistics as a new pressure point for working-class action. Jane Hardy says the large concentration of workers in distribution centres gives them the potential “to talk, argue, share grievances and organise on questions of pay and working conditions as did the factories of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.”<sup>21</sup>

Aligned with these processes of capitalist restructuring, the social composition of the working class may change as “capital expands, contracts, moves and draws in new sources of human material.”<sup>22</sup> Due to the chaos and vicissitudes of capitalism, including climate change, workers are dislocated, leading to “massive migrations within and across continents.”<sup>23</sup> A defining feature of the working class now is its increasing gender and ethnic diversity.

Some, including some Marxists, have latched on to changes in the nature of work—for example the growth of service, white-collar or knowledge work—to argue that the working class has disappeared and that traditional, boring manufacturing jobs have been replaced by flexible and creative jobs based on new technology.<sup>24</sup> While this work may describe some of the changes that are taking place in the world of work, it makes the mistake of presenting them as representing some fundamental, even revolutionary,<sup>25</sup> change in the nature of capitalism. The problem with these kinds of approaches is that they tend to focus on surface changes in the conditions of workers which leave the underlying labour process untouched. While some sectors may rely on a stable workforce and their embedded skills, and thus may face limits to which they can degrade and deskill their work, “in practice firms continuously attempt to simplify and cheapen labour in order to reduce costs and relieve employers’ dependency on scarce or skilled labour,”<sup>26</sup> including professional labour. So, for example, professionals in Ireland’s high-tech sectors have been subjected to lean production methods: “The employment model that combines socialised work with individualised careers appears to have been imported into Ireland in a way that is most closely tied to the approach that prevails in the USA, with relatively little employee autonomy and close managerial control.”<sup>27</sup> This concerted attempt to deskill and more closely control the labour process is often referred to as proletarianisation.

Thirdly, if class position is determined by relationship to the means of production, how do we explain the class position of a layer of professional, technical and managerial workers, who fall in between workers and employers, those who do not own means of production but who control their own labour or the labour of others? While accounting for the position of this layer has been an overriding concern of contemporary Marxist class analysis,<sup>28</sup> it can be noted that Marx was not unaware of this issue and, even in his time, commented on the “continual increase in numbers of the middle classes...situated midway between the workers on one side and the capitalist on the other.”<sup>29</sup> The task facing Marxists is to explain the position of those in the middle without losing a focus on the dynamics of capitalist society as a whole and the manner in which surplus value is “created and pumped around the system by interacting classes and fractions of classes.”<sup>30</sup> Given that it constitutes an absolute minority, the capitalist class requires the cooperation of a much larger group of persons carrying out a range of functions—personnel management, investment appraisal, market research, engineering design and production management and control—to ensure its survival.

There is not space here to dwell on the debates about the nature of these intermediary occupations, but perhaps the best attempt to make sense of their position derives from Erik Olin Wright’s theory of *contradictory class locations*.<sup>31</sup> An important starting point is that when Marx talked about control of the means of production, he did not mean legal control but “effective possession.” Wright isolates three dimensions of control: control over the physical means of production, control over labour power and control over investments and resource allocation. For Wright, these do not always coincide, ranging from those who have control over all three, who are effectively part of the capitalist class, to those like managers and supervisors who have some control over the labour power of others. The latter are in a contradictory position in that they are both wage labourers, dominated by the capitalist employing them, and agents of capitalists in dominating workers. They exercise operational (as opposed to strategic) control, and constitute part of the new middle class<sup>32</sup>.

This kind of analysis can also be applied to technical workers. Carchedi<sup>33</sup> has argued that as capitalism becomes increasingly concentrated and centralised, systems are needed to coordinate and control increasingly complex production systems. Thus, those in the middle can contribute to the function of what Marx called the “collective worker” by coordinating increasingly complex labour processes. But they may also contribute to the “function of capital” by performing a “surveillance” function, which involves controlling the workforce and harnessing it to the needs of the valorisation process. As capitalist enterprises grow in size and complexity, we see the “collective function of capital” being performed by managers and technical workers like engineers, whose work “involves varying mixes of both coordination (necessary organisation) and surveillance (managing for capital).”<sup>34</sup>

Wright identified a second contradictory location between the working class and the petty bourgeoisie (small employers and the self-employed): semi-autonomous employees who retain relatively high levels of control over their work. Callinicos gives the example of university lecturers who do not perform the function of capital but who are at the same time are relatively free from capitalist surveillance and control.<sup>35</sup>

This overall approach is useful in that it allows us to identify a layer who, while wage labourers, exercise control on behalf of the capitalist class or are free from capitalist control. But the lines between the working class and the new middle class may be blurred, and it may be hard, especially given the construction of official statistics, to separate them neatly. It is difficult, barring empirical investigation, to know the extent to which, for example, particular engineers exercise a surveillance function on behalf of capital.

It is also the case that groups may move out of the new middle class as their work is proletarianised. Many in the middle may be poorly tied to the interests of the capitalist class, and have often been subject to the same processes of control and labour intensification applied to workers more generally.<sup>36</sup> Hardy argues that far from being hermetically sealed in their ivory towers, “workers in further and higher education have been proletarianised by the neo-liberalisation of education.”<sup>37</sup> An important implication of Wright’s work is that if those in the middle have contradictory interests, they can be, and have been in the past, won to trade unionism and a political project led by the working class. Whether this happens or not will be determined by social and political factors

### **Mapping the working class in the South**

In the context of my comments above, in what follows I attempt to map the working class in the twenty-six counties. I rely mainly on Labour Force Survey (LFS) data, and use, in the main and for convenience, a data series running from 1998 to 2019.<sup>38</sup> Where it is necessary and useful, comparisons over longer periods are provided, and other data sources, such as the census, are used. Various searches were also carried out on Data.cso.ie, and the Central Statistics Office (CSO) provided some data on request.<sup>39</sup>

I focus mainly on data for 2019 in order to avoid any Covid effects. There have been problems collecting data in the context of the pandemic, and it's also had differential impacts on sectors of employment. How permanent they may be is hard to judge at this stage.

### The size of the working population

In broad terms, we can say the vast majority, 85 per cent, of those who are economically active are employees, and that the number of people working is growing. Based on LFS estimates, the number of employees in the Republic grew, for first time, to over two million in 2019 (see Table 1). The number of workers has increased by over 50 per cent since 1998 (see Table 2). It can be seen from Table 1 that employers with employees constituted only 4 per cent of those “in employment.” While self-employed people with no employees constitute another 10 per cent, some of these are effectively employees forced into bogus self-employment by unscrupulous employers in areas like construction. So while non-agricultural self-employment accounts for 7 per cent of those in employment outside agriculture, self-employment in construction, a sector where there is much concern about bogus self-employment, is 18 per cent, having risen by 61 per cent since 1998. Construction accounts for 18 per cent of all those who are self-employed. There are only two other sectors that compare with this: transport (17 per cent are self-employed), which is mainly composed of taxi drivers (who, according to the census of 2016, were the largest single group of self-employed people), and professional, scientific and technical services (16 per cent self-employed).

Table 1: In Employment 2019					
	N (000)	%	Males	Females	Female %
Employers (with paid employees)	98.9	4%	76.0	22.9	23.2%
Self-employed (with no paid employees)	232.3	10%	174.6	57.7	24.8%
Employee	2,018.1	85%	1,017.3	1,000.8	49.6%
Assisting relative	11.9	1%	5.2	6.6	55.5%
<b>Total</b>	<b>2,361.2</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>1,273.1</b>	<b>1,088.0</b>	<b>46.1%</b>

The most notable change in the composition of those in employment is the huge increase in the number of women at work. In the period covered in Table 2 it can be seen that while the number of employees grew by 53 per cent, the number of women at work rose by over 70 per cent, with over 400,000 joining the workforce as employees. This has led to a situation where over one million women are employees, and half of all employees are now women. Women made up 44 per cent of employees in 1998, but only one third in 1992, and 28 per cent in 1977.<sup>40</sup>

Table 2: Change 1998–2019 (+ unless indicated)			
	All	Male	Female
Employers (with paid employees)	11%	4%	40%
Self-employed (with no paid employees)	21%	7%	104%
Employee	53%	39%	71%
Assisting relative	-46%	-42%	-50%
<b>Total persons</b>	<b>46%</b>	<b>31%</b>	<b>69%</b>

A key factor underlying this development has been the changing position of married women. The number at work has increased by 85 per cent since 1998. Fifty-seven per cent of married women now work, as opposed to 41 per cent in 1998. Participation rates have increased for all age groups, reflecting (and contributing to) the outcomes of women's struggles for greater reproductive freedoms, changing participation in education and demand for labour, changing social norms due to the diminishing influence of the church, demographic changes and changing forms of employment, which will be discussed below but also increasing economic pressure on households and the need to have two adults working in order to achieve a satisfactory level of income and deal with rising debt levels and housing costs.<sup>41</sup>

But women's employment rate is still lower than men's (65 per cent to 76 per cent), and having children is a significant factor here. There are large variations in employment rates between women with and without children. In 2018 this rate varied from 88.1 per cent for women in a couple with no children to 66.8 per cent for women whose youngest child was aged between four and five. The presence of children had a much smaller effect on the employment rate for men, reflecting that fact that care work is mainly undertaken by women.<sup>42</sup> This also explains why women are more likely to work part time: 31 per cent, as opposed to 12 per cent of men. Eighty per cent of women part-time workers are what are called "part-time, not underemployed," the suggestion being that they don't want to work full time. While this may not recognise the social barriers informing their choice, it is the case that those who may choose to work part time on a long-time basis are "among the lower at-risk categories of precariousness."<sup>43</sup> These workers may enjoy conditions comparable with full-time workers, and may be unionised. Many of the leaders of the Debenhams strike were long-time part-timers.

It can be noted that the proportion of women working part time has remained at about 30 per cent since 1998. The vast majority of women work full time, with almost 300,000 additional women working full time since 1998. The number of men working full time increased by 220,000 in the same period. Tables 3 and 4 (ranked by the shaded column) give a picture of the dramatic changes in women's employment.



It can be seen in Table 3 that there have been huge increases in the numbers working in health, education and the public sector more generally. Over half of women workers work in one of four sectors: health, retail, education or hospitality and food. They make up the vast majority of workers in health and education, and a majority in sectors such as accommodation and food, the public sector and retail. Some of these sectors have very high levels of low pay. CSO data<sup>44</sup> provide detail on earnings for 2018 and shows that median earnings were €592.60 per week. They also show that 28.7 per cent of workers were earning below €400 per week, which is just above 66 per cent of median earnings (€394). It also shows that women were more likely to be below €400, as some sectors where they work had very high numbers of workers earning under €400, including accommodation and food (68 per cent), art and recreation (56 per cent) (which forms part of “Other NACE activities” in Table 4), and wholesale and retail (44 per cent). Even sectors such as health and education had a quarter of workers below €400.

This picture of gender segregation is reinforced by the data in Table 4, which focuses on the jobs that women actually do, showing that secretarial, caring and sales work are overwhelmingly done by women. While it shows that over half of women are professionals, the professional jobs they do are quite different to those performed by men. My analysis of detailed data from the 2016 census, covering over three hundred job categories, shows that over half of these professionals are nurses and teachers at primary or secondary level. One in eight women workers is a nurse or a teacher.

Table 3: Women’s Employment by Sector

	All Employment 1998–2019		Women: Workers Only 2019		Women % In Sector
Sector	Change	Women	Number (000)	%	
Human health and social work activities	138%	144%	220.1	22%	79%
Wholesale and retail trade; repair of motor vehicles and motorcycles	36%	38%	144.1	14%	52%
Education	96%	115%	131.2	13%	72%
Accommodation and food service activities	71%	67%	91	9%	56%
Industry	-11%	-10%	79.2	8%	29%
Public administration and defence; compulsory social security	76%	165%	61	6%	53%
Financial, insurance and real estate activities	72%	55%	54.8	5%	51%
Professional, scientific and technical activities	88%	118%	53.9	5%	50%

Other NACE activities	50%	61%	52	5%	59%
Administrative and support service activities	110%	72%	40.5	4%	42%
Information and communication	88%	49%	33.9	3%	30%
Transportation and storage	53%	43%	18.9	2%	22%
Construction	28%	221%	11.5	1%	11%
Agriculture, forestry and fishing	-22%	-16%	9.2	1%	26%
All	46%	69%	1004.1	100	50%

Table 4: Occupational Group: Women Workers

Occupational group	Women (000)	%	% Women In Group
Professionals	247.7	25%	56%
Administrative and secretarial	187.9	19%	80%
Caring, leisure and other services	143	14%	78%
Sales and customer service	118.8	12%	63%
Elementary (unskilled)	107.1	11%	43%
Associate professional and technical	99.2	10%	41%
Managers/directors/senior officials	45.9	5%	39%
Process/plant/machine operatives	25.2	3%	16%
Skilled trades	25	2%	12%
All	1004.2	100%	50%

This analysis also shows that women are more clustered than men, with just ten job categories, a mix of white-collar, manual service work and proletarianised professional work, accounting for almost 40 per cent of women workers. The biggest single category is sales and retail assistants, followed by nurses and midwives and then a variety of administrative and secretarial jobs, care work and teaching, cleaning and bookkeeping.

## Growing Diversity

Another notable, but perhaps not as dramatic, change is in relation to the nationality of those in employment (Table 5).

Table 5: In Employment: Nationality					
	2006		2019		Change 2006-19
	N (000)	%	N (000)	%	
All in employment	2166.8	100%	2357.3	100%	9%
Irish	1857.9	86%	1966.4	83%	6%
Outside Ireland	308.9	14%	390.9	17%	27%
UK	58.9	3%	60.1	3%	2%
EU14 (Excl. Ireland)	33.6	2%	63.9	3%	90%
EU15 to27	132.0	6%	162.8	7%	23%
Other	84.4	4%	104.1	4%	23%

While the LFS series only provides this data from 2006, it can be seen that a greater proportion of those in employment are from outside Ireland. This has increased from 14 per cent to 17 per cent since 2006. While the overall numbers in employment grew by 9 per cent, the numbers from outside Ireland grew by 27 per cent. And while the biggest increase has been for those from EU14 countries, which includes the developed core plus lower-income countries such as Spain and Greece, the greater number are from more peripheral EU states and from outside the EU.

One study which had access to LFS microdata shows a more dramatic increase in the numbers employed across the private sector. It shows that “the proportion of non-Irish nationals in overall employment has increased markedly between Q2 2002 and Q2 2017 in firms of all sizes.” While 5.6 per cent of those in private-sector employment were from outside Ireland in 2002, this had risen to 18.7 per cent in 2017. Over one-fifth of those working in firms with more than one hundred employees were from outside Ireland.<sup>45</sup>

Data provided to me by the CSO for 2019 show that workers from outside Ireland work across all sectors of the economy. Of the 390,000 in the table above, 360,000 are employees. Five sectors account for 64 per cent of them: manufacturing (15 per cent), retail (14 per cent), hospitality and food (13 per cent), information and communication (11 per cent) and health (11 per cent). It is notable that 28 per cent of those working in hospitality and food are from outside Ireland. As we have noted it has very high levels of low pay.

Further insights on this issue can be gleaned from census data, which also show a rise in the proportion and number of workers from outside Ireland from 13 per cent of those at work in 2006 to 18 per cent in 2016. What is significant is that the proportion and number of workers accounted for by the UK and the EU15 (excluding Ireland and the UK) has fallen from 34 per cent to 25 per cent those from outside Ireland. As seen in Table 6, Polish workers make up the largest group. While ten nationalities account for almost half of the non-Irish workforce, there are now ninety-six nationalities represented within that workforce. Almost 6 per cent of workers say they are from an Asian country, 2.5 per cent from South America and 2 per cent from Africa, indicating that the workforce is becoming ethnically and racially more diverse. It is noteworthy that 8 per cent of these workers don't state their nationality, perhaps due to fear arising from their visa status. It is estimated that there are 14,000 undocumented adults here and that over one-third of them work as carers.<sup>46</sup>

Table 6: Top Ten Nationalities					
	2011	% *	2016	%*	2011–2016 Increase
Polish	69473	23%	75508	21%	8%
UK	46902	16%	48091	13%	2%
Lithuanian	19753	7%	21674	6%	9%
Romanian	8057	3%	17134	5%	53%
Latvian	10782	4%	10980	3%	2%
Italian	5318	2%	8545	2%	38%
Spanish	4494	1%	8331	2%	46%
French	6511	2%	8136	2%	20%
German	6483	2%	6974	2%	7%
Brazilian	4011	1%	6568	2%	39%
Not stated	15444	5%	29039	8%	47%
*of those from outside Ireland.					

So this gives us an initial sense of the size and changing composition of the working population. I now want to move to making a wider assessment of the size and shape of the working class.

### Who is working class?

Tables 7 and 8 provide comprehensive details on employment in the South of Ireland based on official categorisations which present data for sectors and occupational groups. Data is provided for all those in the labour force and also for just those who were employees in 2019. While this data is not always useful for the purposes of what I am trying to do here, it does provide a basis for identifying where the working class work and what they do. I have also drawn on an analysis of over 300 job categories taken from Census 2016.

Some broad points can be made before examining the occupational structure to get a better handle on the size of the working class.

1. The vast majority of workers worked in the private sector in 2019, 79 per cent. Of the 412,000 who worked in the public sector 250,000 worked in health and education.<sup>47</sup>
2. In almost all sectors employment has risen between 1998 and 2019, especially in areas such as health (138 per cent), administrative services (110 per cent), education (96 per cent), professional and technical activities (88 per cent) and information and communication (88 per cent). The number of workers in financial services and hospitality and food have grown by over 70 per cent.
3. Five sectors account for almost 60 per cent of all workers; health (14 per cent); wholesale and retail (14 per cent); manufacturing (13 per cent); education (9 per cent) and accommodation and food (8 per cent). Within manufacturing, key sectors are food (48,600), pharmaceuticals (43,400) and computer and electronics equipment (21,500), which make up over 40 per cent of workers in manufacturing. Almost half of workers in manufacturing work for a foreign-owned company (across the wider business economy it is 25 per cent).<sup>48</sup>
4. Those who argue that there have been fundamental shifts in the nature of capitalism often focus on the shift from industry to services as an indicator that we have moved into a post-industrial informational economy. It can be seen that employment in manufacturing has fallen by 11 per cent in the period under review. But it can be noted that it has grown by 19 per cent since 2012, when it reached a low of 240,200, and has continued to grow despite the pandemic.<sup>49</sup> In 2019, manufacturing was responsible for 44 per cent of Gross Added Value (GVA) and GVA per head was three times that of the economy as a whole.<sup>50</sup> This is based on massive productivity gains, with unit labour costs falling by 42 per cent and productivity increasing by 277 per cent since 2000, representing a major increase in the rate of exploitation. Manufacturing still plays a major role in the economy, supporting many jobs in distribution and services. The second and third largest job categories for males in 2016 were large-goods vehicle drivers and elementary storage occupations, accounting for almost 5 per cent of all male jobs. Maintenance fitters was the eleventh-largest group for males. The largest single category for all workers, and women, was retail sales. In 2019 215,000 people were working in retail sales.

Table 7: Economic Sector

	1998 (000)	2019 (000)	2019 (%)	Change	Employees Only 2019 (000)	2019 (%)
Agriculture, forestry and fishing	137.0	106.8	5%	-22%	35.8	2%
<b>Total Industry</b>	<b>436.2</b>	<b>433.4</b>	<b>18%</b>	<b>-1%</b>	<b>373.4</b>	<b>18%</b>
Manufacturing	321.1	286.3	12%	-11%	269.3	13%
Construction	115.1	147.1	6%	28%	104.1	5%
<b>Total Services</b>	<b>1,031.1</b>	<b>1,810.9</b>	<b>77%</b>	<b>76%</b>	<b>1610.8</b>	<b>79%</b>
Wholesale and retail trade; repair of motor vehicles and motorcycles	227.5	309.3	13%	36%	275.2	14%
Transportation and storage	70.4	108.0	5%	53%	87.2	4%
Accommodation and food service activities	104.5	179.0	8%	71%	163.3	8%
Information and communication	67.7	127.4	5%	88%	112	6%
Financial, insurance and real estate activities	67.0	115.1	5%	72%	106.6	5%
Professional, scientific and technical activities	75.2	141.1	6%	88%	107.9	5%
Administrative and support service activities	53.3	111.8	5%	110%	95.6	5%
Public administration and defence; compulsory social security	66.1	116.6	5%	76%	115.5	6%
Education	97.0	190.5	8%	96%	181.9	9%
Human health and social work activities	123.3	293.7	12%	138%	277.4	14%
Other NACE activities	79.1	118.3	5%	50%	88.2	4%
Not stated	11.5	6.2	0%	-46%	6.1	0%
<b>Total persons</b>	<b>1,615.7</b>	<b>2,357.3</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>46%</b>	<b>2026.2</b>	<b>100%</b>

Table 8 allows us to better consider the jobs workers are doing. It can be seen that the biggest category is professionals, a diverse group including scientists, engineers, librarians and journalists. As indicated previously, a large number of these are rank-and-file teachers and nurses, constituting 52 per cent of professionals. The only other large category of note is chartered accountants, who constitute 7.5 per cent of professionals.

Table 8: Occupational Group

	<b>2007 (000)</b>	<b>2019 (000)</b>	<b>2019 (%)</b>	<b>Change</b>	<b>Employees Only 2019 (000)</b>	<b>2019 (%)</b>
Professionals	375.5	494.3	21%	32%	444.2	22%
Skilled trades	410	317.4	13%	-23%	201.3	10%
Associate professional and technical	228.1	274.5	12%	20%	240.1	12%
Elementary (Unskilled)	307	253.7	11%	-17%	246.3	12%
Administrative and secretarial	242.8	241.7	10%	0%	236	12%
Caring, leisure and other services	147	199.5	8%	36%	183.7	9%
Sales and customer service	178.9	192.6	8%	8%	188.4	9%
Managers/directors/senior officials	156.7	189	8%	21%	117.9	6%
Process/plant/machine operatives	179.5	185.4	8%	3%	159.6	8%
Other/Not stated	5.2	9.1	0%	75%	8.6	0%
Total	2230.7	2357.2	100%	6%	2026.2	100%

There has been some debate about whether workers such as nurses and teachers should be included as part of the working class.<sup>51</sup> Moody regards them as proletarianising professions, while Thier argues that, as teachers sell their labour like others, they must be regarded as part of the working class. We could also add that they don't control the labour of others, are increasingly subject to external control through the implementation of national standards and have been at the sharp end of austerity cuts, having their salaries cut, hours increased and their sick pay and pensions attacked. There are also relatively high levels of casualisation in education, with 22 per cent of workers working part time in 2019. In 2016, the Teachers Union of Ireland claimed that as many as 30 per cent of its members and some 50 per cent of those under thirty-five years of age were "casualised."<sup>52</sup> This is why they have grown increasingly militant and prepared to engage in industrial action. I think there is no case for arguing that they don't form part of the working class, and the same applies to nurses. I think it's harder to sustain the argument, as Hardy does, that all

university workers are now part of the working class, as processes of proletarianisation are more uneven across higher education.

I think it's possible to argue, as others have, that in all other categories, except for managers/directors/senior officials, the majority of workers are part of the working class. They sell their labour, have little control over what they do and don't control the labour of others. While this is not an exact exercise, I have examined the 327 job categories for employees-only used in Census 2016, and broadly allocated those who have any managerial or supervisory function out of the working class. I have only included those professions where there is evidence of proletarianisation, mainly teaching and nursing. Some other health professionals, librarians and those in software and web development I have included as part of the working class. I have conservatively left most other groups who are professional out of the working class, including all scientists and engineers. Thus I arrive at a guesstimate that 74 per cent of those at work are part of the working class. This is larger than estimates for the US by Moody and Zweig of 63 per cent,<sup>53</sup> which Thier<sup>54</sup> describes as conservative, but the difference arises mainly from my allocating nurses and teachers to the working class and a rather small allocation by Zweig of 44 per cent of sales workers to the working class. In Ireland, 67 per cent of sales workers are sales assistants. This difference may arise from how workers are categorised in the two countries.

Of course, the working class is not just those who work. If we include those who are unemployed—who are overwhelmingly working class (Census 2016 showed that the risk of an unskilled worker being unemployed was seven times that of a professional<sup>55</sup>)—and others not in the labour force, and apply Moody's suggestion that 75 per cent of the non-working population are working class, we arrive at a membership, based on the 2019 labour force estimates, of 2,681,000 (68 per cent) for the population over fifteen years. This requires excluding all employers, including the self-employed without workers, some of whom are workers forced into bogus self-employment, and farmers, who make up a larger proportion of the labour force here than in other developed countries.<sup>56</sup> As others have indicated, it is the case that the working class make up the overwhelming majority.

### **By way of a conclusion**

But that does not mean that society is run in our interest, or that it is easy to organise this massive majority to act as one. In 2019, 25 per cent of workers were unionised, down from 33 per cent in 2005. In relation to this there are two issues I want to address.

Firstly, the capacity of workers to organise and act has been linked to the size of the workplaces they work in. For a variety of reasons to do with sheer numbers, ease of communication and the capacity to inflict real damage on an employer, bigger workplaces are better organised.<sup>57</sup> Earnings for men and women are highest in large firms, and levels of casualisation are much lower.<sup>58</sup> In an interesting review of employment in large and small firms, and looking at trends between 2002 and 2017, Keogh and others note that



“the number of employees in each firm size category has increased between Q2 2002 and Q2 2017, except in firms with 1–10 employees. The largest increase in employment was in firms with over 500 employees, where employment increased by 58,900, or 52.9 percent...Employment in firms with over 500 employees increased by: 13,100 in financial and insurance activities; 11,700 in the manufacturing sector; 9,900 in professional, scientific and technical activities; and 9,800 in information and communications technologies.”<sup>59</sup>

A majority of workers are now working in companies with more than fifty employees. A third are in firms with over 250. One-third of those in manufacturing are in firms of over 500. Two-thirds of employees in multinationals are in firms with over one hundred workers.<sup>60</sup> Bigger firms are highly profitable, with the top fifty by employment accounting for 72 per cent of GVA in manufacturing and 79 per cent of gross operating surplus.<sup>61</sup>

Second is the issue of precarious employment, which has been much debated on the Left as it's seen to deal a fatal blow to the capacity of the working class to act as one. Both Hardy and Moody devote chapters to the issue to make the argument that the extent of precarity may be overstated, that it is not a new issue for the labour movement, that it assumes that full-time permanent employment was the norm in the past and most importantly that it has not created a new class of workers with interests separate to the majority of workers. They also want to assert that it is possible to organise temporary and part-time workers. But the challenge may be greater in some sectors. It is the case that, for example, levels of part-time work vary greatly across particular sectors, with very high levels in areas such as hospitality and food (42 per cent), retail (33 per cent) and also in smaller firms. This presents a real challenge to organising.

While the debate about precarious work suffers from a lack of clarity about what it means as there is “no official definition...and as such no standardised measure,”<sup>62</sup> Nugent and his colleagues set out to get a measure of the extent of it. They show that while temporary employment has fluctuated, it fell between 1998 and 2018, the number of short-term contracts has increased for temporary workers, part-time work has also increased since the 1980s but fallen in recent years, and there has been a slight increase in marginal part-time work and a fall in permanent employment among young people. In pulling the data together, they estimate that 77 per cent of workers are in permanent employment, while 23 per cent are at “elevated risk of precariousness,” up 2 per cent between 2004 and 2016.

When measures of deprivation and poverty are taken into account for permanent workers, almost half of all workers could be considered to be in “precarious” employment. This would seem to echo Moody’s argument that what can be lost in the debate about precarity are the wider changes in working class lives in recent decades, which include a decline in living and working standards, job intensification and declining wages and benefits.<sup>63</sup> This is starkly illustrated by the massive fall in the wage share of national income, which fell here from 55 per cent in 1995 to 44 per cent in 2015—the second biggest drop in the thirty-seven countries surveyed. It was 66 per cent in 1960.<sup>64</sup>

Recently, the CSO says that “in 2019, the labour share for Ireland reached an all-time low of 30% down off a peak of 49% in 2010.”<sup>65</sup>

What we can take from all of the above is that while the working class is bigger than ever and working in bigger workplaces than before, and is not as precarious as some think, it faces new challenges in generating solidarity among an increasingly diverse workforce. The biggest groups of workers are now women working in teaching, nursing and retail. Distribution workers of various sorts are significant within the working class. Far from being in some post-industrial nirvana, many workers work in routine service jobs or face the prospect of proletarianisation in a context where employers are grabbing an increasing share of their labour. Many work for low pay. Some, especially younger workers, are precarious.

How the Left responds to this will be crucial for building itself and its relationship with wider layers of workers who are looking for real change in a context where unions have been weakened and don't show any real desire to fight. Workers are the vast majority and retain the capacity to significantly change society. The problem is that they are not yet organised to do so. The task, as ever, is to turn the class in itself into one *for itself*.

<sup>1</sup> O Toole, F. (2021). “Pandemic has shown foolishness of taking cheap workers for granted,” *Irish Times*, Oct 16.

<sup>2</sup> O Toole, F. (2021).

<sup>3</sup> O Toole, F. (2021).

<sup>4</sup> Wright, E. O. (1976) *Class, Crises and the State*, Verso. See also Callinicos, A. (1987) *Making History*, Cambridge: Polity

<sup>5</sup> Callinicos, A. (1983/2006) “The New Middle Class and Socialists,” *International Socialism*, 2 (20), available online from: <http://isj.org.uk/the-new-middle-class-and-socialists/>

<sup>6</sup> Molyneux, J. (2018) “Who is the working class today?” *Rebel*, December 4, available online from: <http://www.rebelnews.ie/2018/12/04/who-is-the-working-class-today/>

<sup>7</sup> Economic and Social Research Institute (2016) *Cherishing All the Children Equally? Ireland 100 Years on From the Rising*, Cork: ESRI/Oak Tree Press.

<sup>8</sup> Crompton, R. (1993) *Class and Stratification*, Cambridge: Polity. See also Jon Gubbay (1997) “A Marxist Critique of Weberian Class Analyses,” *Sociology*, 31(1), pp 73–89.

<sup>9</sup> See Table 3.2 in Breen, R. et al (1990) *Understanding Contemporary Ireland*, Gill and Macmillan.

<sup>10</sup> De St Croix, G. (1981) *Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World*, Duckworth. p 90.

<sup>11</sup> Eagleton, T. (2011) *Why Marx Was Right*, Yale University Press, p 165.

<sup>12</sup> See Marx, K. and Engels, F. (1972) *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, Peking: Foreign Language Press and Molyneux, J. (2018) “The Working Class,” *Irish Marxist Review*, 7(20).

<sup>13</sup> De St Croix (1981) pp 43–4.

<sup>14</sup> Marx and Engels (1972) p 30.

<sup>15</sup> Edwards, P. (1986) *Conflict at Work*, Oxford: Blackwell, p 5.

<sup>16</sup> Hardy, J. (2021) *Nothing to Lose but Our Chains*, Pluto Press, ch. 4..

- <sup>17</sup> Ferguson, S. "Social Reproduction: What's the big idea?" available online from: <https://www.plutobooks.com/blog/social-reproduction-theory-ferguson/>
- <sup>18</sup> Hardy, J. (2021) *Nothing to Lose but Our Chains*, Pluto Press, p 35.
- <sup>19</sup> Eagleton (2011) p 169.
- <sup>20</sup> Moody, K (2017) *On New Terrain*, Chicago: Haymarket, p 3. See also Chapters 1,3 and 5. Similar arguments can be found in Hardy (2021).
- <sup>21</sup> Hardy (2021) pp 42–3.
- <sup>22</sup> Moody (2017) p 2.
- <sup>23</sup> Hardy (2021) p 210
- <sup>24</sup> See Hardy (2021) Chapter 3
- <sup>25</sup> See D'Art, D. and T. Turner (2002) "Industrial Relations in the New Economy," in D'Art and Turner (eds) *Irish Employment Relations in the New Economy*, Blackhall Publishing.
- <sup>26</sup> D'Art, D. and T. Turner (2002) p 4. See also Hardy (2021) Chapters 2 and 3.
- <sup>27</sup> Murray, P. and O'Riain, S. (2007) "Work Transformed: Two faces of the new Irish Workplace," in S. O'Sullivan (ed) *Contemporary Ireland: A Sociological Map*, UCD Press.
- <sup>28</sup> Chibber, V. (2009). "Development in Marxist Class Analysis," In Bidet, J. and Kouvelakis, S., *Critical Companion to Contemporary Marxism*, Haymarket.
- <sup>29</sup> Quoted in Bottomore, T. (1988) *Interpretations of Marx*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell. p 19.
- <sup>30</sup> Gubbay (1997) p 84.
- <sup>31</sup> Wright, E. O. (1976) *Class, Crises and the State*, Verso, ch. 2. For a very useful discussion see Callinicos (1983/2006).
- <sup>32</sup> Callinicos (1983/2006).
- <sup>33</sup> Carchedi, G. (1977) *On the Economic Identification of Social Classes*, London: Routledge.
- <sup>34</sup> Meiksins, P. and Smith, C. (1996) *Engineering Labour*, Verso, p 17. See E. Conlon (2019) "Prisoners of the Capitalist Machine: Captivity and the Corporate Engineer," in Christensen et al, *The Engineering-Business Nexus*, Springer, where I have explored the position of engineers in these terms.
- <sup>35</sup> Callinicos (1983/2006).
- <sup>36</sup> See Hodson, R. (2001) *Dignity at Work*, Cambridge University Press, ch. 6, and D'Art, D. and T. Turner (2002).
- <sup>37</sup> Hardy (2021) p 190.
- <sup>38</sup> It should be noted that a new Labour Force Survey (LFS) replaced the Quarterly National Household Survey (QNHS) in Q3 2017 and, as a result, care will be taken when comparing data from before and after this period.
- <sup>39</sup> I want to thank Martina O Callaghan in the CSO for her assistance.
- <sup>40</sup> Gunnigle, P., Mc Mahon, G and Fitzgerald, G. (1995) *Industrial Relation in Ireland*, Gill and Macmillan, p 16.
- <sup>41</sup> See Edwards, P. (2000) and Share, P. et al.(2012) *Sociology of Ireland*, Gill and Macmillan, ch. 6.
- <sup>42</sup> <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-wamii/womenandmeninireland2019/work/>
- <sup>43</sup> [https://www.nerinstitute.net/sites/default/files/research/2019/precarious\\_work\\_in\\_the\\_republic\\_of\\_ireland\\_july\\_19\\_final.pdf](https://www.nerinstitute.net/sites/default/files/research/2019/precarious_work_in_the_republic_of_ireland_july_19_final.pdf)
- <sup>44</sup> <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/peads/earningsanalysisusingadministrativedatasources2018/>

- <sup>45</sup> Keogh, R. et al (2020) *The Composition of Employment in Small and Large Firms*, IGES Unit, Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. p 14.
- <sup>46</sup> See <https://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/editorial/the-irish-times-view-on-regularising-undocumented-migrants-a-path-out-of-the-shadows-1.4748023>
- <sup>47</sup> See <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/lfs/labourforcesurvey/lfsquarter12020/>
- <sup>48</sup> <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-bii/businessinireland2019/multinationalsanirishperspective/>
- <sup>49</sup> See <https://www.ibec.ie/connect-and-learn/media/2021/03/03/irish-manufacturing-generates-30000-jobs#:~:text=Irish%20manufacturing%20generates%2030%2C000%20jobs,Europe%20with%205.4%25%20export%20growth>
- <sup>50</sup> <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-bii/businessinireland2019/detailedbusinesssectors/>
- <sup>51</sup> See Moody (2017), Thier, H. (2020) *The Working Class Is the Vast Majority of Society*, available online from: <https://jacobinmag.com/2020/09/working-class-peoples-guide-capitalism-marxist-economics> and also Harman, C. (1986) “The Working Class after the recession,” *International Socialism*, autumn, 1986, and Hardy (2021) ch. 11.
- <sup>52</sup> <https://www.tui.ie/news/a-breakthrough-in-the-campaign-to-end-casualisation-a-message-to-members-from-tui-president-joanne-irwin.8936.html>
- <sup>53</sup> Moody (2017), Zweig, M. (2000) “America’s Working Class Majority,” *Regional Labour Review*, fall, 2000.
- <sup>54</sup> Thier (2020)
- <sup>55</sup> <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cp11eoi/cp11eoi/ioscs/>
- <sup>56</sup> <https://ourworldindata.org/employment-in-agriculture>
- <sup>57</sup> See Harman (1986), and Conlon, E. (1998) “Fighting back in hard times: the 1990 strike in Waterford Crystal,” Annual SAI Conference, May 8–10, Wexford, available online from: <https://arrow.dit.ie/schmuldistcon/7/>
- <sup>58</sup> Keogh et al (2020) p 1.
- <sup>59</sup> Keogh et al (2020) pp 6–7.
- <sup>60</sup> <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/bd/businessdemography2019/>
- <sup>61</sup> <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-bii/businessinireland2019/businessperformanceinireland/>
- <sup>62</sup> Nugent, C. et al (2019) *Precarious Work in Ireland*, NERI Working Paper Series, p 4.
- <sup>63</sup> Moody (2017) p 30.
- <sup>64</sup> See <https://www.neriinstitute.net/blog/2016/04/01/a-worryingtrend-in-wages/> for more details.
- <sup>65</sup> <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/ppii/productivityinireland2019/chapter4gvaandthelabourshare/>