

## **The aesthetics of protest in the UCL Justice for Workers campaign**

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### **Abstract**

*In this study, I focus on the aesthetics of protest of the UCL Justice for Workers campaign, a University College London-based, student-led campaign dedicated to ending the outsourcing of workers at the university, including catering, cleaning and security staff. Drawing from my own participation in the movement, I explore how UCL Justice for Workers use aesthetics in order to communicate and perform a political voice. I use Enzo Traverso's reading of the concept of Left-Wing Melancholia to show how, through various aesthetic means, UCL Justice for Workers look to the past in order to recover the utopian imagination which has fuelled past workers' revolutions. Moreover, informed by scholars working in the fields of critical geography and urban studies, I detail how UCL Justice for Workers contest the spatial order of the university campus through the use of banners, posters, and other ephemera.*

**Keywords:** student-worker movements, precarious workers, trade unions, Left-Wing Melancholia, memory, space, aesthetics

### **Introduction**

On a bitterly cold night in November 2019, I sprung out of bed at 3AM and made my way to the bus stop around the corner from my house. I hopped on the number 28 bus which was headed towards the Sainsbury Wellcome Centre, where UCL workers organising through the Independent Workers' Union of Great Britain (IWGB) had formed a picket line in preparation for a day of strikes in protest against their employers, the outsourcing companies Sodexo and Axis. Though the atmosphere was tense, and many workers were scared to participate in the strike, there was a lot of hope too; the workers' spirit uplifted by the many students, including myself, who had arrived to show their support.

The strikes were part of a wider campaign, jointly fought by students and workers, that seeks to end the outsourcing of cleaners, security, and maintenance staff and have them be directly employed by UCL. As has become a recurring trend among UK universities since 2010, in order to cut costs and "drive efficiencies and ensure value for money", UCL has outsourced a variety of jobs, including security, catering and cleaning roles, leaving large firms such as Sodexo and Axis to deal with the contracts of these workers (Singer 2018). Outsourcing led to sub-contracted workers being subject to far worse conditions than those who are directly employed by UCL. For example, outsourced UCL

workers, up until 2020, received no occupational sick pay, meaning they would be forced to go to work or risk severe personal consequences. In addition, poor pensions meant that many would retire into poverty. Furthermore, outsourced workers have been subject to precarious zero-hour contracts which offer very little job stability, causing them to live in constant fear of becoming unemployed (Action Network, 2019).

In late 2018, as a result of these poor conditions, outsourced workers at UCL began to organise through the IWGB, and launched a campaign demanding to be brought back “in-house”, in other words, to be directly employed by UCL and thus share the same employment benefits as their non-outsourced colleagues. Around the same time, a student campaign was launched, organised by student activists, called UCL Justice for Workers. The ongoing campaign is dedicated to supporting unionised outsourced workers in their struggle to be brought back in-house, working and organising in conjunction with workers. The campaign has since made considerable gains, including improved pensions and full sick pay for non-zero-hour staff, although the fight to end outsourcing altogether and thus achieve full equality with directly employed staff remains.

This article is dedicated to the study of the aesthetics of protest of the UCL Justice for Workers campaign, drawing from my own personal involvement. I will be specifically looking into how the activists of the campaign use “visual culture to create self-images, new ways to see and be seen, and new ways to see the world” (Mirzoeff, 2020: 5). The first section will comprise a literature review, situating the article’s findings within recent scholarship on the aesthetics of protest. Subsequently, the article will focus on two interrelated but distinct elements of the aesthetics of protest employed in UCL Justice for Workers. Firstly, I will analyse how the memory of workers’ struggles is resurrected across the aesthetic materials of UCL Justice for Workers, using the concept of Left-Wing Melancholia as a theoretical backdrop. Secondly, I will explore how UCL Justice for Workers use posters, banners, and other ephemera as a means of materially engaging with the space of the university campus.

## **Literature review**

This article undertakes a multi-disciplinary approach to the study of activism and social mobilization. In particular, I will be looking to explore the aesthetics of protest of the UCL Justice for Workers activist group. The aesthetics of protest can be defined as the “slogans, art, symbols slang, humour, graffiti, gestures, bodies, colour, clothes, and objects that comprise a material and performative culture” (McGarry and Others 2020: 18). This article will address the question: How do UCL Justice for Workers communicate and perform a political voice through aesthetic means?

The aesthetics of protest can be separated into two interrelated but separate categories, and this study will seek to touch on both: the immediate and the mediated (Faulkner, 2020). The immediate aesthetics of protest refers to what aesthetic elements protestors employ in real, physical space, including the

banners, signs and placards they carry, as well as how protesting bodies congregate and assemble in space. The mediated aesthetics of protest refers to how protests are captured in various media forms, such as photographs and memes (Faulkner, 2020).

### **The study of social mobilization: the structuralist/rationalist bias**

The study of social mobilization has, until recently, tended to have a strong rationalist and structuralist bias (Ryan, 2020). Rationalist analyses of social mobilisation work from the epistemological position “that regards human reason as the paramount source and means for gathering and testing of knowledge”, emphasising intellectual and deductive processes over the sensory (Ryan, 2020: 102).

In the context of the study of social movements and activism, scholars working with a rationalist lens have thus “emphasized the continuities between movement and institutionalized actions, the rationality of movement actors, the strategic problems confronted by movements, and the role of movements as agencies for social change” (Jenkins quoted in Ryan, 2020: 528). Prominent theories emerging from this rationalist tradition include the resource mobilisation framework (RM), which investigates how social movements draw from a variety of material and ideological resources in order to achieve their goals, as well as emphasising the importance of network building within and across movements to build support and momentum. Another key concept in the rationalist tradition is Political Process Theory (PPT), which assesses the political environments in which social movements take place in, and how this can shape how activists take action (Ryan, 2020).

Structuralist analyses, on the other hand, focus on the “material conditions and broader social, economic or political forces that operate to contain and shape the actions and activities of social movement actors” (Ryan, 2020: 103). For example, scholars such as Sydney Tarrow (Tarrow quoted in Ryan, 2020), focus on the different organisational structures that exist within social movements. In particular, they compare the effectiveness of hierarchical versus horizontal structures when organising for social change (Ryan, 2020). Meanwhile, Zald and McCarthy evaluate the material conditions that constrain or enable the success of social movements, such as financial resources, as well as the size and reach of membership (Zald and McCarthy quoted in Ryan, 2020).

### **The aesthetics of protest: a reaction to the rationalist/structuralist bias**

Such analyses, however, tend to interpret social movements and activism in purely empiricist terms, overlooking the communicative and performative nature of protest. As a result, the aesthetic choices made by social movements are seen as ways that activists raise awareness of their campaigns or merely as forms of propaganda (McGarry and others, 2020). I am interested in moving

beyond such conceptions in order to explore how social movements across the globe have drawn from aesthetic techniques as a means of protest and affirming a political voice.

There has been a rise in scholarship which has analysed the aesthetics of protest from this perspective. For example, Tijen Tunali, in her article "The Art of Resistance: Carnival Aesthetics and The Gezi Street Protests" (2018) notes how during the Gezi Park protests, a wave of civil unrest and demonstrations against the authoritarian Turkish government in 2013, aesthetics were not merely an accessory to the political struggle, but rather played a key role in fomenting a staunch resistance to tyranny. The Gezi Park protests made use of a wide variety of aesthetic means, flooding the streets with graffiti, performances, memes, cartoons, murals and paintings (Tunali, 2018). Drawing from Bakhtin, Tunali points to how the Gezi Park protests employed "carnival aesthetics", principally involving the use of "grotesque symbolism, imagery, and language" as a means of subverting and resisting hegemonic forces which dictate social life and relations (2018: 378). In particular, the protestors employed a kind of carnivalesque humour, creating highly satirical depictions across placards, magazines and murals of then Prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, as a means of challenging his authority and declaring their refusal to bow to his reign of terror (Tunali, 2018). According to Tunali, the Gezi Park protests did not make the boundaries between art and activism become blurred, but rather, they made visible "the political space in which the differences between aesthetic action and political action are erased" (2018: 392).

This study, as a result, seeks to add to this small but growing body of literature concerned with analysing how protest movements communicate and perform a political voice through aesthetic actions— thus shifting the focus to how "protestors document and produce protest through aesthetics" (McGarry and others, 2020: 17). At the core of such research is a reformulation of the Kantian notion of aesthetics, which tends to view the concept as merely what is pleasing to the eye and thus a universal category detached from any material or political conditions (Ryan, 2020). Recent scholarship within the study of social movements has attempted to move away from such conceptions and draw from theorists who have sought to politicize aesthetics (see McGarry and others 2020, Werbner and others, 2014, McLagan and McKee, 2012). Among these scholars which have revised the link between aesthetics and politics is philosopher Jacques Rancière. According to Rancière, aesthetics and politics are intimately linked because both are concerned with determining what can become visible and heard in society (2003). In such an understanding, aesthetics is considered to be both the site of power and of resistance. Building from the works of the likes of Rancière, scholars within the study of social movements have sought to understand "the interconnection between art, image-making and the socio-political sphere, including the ways in which artistic expression, popular culture and embodied sensory encounters of various kinds interact with – even alter – the prevailing landscape of power and possibility" (Ryan, 2020: 106).

This article also seeks to explore the various ways in which UCL Justice for Workers make visible past movements, ideologies and ideas through aesthetic means in order to bring about change to their status as precarious workers. Werbner et. al note how a key element to the aesthetics of protest is the use of citation and intertextuality, where social movements draw on past images, tropes, slogans and reformulate them into “new bricolages and assemblies” (2014: 15). This drawing on the past can be seen in various social movements across the globe – for example, during the nation-wide strikes in Botswana in 2011, the movement appropriated the “rolling hands” gesture used in the Indignados anti-austerity movement in Spain the same year (Werbner, 2014). However, their appropriation of the gesture came with a difference: while the original gesture during the Spanish protest signified the sentiment “I’m bored, get to the point”, during the Botswana strikes, the protestors rolled their hands in a circular motion in order to voice their demand for regime change (Werbner, 2014: 245). More recently, the feminist performance piece *A Rapist In Your Path*, which originated in Chile, has now been used by feminist protestors across the world. The piece, which combines song and choreographed gestures and movements, was originally devised by Chilean feminist theatre group Lastesis (McGowan, 2019). The work has now been used as a tool of protest across the world, including outside the trial of Harvey Weinstein, a film tycoon accused of multiple cases of sexual assault (Hyde, 2019). This appropriation of symbols, practices and gestures creates what Werbner calls “vernacular cosmopolitanism’ – a widely shared invented language across countries and divisions of class, ethnicity, religion, religiosity, race and gender, which is nevertheless also inflected by local forms of popular aesthetics, power relations and politicised understandings of inequality and injustice.” (Werbner and others, 2014: 16).

UCL Justice for Workers are in keeping with many forms of social mobilisation across the globe in the sense that they also make reference to a rich legacy of past iterations of social struggle. In order to better understand the significance of the use of intertextuality and citation in the aesthetics of protest of the UCL Justice for Workers campaign, I will apply Enzo Traverso’s interpretation of the concept of Left-Wing Melancholia as a conceptual framework. Left-Wing Melancholia (also referred to as Left Melancholia, Left Melancholy and Left-Wing Melancholy) is a term which was originally coined by Walter Benjamin in his 1931 essay titled “Left-Wing Melancholia” to describe the Left’s melancholic attachment to past workers’ struggles and their history, which has been marred by a series of heavy defeats (Benjamin 1974). Many scholars since Benjamin have since tackled his diagnosis of the left’s state of melancholy. For example, Wendy Brown sees the Left’s fixation with its past as something that stifles its ability to organise and mobilise in the present (2017). Brown, in her essay titled “Resisting Left Melancholy”, argues that the left’s condition of nostalgia means that instead of adapting its strategies and ideological frameworks to address issues in the present, it instead focuses on mourning failed emancipatory projects (2017). Enzo Traverso’s work *Left-Wing Melancholia: Marxism, History, and Memory* (2017), on the other hand, seeks to highlight how the

Left's melancholia can be productive and fruitful. To Traverso, Left-Wing Melancholia is a way that the Left can look to its past defeats as moments of unrealised possibility, ones that can instigate the desire for radical change in the present (2017). By applying Traverso's reading, I hope to show that UCL Justice For Workers' appropriation of the memory of past workers' struggles is not a self-indulgent exercise in nostalgia and mourning, but rather a way the group seeks to bring about change in the present.

Although it is important to analyse the various references and symbols employed in the aesthetic materials of social movements, it is also important to understand how protestors engage with material, physical space through the banners, signs, placards and posters which they produce. As Julia Tulke argues, the ephemera employed by protestors is a way in which protest lays claim to urban space, declaring their "right to the city"—Lefebvre's term for when citizens begin to shape public space according to their own needs and desires (2020). The ephemera used by protestors is actively engaged with contesting "notions of what urban space should look like, questioning public ownership and representational regimes" (Tulke, 2020:123). Along similar lines, Paulo Gerbaudo, in his analysis of the fly-posting practices of radical activists in Berlin and Rome, notes how the posters acted as a means of appropriating space, creating territories which were outside and oppositional to government control (2013). By creating these symbolic territories through the posters, activists challenged hegemonic forces which seek to dictate who and what can appear in public space (Gerbaudo, 2013). This article will build on this existing scholarship and seek to understand the ways in which UCL Justice for Workers engage with the material environment of the university campus. In particular, I will show how UCL Justice for Workers use ephemera to challenge the spatial order of the campus, making visible the often invisible struggle of the outsourced workers of the university.

### **Left-Wing Melancholia: recalling the past to re-imagine the future**

There has been a growing interest in the role of memory in contemporary politics and social movements. Specifically, much of the discussion has centred around the nostalgic dimension of the memory work at play in political movements. As journalist Martin Kettle argues, the yearning for a lost past and a certain way of doing politics has become increasingly important in the way social movements organise, both on the Right and on the Left (Kettle, 2016). He cites, for example, the nationalist rhetoric characteristic of much of the Brexit campaign, which often played into a longing for a mythical past where Britain was uncontaminated by migration and had sovereign control of its borders. On the Left, he points to how Jeremy Corbyn looked to the workers' struggles of the past such as the miners' strike of 1984 to agitate his base and revitalise socialist ideas of worker struggle, solidarity and trade unionism. The increasing role that memory seems to play in politics today raises a series of questions, which are

worthy of delving deeper into in order to gain a better understanding of the role that it plays in contemporary activist movements such as UCL Justice For Workers. Is the increasingly pivotal role that the past plays in Left social movements a dangerous condition, symptomatic of what Huyssen diagnosed as a generalised societal inability to imagine a future beyond the present? (Huyssen quoted in Rigney, 2018). Or, as Eyerman has argued, is it instead a way to draw force and inspiration from previous movements in order to effect change in the present? (2016).

Leftist academics have long since debated whether looking to the past is a meaningful way to achieve transformative change in political and social realities. Much of the discussion has centred around the concept of “Left-Wing Melancholia”. According to Wendy Brown, Benjamin used the term to denounce those on the left who were more attached to long-held ideological frameworks and political beliefs than serious about understanding and acting on the issues that affect the present day (2017). Here, then, Benjamin is pointing to a danger in the Left’s obsession with the past, one that threatens to stifle its ability to achieve the transformative change it envisions (Brown, 2017). To Brown, this melancholic attachment to the past eliminates the possibility to be able to recover from it, and thus to be able to act freely in the present without being burdened by it. Brown states that this is what “renders melancholia a persistent condition, a state, indeed, a structure of desire” (2017).

Brown, however, argues through Stuart Hall that the Left’s melancholia is not only to do with an attachment to an analytic orthodoxy, one based on the “determinism of capital and the primacy of class” above all else (Brown 2017). It also has to do with how, in contrast to the politically successful right-wing movements of the late 20th century, the Left refuses to adapt to the ever-changing nature of capital, rendering itself historically anachronistic in the process. She cites, for example, how Thatcher was able to respond to the era of flexibilization and “disorganised capitalism”, placing privatisation at the center of ideology and policy in order to align itself with the new logics of capitalist development. It is by doing this that Thatcherism was able to make itself “appear to ‘have history on its side’, to be coterminous with the inevitable course of the future” (Brown, 2017). The Left, on the other hand, rendered itself obsolete by stubbornly refusing to adapt new, cultural and socio-political formations and strategies in light of these transformations. She returns to Hall to sum up this dual problematic of Left-Wing Melancholia: it “consists not only of a defensiveness towards the agendas fixed by now-anachronistic political-economic formations (those of the 1930s and 1945) but is also due to a certain notion of politics, inhabited not so much as a theory, more as a habit of mind” (Hall quoted in Brown, 2017).

Traverso’s reading of the Left’s condition of melancholia is altogether more optimistic. In stark contrast to Brown, Traverso sees the Left’s look to the past and its revitalisation of past struggles and ideological frameworks as a productive means of effecting change in the present. Traverso places Left-Wing Melancholia as emerging from a context of the failure of the emancipatory

promises of communism in the 20th century. While at the beginning of the 20th century, communism presented the idea of a utopian future free of oppression, the collapse of the Soviet Union shattered such illusions (Traverso, 2017). Thus, the beginning of the 21st century was marked “by a general eclipse of utopias” (Traverso, 2017: 5). The promise of a better and altogether different future was replaced by a resignation to capitalism as an eternal and unshakeable reality (Traverso, 2017).

The ultimate result of this was a memory boom in the public sphere: as Traverso puts it, “a world without utopias inevitably looks back” (Traverso, 2017: 9).

However, as opposed to Brown, Traverso sees this as a positive progression. In his view, the resurgent interest in revisiting the past within left-wing movements is not the product of a fatally nostalgic mourning of lost utopian promises and failed emancipatory projects, as Brown argues. Instead, Left-Wing Melancholia is a way that the Left can reframe the past, reclaiming its defeats not as a sign of its failure, but rather as moments that represent tremendous, unrealised possibility: in other words, as *Jetztzeit*, Walter Benjamin’s term for episodes filled with the revolutionary potential necessary to break from the natural course of history (Rigney, 2018). It is this desire to fulfil the unrealised radical potential of these moments in history that can fuel the desire for revolutionary change in the present (Traverso, 2017).

Traverso’s reading of Left-Wing Melancholia as a productive agent of change can be seen in the rich aesthetic culture of UCL Justice for Workers campaign. As is becoming increasingly frequent in activist campaigns and groups today, UCL Justice for Workers draw from a rich aesthetic legacy of past movements, fusing images, tropes, and ideas, and appropriating them into new forms which attend to the particularities of their struggle (Werbner and others, 2014). This invocation of the past through aesthetic means is not simply a form of conservative, anachronistic nostalgia, but rather one that plays a vital role in “revitalising and (re)inventing the ‘political’” (Werbner and others, 2014: 16). Though the group is specifically working within the current neoliberal context of increasing precarization, one can observe how the group often looks to past worker’s struggles as a source of inspiration. In particular, the group revitalises the memory of trade unionist struggles and of student-worker social movements such as May 1968. They thus resurrect socialist ideas of camaraderie and collective struggle as an effective means of bringing about significant change to their lives and status as precarious workers.

One of the ways that UCL Justice for Workers invoke past workers’ struggles is through the use of the symbol of the clenched fist. The symbol is consistently repeated and depicted visually including in photos and through emojis; it is also reproduced gesturally by activists in the movement during protests (see Figure 1).





Figure 1. Images courtesy of the IWGB.

The clenched fist has become synonymous with many social movements throughout history; it is said to have originated from the imagery of the European revolutions of 1848 (Pretorius, 2009) and has since been appropriated in various movements for equality and justice, including in the Black Power Movement (Duffield, 2020) and the Suffragettes (Denney, 2017). In the case of the UCL Justice for Workers campaign in particular, the group identify themselves within a lineage of past workers' movements, such as SOAS Justice for Workers, which have also fought against outsourcing. They do this by referencing the logos of social movements which have incorporated the symbol of the clenched fist. However, in these logos, the symbol of the clenched fist is adapted and is depicted holding a broom (see Figure 2).



Figure 2: On the right, the UCL Justice for Workers logo (image courtesy of Dominique Hua). On the left, the SOAS Justice for Workers Logo<sup>1</sup>.

Although the clenched fist symbol has been widely used throughout history, its popularity in workers' movements eventually declined toward the end of the 20th century, as it became strongly associated with the totalitarian state socialism of the Soviet Union (Moss, 2006). However, the symbol has since been resurrected in present-day social movements, as is the case in the UCL Justice For Worker's campaign. Thus, to re-appropriate such a historically charged image can only be a conscious decision, as socialist historian Sheila Rowbotham argues (Rowbotham quoted in Moss, 2006). It signifies that the UCL Justice for Workers movement is consciously revitalising the memory and idea of workers' struggles – they are carrying on their legacy in their fight against outsourcing.

In addition, UCL Justice for Workers also refer to past movements of outsourced workers who have also fought to end subcontracting. The group primarily did this through film screenings. The group held two screenings of the documentary *Limpiadores* (Fernando Mitjans, 2015), the first held in September 2018 and the second on the 12th of November 2019. The documentary chronicles the SOAS Justice for Cleaners campaign, which, after 8 years of battle, finally succeeded in its aim of having outsourced workers be directly employed by the university in August of 2018. Film screenings have been a valuable tool used by activist groups in the formation of collective memories of worker struggle. De la Puente and Russo, in their analysis of

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<sup>1</sup> SOAS Justice 4 Workers, n.d. [image] Available at: <<https://twitter.com/soasj4c>> [Accessed 28 June 2021].

activist groups in Latin America, note how, through the exhibition of films which depict past workers' struggles, activists ensure that past sacrifices and battles waged by workers are not forgotten and their memory is kept alive (2007). By doing this, activists break from "the uniformity of history, recovering the traditions of generations passed" (De La Puente and Russo, 2007: 16, my translation). The same can be said of the screenings held by UCL Justice for Workers: the memory of SOAS Justice for Workers is kept alive and brought into the present. The film was used as a means of exploring the connections between the injustices faced by UCL and SOAS outsourced workers, and the lessons that could be learnt from the SOAS campaign. Therefore, UCL Justice for Workers break from a linear conception of history which confines events to the past: instead, "past movements become active in the present, creating connections which bypass homogenous empty time. Time is connected directly, rather than through a line." (Firth and Robinson, 2012: 245).

Moreover, through these activist screenings, instigate a radical politics of melancholy. One of the key sections in *Limpiadores* documents the events of the 12th of June 2009. On this date, SOAS cleaners, who at the time were employed by the outsourcing company ISS, were called into a meeting held at one of the university's lecture theatres. The meeting was a cover for a UK Border Agency raid; 9 cleaners were arrested and later deported by the UKBA (SOAS Unison, 2009). The deportation was carried out under the orders of the outsourcing company, with the knowledge and complicity of SOAS's management (SOAS UNISON, 2009). Since the event, there have been commemorative events hosted at SOAS to remember the injustices that took place– the saying "never forgive, never forget" became a prominent rallying cry which signified a commitment to denouncing the culture of hostility and violence toward undocumented workers (SOAS Unison, 2009). In the second UCL Justice for Workers screening of *Limpiadores*, special attention was brought during the discussions that followed the exhibition of the film to the deportation raid of 2009. Many audience members expressed how they were unaware of the injustices that occurred and were appalled at what they had witnessed. Thus, through the screening, UCL Justice for Workers ensured that the university body was made aware of the violence enacted toward the workers, refusing to allow the injustices to become forgotten and concealed. The screening therefore represented an "indomitable refusal to let go, a defiance of the demand to forget" (Palmer 2017:381).

Furthermore, the powerful feelings of outrage and sadness provoked by the emotionally charged testimonies of the documentary did not serve to paralyze action. Instead, UCL Justice for Workers activists harnessed these emotions and used them as a call to action, urging audience members to join in the fight against the exploitation of outsourced workers. Therefore, UCL Justice for Workers drew "strength from *within* melancholy and bereavement" (Traverso 2017: 20).

UCL Justice for Workers also revitalise the imaginary of labour history and trade unionism. One example of the group doing this was through a meme made

by activists which makes references to traditional forms of labour organising, redeeming their memory and portraying them to still be relevant to the class struggle of the present day. The meme (see Figure 3) depicts a text message that says, “u at the picket line?”, with the caption, “naughty next”. The picket line here is invoked as a symbolic site of class struggle and worker solidarity. Invoking the discourse of picket lines, and thus traditional forms of labour organising, is significant in a context where in the United Kingdom, such forms of worker struggle are considered “a spent force (...) its history is no more relevant than that of the lost tribes of ancient Judea” (Davis 2009: 284). Trade unions, in particular, have been increasingly dismissed as irrelevant, with many pointing to the fact that union membership has fallen by half since Thatcher came to power and collective bargaining coverage by around two thirds (Dromey, 2018).



*Figure 3. Image courtesy of Sofia Vázquez.*

Moreover, the caption here framing this as a “naughty text”, complete with the heart emoji, represents a reformulation of the historically charged symbolism of the picket line. The picket line in UK labour history has been a site of many defeats, as well as repression and violence at the hands of state forces (Kelliher, 2020).

Here, however, instead of focusing on the violence of picket lines, what is remembered in this meme is the often overlooked “pleasures of politics” (Hamilton, 2010: 270). The picket line is invoked as the site of a “multiform pleasure, one of physical and social transgression, of new friendships or

complicities to be gained” (Ross quoted in Hamilton 2010: 270). Thus, the imaginary of the picket line is rescued in order to point to the fact that social mobilization is not purely a matter of applying strategies and theories. It is also about the coming together of bodies, forming collective, visceral experiences that reach beyond the cognitive. There is thus a move toward a form of activism that embraces the affective: “processes of life and vitality which circulate and pass between bodies and which are difficult to capture or study in any conventional methodological sense.” (Blackwell, 2012: 4). As a result, the meme represents a kind of fruitful melancholia which is not fundamentally concerned with lamenting the defeats of the past, but rather “rethinking a revolutionary project in a nonrevolutionary age” (Traverso, 2017: 20).

Furthermore, UCL Justice for Workers also resurrect the memory of May 1968, a series of student-protests, strikes and occupations that erupted in Paris in factories and universities. The May 68 movement was exceptional insofar that it involved a potent unity between students and workers, both joining together to carry out strikes and demonstrations in such a way that had never occurred in a Western country before (Memou, 2013). However, official histories related to the movement tend to downplay this particular dimension of student-worker solidarity, reducing it to being primarily a student revolt (Ross, 2008). In the UCL Justice for Workers ephemera, however, May 68 is invoked as a site of student-worker solidarity. In one such sign (see Figure 4), the group appropriates a common motif found in May 68 posters, that of the clenched fist rising out of a smokestack. The motif, used in its original context, was a way that students showed solidarity with striking workers (Baggett, 2014). In the UCL Justice for Workers poster, this motif is accompanied with the words, “students and workers, unite and fight!” Here, then, the UCL Justice for Workers group is looking to the past as a source of inspiration, as a site of solidarity between workers and students.

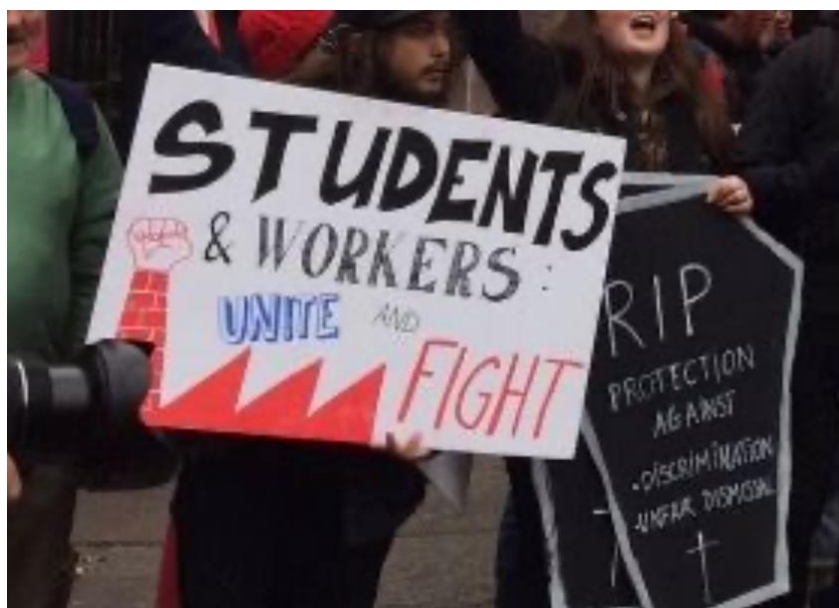


Figure 4. Image courtesy of Laura Esther.

The fact that May 68 is remembered this way is significant in a context where the notion that the events took place in Paris were largely inconsequential, insofar as they failed to achieve meaningful structural change, has become commonplace in discourse about the protests (Ross, 2008). The dominant discourse surrounding the May 68 events has been that, while the protests led to changes in cultural attitudes, especially with regard to the notion of sexual freedom and liberation, they led to no important political and institutional changes in the long term (Ross, 2008). The view that May 68 was primarily a cultural phenomenon and not a political one is shared by many notable intellectuals: Raymond Aron, the conservative philosopher and historian of ideas, described the events of May 68 as “a verbal delirium with no casualties” (Poirier, 2018). Along similar lines, liberal historian Marcel Gauchet, while noting the cultural impact of the events on French society and beyond, argues that the strikes led to no notable practical consequences, highlighting how the Left was crushed in the subsequent elections of 1969 (Sing, 2015). The dominant view, then, is that May 68 was simply a momentary disruption, one that ultimately failed to create the radical change which it envisioned. In the aesthetic materials of UCL Justice for Workers, however, the revolutionary potential of the May 68 protests is rescued, the events remembered as a tremendous moment in history where workers and students joined together to wage class struggle and fight for a better future. Therefore, although the intersection of student and worker struggle of May 68 was short lived, here it is invoked as a “struggle for emancipation as a historical experience that deserves recollection and attention in spite of its fragile, precarious, and ephemeral duration” (Traverso, 2017: 52).

What is striking about the way UCL Justice for Workers recall the past through their various aesthetic materials is that it is often done in a way that is somewhat non-specific and ambiguous. The group, in some cases, chooses to reference the past in rather general terms. This is evidenced by the group’s use of the iconography of the fist in order to invoke the memory of workers’ struggles, along with its memes which often conjure up the imaginary of picket lines and trade union struggles— in both these cases, no specific historical figures or movements are referenced. Instead, what is evoked is a more general idea or feeling of workers’ struggle and radical organising. Even when UCL Justice for Workers allude to specific movements such as May 1968, again what is revived is more a general spirit of student-worker solidarity than a coherent set of practices, strategies and ideological frameworks. Thus, what emerges from the various references and allusions made across the aesthetic materials of UCL Justice for Workers is not a clear-cut, monolithic version of the past, but rather a hazy, fragmented assemblage of memories. Jonathan Dean, in his analysis of the UK student protests of 2010/11, points to how the memory of May 68 continues to “yield a considerable affective pull and symbolic hold over contemporary forms of student and radical politics, but in a manner that is often vague, spectral and difficult to clearly demarcate” (2015: 314). Dean’s analysis encapsulates the often vague and affective nature of the impact of memory on UCL Justice for Workers.

This ambiguity which Dean points to is crucial if we are to understand the left-wing melancholia imbued in the aesthetics of UCL Justice for Workers. Traverso indicates that Left-Wing Melancholia, “Before being an epistemological posture or an allegorical vision of the past (...) is a temper, a state of the mind, an atmosphere, and a mood” (Traverso, 2017: 50). This holds true if we consider the way UCL Justice for Workers evoke the past across its aesthetic materials: it is not simply a case of appropriating coherent ideologies or strategies, but rather more generally reviving a kind of spirit of student-worker solidarity and worker struggle. On the surface, this may seem to point to a rather pointless exercise in nostalgia, seen by some as endemic on the left, which holds little intellectual or strategic bearing (Bonnett, 2010).

However, following Traverso, it could be argued that what UCL Justice for Workers are trying to do by appropriating the memory of past struggles is reignite the “structure of feelings” of the Left, recovering the utopian imagination which had fuelled the revolutions of the past, one which had been all but lost following the demise of the Soviet Union at the turn of the century (Traverso, 2017). By recalling the past, UCL Justice for Workers attempt to collectively imagine an alternative to the hegemony of neoliberal capitalism, whose logic seems inescapable and unshakeable (Traverso, 2017: 23). UCL Justice for Workers, then, embrace Traverso’s assertion that radical change cannot be simply achieved through “valuable diagnostics of force relations, effective claims, and strong organisation,” it also requires “a process of human self-emancipation [which] forcefully mobilizes powerful emotions, expectations, and hopes” (Traverso quoted in Souvlakis, 2019).

### **The spatial politics of UCL Justice for Workers**

The role of space in social movements has been an emerging area of interest in social movement studies. In some aspects of social movement theory, space is treated as a given, as a naturally existing material environment which can significantly impact a social movement’s actions, in both restrictive and emancipatory ways (Miller and others, 2016). For example, spatial proximity is said to enable participation in social movements, while distance hampers it (Miller and others, 2016). It is also thought of as both where contentious politics can occur and what social actors battle to take control over; one can cite Occupy Wall Street as an example (Auyero quoted in Miller and others, 2016). However, such theories are dependent on the idea that activism merely takes place in spatial contexts, but such assumptions do not take into account that “like time, space is not merely a variable or container of activism: it constitutes and structures relationships and networks (including the processes that produce gender, race and class identities; situates social and cultural life including repertoires of contention)” (Martin and Miller quoted in Miller and others, 2016: 26). Activists, then, do not take space to be merely an architectural given, but actively engage and produce space, creating *terrains of resistances*: “*sites of contestation* and the multiplicity of relations between hegemonic and counter hegemonic powers and discourses, between forces and relations of domination,

subjection, exploitation and resistance” (Routledge quoted in Miller and others, 2016: 29).

Such terrains of resistance are where social movements endow space with a variety of powerful symbolic, ideological, and cultural meanings (Routledge quoted in Miller and others, 2016).

The use of ephemera such as posters, banners and signs are one way that activists engage with the politics of space. As Paulo Gerbaudo notes, ephemera used in protest groups are often considered to function mainly as propaganda, or as vehicles of communication for activists. What is often neglected is that such ephemera are deeply tied to an understanding and engagement with the politics of space. This gap in the analysis of social movements can be explained by the widely held assumption that protest movements have largely migrated onto the digital and virtual sphere, and, as a result, have become “detached, by and large, from the physicality of public space” (Gerbaudo, 2018: 241). However, the practices of activist groups such as UCL Justice for Workers challenge such assumptions. According to Gerbaudo, activist groups often employ ephemera as a form of “symbolic appropriation of public space (...) predicated on a material appropriation of walls and streets and an exercise of control over them” (2018: 246). Such appropriation carries with it the explicit goal of demarcating a symbolic territory which is resistant and oppositional to the hegemonic forces of the state (Gerbaudo, 2018). However, activists are nevertheless aware that they can never fully escape such forces, and that their interventions into the city landscape are likely to be subject to government regulation (often they are simply removed). With this in mind, activist groups often strategically place their posters to ensure that they will not be taken down, even going as far as adding physical obstacles such as shards of glass to posters (Gerbaudo, 2018).

UCL Justice for Workers activists also use posters, banners, and other ephemera as a means of re-appropriating and laying claim to space. Specifically, UCL Justice for Workers use ephemera to materially engage with the university campus space. Like the activist groups which Gerbaudo identifies, UCL Justice for Workers are also strategic in their placements of such ephemera, ensuring that they can evade the possibility of their posters, stickers, etc. being taken down too easily by the members of the university’s security team. However, in contrast to the activist groups which Gerbaudo cites, UCL Justice for Workers activists also place their posters in highly visible locations within the university campus which are likely to be subject to regulatory forces. In the strategic discussions of the group, of which I have taken part of, having ephemera being taken down by university staff is thought of as almost an inevitability, in full knowledge that ultimately the regulatory forces of the university are responsible “for what is considered ‘out of place’ in an ordered urban environment” (Dickens, 2009: 248). To this end, the activists of the campaign have even targeted buildings which were heavily patrolled and guarded, such as the university’s Student Centre, which is invigilated 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.



The fly-posting actions undertaken by the group in the Student Centre would be traditionally considered failures according to most activist groups, as they resulted in the posters being taken down almost immediately, sometimes before activists have even had the chance to try to place them on the walls, with security guards spotting them and preventing them from attempting to do so. In contrast to activist groups which largely attempt to avoid heavily surveilled areas, UCL Justice for Workers activists deliberately targeted the highly visible and patrolled space of the Student Centre, entering the building in broad daylight, using just blue tack as opposed to the much stronger wheat paste traditionally used in flyposting. Their transgression of space, then, seemed to almost invite confrontation with the regulatory forces of the university. What becomes clear as a result of this is that the group is not fundamentally concerned with permanently erecting “symbolic boundaries (...) in the maintenance of a peculiar form of territoriality” (Gerbaudo, 2018: 248). Rather, they intend to expose the fact that the university space, rather than being a neutral and pre-existing container of action, unmoored by ideology (Lefebvre, 1991), in reality contains within it “relations of power and discipline (...) inscribed into the apparently innocent spatiality of social life” (Soja, 1989: 10). By rendering the regulatory forces of the university visible, the group shows how the policing of space is “increasingly not simply the work of the public police force but (...) an increasing array of public, private and voluntary sector providers (Yarwood, 2007), who seek to ‘police’ not only violations of law and legislature, but also violations of societal norms, and behaviours considered to be socially undesirable and threatening to the normative order of public space” (Cook and Whowell, 2013: 3). In doing so, the group demonstrates how there is a “contestation in and over space (what should or should not be made spatially manifest; what and who should give space form)” (Dikeç, 2015: 4). They intend to pose the question of who has a right to the university campus, and who is in control of its spatial order.

As a result, UCL Justice for Workers are not attempting to permanently lay claim to space through these high-risk interventions into the urban landscape. As seen in Chapter 1, UCL Justice for Workers draw power from the ephemeral, focusing on small-scale interventions which have the potential to cause a rupture from the natural course of history and the logic of capitalism. Many of the banner-drop actions aforementioned would perhaps be considered ineffective since they were unable to create long-lasting, permanent change (Milligan, 2018). However, recent scholarship has pointed to how (see Milligan, 2018, Tonkiss, 2013, Swyngedouw, 2010) such ephemeral interventions into the urban landscape can be read as “cracks” (Milligan, 2018: 16), a necessarily fleeting break from the logic of capitalism, a “perfectly ordinary creation of a space or moment in which we assert a different type of doing” (Holloway, 2012: 21). This is evidenced by actions undertaken by UCL Justice for Workers activists such as banner drops at various locations throughout UCL’s campus, including the Main Quad— such actions resulted in the banners being taken down almost immediately. However, they acted as ways of opening up fissures, gaps, and cracks in the “police order” of the campus (Swyngedouw, 2020),

making spatially manifest the struggle of outsourced workers who are rendered invisible by the university's authorities.

Moreover, the ephemeral nature of these “cracks” allow for space to be consistently challenged; the workers repeatedly lay claim to their right to space through these aesthetic interventions. “La lucha continua” (which means “the struggle continues” in Spanish), has been a unifying rallying call for activists of the UCL Justice for Workers campaign, and one that encapsulates the group's ceaseless desire to continue waging their battle against the spatial order of the university. The group's appropriation of the walls of the campus through posters and of space through the use of banners are, as we have seen, only momentary. They are quickly met with the regulatory forces of the university. This means that activists return again and again to appropriate the walls and spaces of the university— thus their challenge to the spatial order of the university is one that is repeated and continuous. As a result, the ephemeral nature of these banner drops and fly-posting actions allow for a continuous re-negotiation of space; their transience are thus powerful agents not in spite of, but rather “because of their temporality- for something which can pop up and disappear has the power to pop up again, to multiply, to spread cracks throughout” the university campus (Milligan, 2018: 18, emphasis my own).

It is through these “cracks” in the university campus that UCL Justice for Workers attempt to reclaim the university as a space of solidarity and shared collectivity, providing small-scale challenges to the university's dedication to the needs of the market and of capital. UCL can be placed alongside a recurring trend among universities which are dedicated to fast, aggressive spatial growth and expansion (Zhang, 2012). UCL

Estates, responsible for the university's entire estate and facilities infrastructure, has been responsible for UCL's growth on a massive scale, including the ongoing construction of UCL East, the largest single expansion in the university's history (UCL, 2020). The construction of UCL East also signifies another way in which the university embodies the logics of urban capitalist development: while notionally centred around its main campus located in Bloomsbury, UCL has continued to spread into many corners of London, including Camden, Canary Wharf, and now Stratford with the UCL East Campus (UCL, 2020). This means that UCL has no rigid or identifiable “centre”, mirroring the modern city which “lacks what gave shape and meaning to every urban form of the past: a dominant single core and definable boundaries”. (Fishman, 1993: 398). However, massive growth and profit has not translated into spaces that respond to the needs and desires of the inhabitants of the university— UCL students are subject to highly unaffordable housing, having to pay continuously rising rents that makes being able to get by in London very stressful (Packham 2017). Moreover, there is a generalised feeling of alienation in the University campus, as I exemplified in this quote:

It is all very, very spread out and very big. Like others have said, UCL is not an enclosed campus and when you're walking around a lot of the buildings just feel

like city buildings rather than those of a university. While there are a bunch of student cafes and the like, it didn't really seem like much of a community was fostered in them either”

Student's perspective on the UCL campus (The Student Room, 2017)

A recurring theme, then, is the alienation and isolation felt in the space of the university. Often, students and outsourced workers have very little chance to come into contact with each other. In addition, there is a lack of connectivity between workers themselves, who often have to work long hours with little chance to communicate and work collectively. There is a lack of sense, then, of space as a “place of encounters, a focus and locus for communication and information, for meaningful interactions and for difference” (Zieleniec 2018: 12). Through bodily means, UCL Justice for Workers reclaim the university space as one of collectivity and community. The body here is understood as a “link in a larger spatial dance with other ‘dividual’ parts of bodies and things and places which is constantly reacting to encounters and evolving out of them” (Thrift, 2003: 103).

As Judith Butler notes, the body is a means of laying claim to space, “through seizing and reconfiguring the matter of material environments” (Butler, 2012: 118). UCL Justice for Workers activists set up a weekly breakfast stall for the outsourced workers at UCL, every Friday morning. This stall means that workers, who often are leaving from their shifts or arriving for them, have a chance to talk with other workers and students over pastries, coffee, and tea. As the IWGB union states, “The stalls function as a community hub where strong relationships have developed between workers who might not see each other on shift and between workers and the union” (“IWGB”, 2019). However, they are also spaces that build stronger bonds between students and workers, who get the opportunity to talk to each other about their daily routines and lives. In addition, students during these stalls offer their support to outsourced workers, listening to the grievances and issues that they are facing at work. It can thus be said that UCL Justice for Workers create spaces in which the individuals that make up the body of the university are “reintegrated into a web of social connections” (Purcell, 2014: 149). The breakfast stalls provide a challenge to the hegemonic distribution of space by creating unique spaces in which the constituent parts of the university body can engage “each other in meaningful interactions, interactions through which they overcome their separation, come to learn about each other, and deliberate together about the meaning and future of the city. These encounters make apparent to each inhabitant their existence in and dependence on a web of social connections.” (Purcell, 2014:149)

As we have seen, UCL Justice for Workers are not concerned with creating fixed territories, rather, they are dedicated to carving out spaces within the campus that can counter and challenge the hegemony of the university over who and what has the right to appear. Another significant way that the group did this was through the use of film screenings. In Chapter 1, activist film screenings were used as a means of creating collective memory. There is, however, a second

dimension to this form of activism. Lyell Davies has analysed the political potential of activist film screenings: rather than functioning as mere entertainment, activist film screenings are means of providing testimony to social struggle and a way to make previously passive social actors “take responsibility for what they have seen and become ready to respond” (Davies, 2018: 24). Activists film screenings, then, are spaces which are actively charged with contesting the dominant order. They can be therefore be considered counter-publics: spaces in which individuals can foster counter-hegemonic ideas and attend to the needs and desires of a subaltern group (Davies, 2018). The formation of these counter-publics can be seen in the screenings held by the group, particularly the screening of the documentary *Limpiadores* (Fernando Mitjans, 2015), held on the 12th of November 2019.

During the screening, the audience, composed of both academics and students, were not merely passive spectators to the film, but were actively engaged with the questions and problems posed by the documentary. Following the end of the film, activists from the campaign initiated a discussion about the lessons that can be learnt from the campaign, drawing particular emphasis to how the major successes achieved by the campaign seen in *Limpiadores* was due to the active organising of outsourced workers, as well as the support of students and academics, therefore instigating a call to action to the wider university body. For many, these discussions acted a sort of awakening— many members of the audience noted that they were not aware of the conditions that outsourced workers faced at UCL, as well as being oblivious to the fact that the university’s management has consistently refused to take the workers concerns and issues seriously, shifting responsibility to the outsourcing companies which employ the workers. Many students and academics not directly involved in the campaign also voiced their questions on what they can do to support the outsourced workers’ campaign to be employed directly by UCL. There was thus an “emergence of an engaged ‘responsible historical subject’...[that] embrace[s] a political and moral standpoint regarding what they believe is right or wrong, acceptable or unacceptable, and to thereby decide to ‘take a position’” (Davies, 2018: 23). As a result, the film screening became a “counter-public” in which students, activists and academics discussed counter hegemonic ideas, in addition to reflecting on how to attend to the needs of the disenfranchised outsourced workers.

In summary, through aesthetic means, UCL Justice for Workers attempt to make their struggle and their presence as outsourced workers spatially visible. In this reading, the right and act of being visible is a form of empowerment. However, it is important to acknowledge that visibility is not taken to be a natural good and inherently a form of empowerment by activists, and this is true for the activists who are part of the UCL Justice for Workers campaign. As Brighenti notes, “visibility is a double-edged sword: it can be empowering as well as disempowering” (2007: 355). While UCL Justice for Workers contest regimes of visibility, this does not mean that they are not nevertheless subject to hegemonic forces which seek to “activate and define the scope of the visible, that is, what can be seen and, more importantly, by whom.” (Hatuka and Toch, 2016:

3). The activists are sometimes subject to a kind of visibility which strengthens and upholds unequal dynamics of power. This visibility represents a disempowering force which seeks to “manage, in a routine way, the visibility of various identities” (Brighenti, 2007: 235).

One example of a disempowering form of visibility is the surveillance which outsourced workers are subject to from their bosses, who aim to prevent them from organising and unionising on a collective level. Outsourced workers have repeatedly voiced concerns about surveillance from their bosses, who intimidate and bully those that engage in trade unionist activities. Concerns of surveillance reached a peak in November 2019 when the workers’ employer, the outsourcing company Sodexo, announced that it would begin to introduce monitoring systems in which cleaners would be forced to have their fingerprints scanned when clocking in and out of work (Chapman, 2019). Although the proposal was eventually scrapped after considerable pushback from trade unions, it clearly showed an intensified effort to surveil workers’ activities and movements. In such a context, the workers are “obliged to be visible” (Brighenti, 2010: 49)—they cannot negotiate visibility in their own terms; visibility is used imposed on them as a form of domination and control. As a result of the intense scrutiny which workers are subject to in their workplaces, many feel that they cannot take part in some of the confrontational actions carried out about UCL Justice for Workers, such as fly-posting, for fear of retaliation. This shows how visibility, while it can be a form of empowerment, it can also be used as a weapon of domination and control by those in positions of power.

A significant way in which workers elude this form of imposed visibility is through the various aesthetic actions undertaken by student activists, such as flyposting and banner drops. While workers cannot physically appear in space for fear of surveillance and control, their presence becomes felt through these banner drops and posters. The banners and posters come to embody the voice and struggle of the workers. This exemplifies how outsourced workers seek tactics to shield themselves from the disempowering effects of imposed surveillance. In particular, it exemplifies how they “manage their visibility by controlling which aspects should be observed and by whom” (Settles and others, 2018: 2). Therefore, it becomes evident that visibility is constantly negotiated by the activists that make up UCL Justice for Workers. While outsourced workers fight to attain an empowering form of visibility, they also simultaneously must negotiate and combat forms of visibility which put them at risk.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, UCL Justice for Workers use aesthetic means to communicate and perform a political voice. In this study, I have identified two key areas in which the aesthetics of protest operate: the first, in the realm of memory, where UCL Justice for Workers draw from a rich aesthetic legacy of past movements, fusing images, tropes and ideas and transform them in order to attend to the particularities of their own struggle. Second, I have explored how UCL Justice

for Workers engage with the physical space of the university through the use of ephemera as well as their own bodies.

With regard to the former, I hope to have shown how UCL Justice for Worker's invocation of the past through aesthetics represents a fruitful kind of melancholia. Wendy Brown sees the Left's fixation with its past as a conservative nostalgia which renders itself a prisoner to its past, leaving it unable to act in the present. Following Traverso, I have argued that, on the contrary, the Left's melancholia is what fuels its desire to continue the often tragic legacy of workers' struggles. For example, I have pointed to UCL Justice for Workers' use of activist film screenings, in which activists draw power from bereavement, declaring a refusal to let go of the past and thus announcing the need to continue to seek justice for workers who have suffered at the hands of a violent and exploitative system. Moreover, I have shown how UCL Justice for Workers reinvigorate, through the use of memes, the imaginary of picket lines and trade unionism. However, what UCL Justice for Workers attempt to recapture through these memes are not merely ideologies or a set of coherent practices and strategies, but rather the "pleasures of politics" and the affective synergies that circulate between protesting bodies. Left-Wing Melancholia imbued in the aesthetics of UCL Justice For Workers, then, represents an attempt to rekindle the utopian imagination which has fuelled the revolutions of the past.

However, I have also analysed how UCL Justice for Workers engage with the material and physical space of the university campus. Through the various references imbued in the aesthetics of the campaign, such as the group's references to May 68, UCL Justice for Workers elevate the importance of short-lived experiences which have the revolutionary potential necessary to break from the natural course of history. The activists' engagement with the material space of the university campus reflects a similar preoccupation with the power of the ephemeral, embracing the logic of Milligan's "cracks": necessarily fleeting moments in which activists break free from the logic of capitalism (2018). Through the use of these cracks, UCL Justice for Workers open up gaps and fissures in the university campus, creating zones of collectivity, community, and solidarity.

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