Reform's aesthetics of industry

Sacha Hilhorst

In North Nottinghamshire, Reform UK present themselves as the party of workers, community and coalmining heritage. But this image is at odds with the party's actual role in the asset economy.

When Nottinghamshire's Silverhill Colliery closed in the early 1990s after more than a century in operation, the pit wheels that had once moved miners between the pit top and the mineshaft were taken into an Ashfield District Council depot, where they would remain immobile, like a stopped clock, and largely unseen for the next quarter century. In 2018, a group of former Silverhill miners learned of their whereabouts. When they visited, they found the wheels covered in weeds and brambles. The men started raising money to have them placed as a monument in the country park that now covers the former slag heaps.[1] Many locals made small donations to the crowdfunder in honour of now-deceased pitmen – £15 in memory of someone's dad here, £40 in honour of a grandparent there. Ex-miners chipped in too. 'In recognition of the mining camaraderie and all I learned as an apprentice 'leckie at Sutton many years ago', one wrote, adding that, yes, he 'can still fall asleep standing up.' (As anyone spending time with ex-miners soon learns, pit electricians' alleged laziness remains a fond source of jokes and loving mockery.) The Friends of Silverhill group raised around £13,000 in total.[2] But even this impressive effort fell short of what was needed to return the wheels to Silverhill Wood. And that is where then-Conservative, soon-to-be-Reform UK MP Lee Anderson came in.

As Anderson frequently mentions, he is an ex-miner himself and he took up the cause of the Silverhill monument with vigour. When funding did not appear to be forthcoming from the council, he asked a local property consultant and

Reform UK member to bear the additional cost, to the tune of £37,000. 'He put his hand in his pocket, as good Reformers do.'[3] In 2024, the newly restored pit wheels were installed in Silverhill Wood, some three decades after they came down. 'The men that worked here went on and broke every production record for coal', says Farage in a Reform UK video, standing in front of the wheels and looking straight into the camera. 'And then the Berlin Wall came down. They were flooded with cheap imports from Poland and in '92 or '93 all these pits were closed. Devastating for these communities. … [I remember] thinking it was a complete betrayal.'[4] While an unconventional historiography of the UK coal industry, Farage's video and the Silverhill example as a whole speak to the image Reform is trying to project in Nottinghamshire: a community-minded party that is 'the natural home of the working class.'[5] Between the ex-miners and the property consultant who funded the Silverhill memorial, it is the former who are used to bolster Reform's public image, whereas the latter is the more emblematic of the party's support base.

Back in 2021, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in North Nottinghamshire, not far from Silverhill. While living in Mansfield, I interviewed close to a hundred people from the town and the surrounding pit villages, joining them at the pub, the community centre and the football club whenever they would have me. When I return now, many of the people I have kept in touch with tell me they are leaning towards Reform. These include people who do not fit the stereotype: teachers, NHS administrators and many women in their 40s and 50s, with the latter being the group among whom Reform is expanding its support most rapidly.[6] The 2024 Reform UK vote mapped closely onto the 2015 UKIP vote, drawing in some working-class but primarily middle-class voters who feel an influx of foreign goods and foreign people has wrecked the country – Polish coal, Polish people.[7] But it is now building out to a broad slice of Middle England, making a play for all those who are fed up and are willing to support, condone, or overlook the harsher parts of the party's policy platform. This makes for a powerful and heterogenous coalition, built around a central contradiction. This is at its heart a contradiction between labour and assets, between retired miners and property consultants, and between those who wish to restore the nobility of work and those who seek to build a new world altogether.

Eddie and Louise

Eddie has had many jobs in all sorts of trades, but one of his favourite ones was at a canning factory. Leaving school in the 1980s as pits around Mansfield were shutting, he didn't have the option of becoming a miner, as his father had been for a time, but he didn't mind. Dark, scary places. After an apprenticeship and various jobs he made his way into the canning factory, which was booming.

What he loved about the job above all was the autonomy. The boss would let him get on with it. 'Brilliant job. High speed. We used to make, we used to make a million a shift.' His boss used to tell him that workers like Eddie were welcome to take it easy when the machines were ticking along nicely. 'That was the gaffer that said that. He says, "if I walk down the line and see you're sat about doing the crossword and drinking coffee", he says, "I'm happy because we're making money"', Eddie tells me, laughing. 'He says, "if I see you running about, [working] the machinery, we're not making money." So he understood it.' When he gets too effusive about the job, his wife Louise reminds him of the constant rotation of days, afters and night shifts, which was making him ill. She's not wrong, but Eddie can't help pushing back. He loved that job.

I met Eddie and Louise while working on a project about everyday economic radicalism for the think tank Common Wealth. In long interviews, my interlocutors told me about their lives, their work, and their views. While Eddie was at the canning plant, Louise had worked in hosiery factories. Stitching in zippers at piece rates made for monotonous work, but she enjoyed chatting to her colleagues in the smoke breaks, which they always tried to stretch beyond the allotted 10 minutes, and going out together at night. 'You'd get off the bus and start at the Wheatsheaf. There was a certain route that you used to follow around Mansfield and everybody did it, didn't they? I bet we used to visit, what, eight or nine pubs easily and then go to the nightclub and we'd be there 'til two, three o'clock in morning and then go home... Mansfield used to be an amazing place on Fridays and Saturday nights. You couldn't move down Mansfield honestly.' But the textile workers, whose movement from market to pub to club had set the town in motion, would all end up losing their jobs. Between 1986 and 2005 at least 16 different textile factory sites were shuttered in and around Mansfield and Ashfield.[8] In the late 1980s, Louise's job was one of those that disappeared. It is the far less-discussed deindustrialisation, which predominantly affected women workers who had never had the same structural power as King Coal, but no less profound in its effects, not least on the town centre, which would gradually lose its buzz.

Conditions worsened in the canning factory too, though as Eddie tells it not for lack of profitability, but through a series of mergers and take-overs which resulted in an increasingly narrow focus on profit maximisation. The autonomy that Eddie had so enjoyed was disappearing. 'The hours got longer and they weren't content with you running the machines anymore. You'd then got to run the machines, you'd got to clean the plant, you had to be on the go all the time. And the people that were taking over had got not a great amount of experience and telling you how to do your job. And then when they messed up, it was your fault.' Morale worsened and the union got invited to negotiate redundancy packages – one of which would be Eddie's own. 'People were getting disillusioned with it because every time, it was us that suffered, it weren't management

that suffered. It were always workers. We got "you can't have a pay rise", and [we would] think, well you made so many million profit last year, why can't we have a pay rise? We're making the blooming things!'

If Eddie and Louise's early careers were typical of Mansfield's 1980s industrial economy, so too are their later careers in education and care common for Mansfield residents now. But the roles available locally to those without university degrees offer neither the pay nor the autonomy nor the social side that their previous roles did. When Louise returned to work after having children, she took a job as a teaching assistant. 'I loved that job. I never thought I'd leave.' But supporting children who were growing up in rapidly declining pit villages was tough and she was taking the job home with her. Over time, she felt increasingly over-managed and under-supported, feeding children through the system like fabric through a sewing machine. All around her she sees that work has changed. 'You work 24/7 now', Louise says. There didn't used to be the need, Eddie adds. 'The only reason there's 24/7 jobs is for big companies.'

Early on in the Blair years Eddie started to ask himself some big political questions. Why did representatives fail to look after their constituents? Why did politicians promise one thing and do another? Why did nothing seem to change even when the government changed? He started to read books that promised to answer those questions. Tracing it back, Eddie can see how his strict religious upbringing and subsequent loss of faith made him sceptical of authority. He started to seek out different perspectives. There were the works of Graham Hancock, who claims the archaeological establishment is hiding the fact that ultra-intelligent aliens built the pyramids. Unfolding political events only strengthened Eddie's sense that he was starting to see 'how it all hangs together'. 'People then call you a conspiracy theorist, but nobody ever actually looks into it… It all begins to make sense once you realise what the game is. It's enlightening, shall we say.'

In Eddie's view, politicians are 'bought and paid-for actors.' They do the bidding of wealthy people who control the agenda behind the scenes. Who are those people? 'Well you've got the World Economic Forum … You've got certain families on the planet that run the planet. They bought the political system. They bought the pharmacological system, they run it. And the biggest one that they run and control is the media, their gatekeeper.' One might venture a guess as to who are included in the 'certain families' are who allegedly control the world. Age-old conspiracy theories about the Rothschilds are recycled into newer iterations involving the World Economic Forum, COVID-19 machinations and Taylor Swift's masonic handshakes, retaining their core of antisemitism. There can be no sugarcoating this. Eddie anticipated this response from me and initially expressed a reluctance to tell me about the theories at all. But his desire to explain it all won out. The signs and the symbols, televised with impunity; the

'families'; WEF chairman Klaus Schwab, 'who has just retired of course'. Louise would rather not hear about it all. 'But he tells me anyway.'

In the last elections, both Eddie and Louise voted Reform. Louise: 'I don't know whether to believe them or not, but it's all about going back to how this country used to be, by going back to nationalising everything … Supporting the workers, making the people who've got the money pay the taxes, not the people who haven't. That's what I want.' Eddie suspects Reform will be just like the rest of them, though he makes sure to cast a ballot anyway. If Eddie's wistful ruminations on the 'more socialist' system we lost and Louise's hope for a government of workers for workers sound like they could find common ground with a left-of-centre government, they do not. They describe it as 'unthinkable' that they would ever vote Labour again – they dislike all politicians, but Labour ones all the more so for having once put their trust in them.

The politics of the asset condition

In their support for Reform UK, Eddie and Louise make common cause with people who do not share their enthusiasm for workers' rights and taxing the wealthy. In working-class towns and neighbourhoods as elsewhere, Reform draws much of its support from the middle-class voters who were once staunch Tories – the vast majority of 2024 Reform voters have not voted Labour at any point in the last 20 years and would not consider doing so now.[9] The conversations I have been having with people in North Nottinghamshire reflect this. One of those I spoke to recently was a small business owner, now comfortably retired, who loved Farage and was excited to see his party do so well. I caught him in a sunny mood in any case, for he had recently returned home to Mansfield after a holiday aboard a cruise ship.

Even putting aside the multiracial character of the actually existing working class, Reform cannot be properly described as the political extension of the so-called white working class. It hitches fervent anti-system voters like Eddie and Louise, many of whom have leftish economic views, to longstanding Tories whose allegiances to the Conservative Party have been eroded over its long years in government. They are brought into a shared political project by varying degrees of opposition to immigration, a sense of decline, and a desire for political renewal. With the right strategic silences, the former textile worker who has felt the ravages of deindustrialisation can be interpellated through the same declinism that appeals to the hardened racist who fears for the 'replacement' of the white Briton. Sometimes these are the same person. But sometimes they are quite different indeed – the former canning factory worker now allied to the managers that used to exploit him.

The latter are people with money, which matters. Reform's financial backers allow them to effect concrete change in worn-down places, as with the Silverhill pit wheels, which allows them to project themselves as the embodiment of community spirit. When so many feel that politicians only ever take and never give, Reform's financial resources in Nottinghamshire allow it to do politics differently. As to what the generous donors receive in return, we can only guess. In the case of Silverhill, the property consultancy that stumped up the money has worked extensively on public sector contracts. The same interdependence is true at the far greater scale of the Reform donor roster at large, which is made up in large part of property developers, cryptocurrency speculators and assorted fossil fuel interests, all operating in industries that are highly dependent on a favourable regulatory environment.[10]

At a more abstract level, Reform's donor base also reflects not just the economic but also the cultural power of income from assets rather than labour. Housing wealth and crypto speculation are emblematic of the drive to attain financial security when work fails to pay. As capitalism becomes organised around the logic of assets and wealth rather than labour and income, it generates a vacuum of justification, as the sociologist Will Davies has argued.[11] A lifetime of toil no longer guarantees home ownership. Even for the winners of the asset economy – the mortgage-free homeowners whose properties have exploded in value – the knowledge that their children will not have the opportunity to attain the same off the back of their labour sparks a bleak mood. Where the home was once not just an appreciating unit of housing wealth but also a reflection of moral worth and the promise of release from financial insecurity, we now witness work and ownership becoming alternatives rather than complements. For people like Eddie and Louise, who experienced some of Britain's last remaining Fordist factory work, this is a moral disaster. But to the crypto crowd, the nobility of work for the sake of work has long receded in favour of the mythology of the entrepreneur, in whom assets and labour are intimately intermingled from the start.[12] Where one part of the Reform coalition would like to restore the conditions that enabled the coherent Fordist life story, another part would explode them altogether.

What we are left with is a workerist aesthetic propped up by funds from those for whom labour standards, labour conditions, and indeed labour itself are not particularly meaningful categories. On the divisions that define the asset economy, Reform wants to have it both ways. It wants to look workerist but remain capital-friendly. As a result it is soft on slumlords, dismissive of workers' rights, and at least as willing to accept dodgy money as their competitors.

This is sometimes presented as a 'gotcha' of sorts, particularly since Reform voted against the Employment Rights Bill. It is right to hammer Reform on this, but any overeager identification of hypocrisy underestimates how willing Reform might be to make material concessions to undergird their rhetoric. An emblem-

atic policy in this regard is Farage's proposal for non-doms to pay a 250 thousand pound fee in exchange for exemption from many UK taxes, with the proceeds redistributed to the lowest-paid workers, supposedly to the tune of several hundreds of pounds each every year.[13] Never mind that it would be a terrible hit to Britain's tax base – it would feel to many like finally receiving something back.

Moreover, it is harder to attack Reform's attempt to project itself as the tribune of the working class when Labour cannot do so with credibility either. It was in power as the last of Mansfield's factories and mines shuttered and it has done far, far too little, then and now, to turn the tide. Indeed, the interventions of the New Labour-era Regional Development Agencies often created only more bad employment, handing out millions to horrendous employers such as Sports Direct so as to be able to present encouraging job creation statistics.[14] Many people in ex-industrial England are rightfully furious about this, regardless of their political stripe. And for all the genuinely fantastic workers' rights improvements contained in the Employment Rights Bill, the current parliamentary Labour Party and their staffers tend to be sociologically remote from the everyday lives of Britain's lower-paid workers. Few of them can speak to the experience of being utterly powerless before a condescending manager, the grief of having to deny your children small comforts and luxuries, or the pains of a body wrecked by shift work.

Concluding thoughts

Many Reform voters will never vote Labour again – they say so quite openly themselves. Eddie and Louise are among those who are unlikely to vote for the left again. They tell me they feel terrible for their offspring, who will face this deteriorating hellscape for longer than they will have to. As it happens, I have spoken with one of their children. Max is a well-paid, university-educated NHS worker, who loves living in the area. Through summer jobs at the massive Sports Direct warehouse north of town he learned a little Polish and came to appreciate his various colleagues, though not the working conditions at the lower end of the UK labour market. He would like to see the government ramp up investment in public services and take a stronger stand against racism. He strongly favours a wealth tax.

Max's comparatively upbeat view of the state of things contrasts starkly with the bleak assessment offered by his parents, which is perhaps one of the reasons their politics have diverged. When we first met earlier this year he told me he was likely to vote Labour again. An earlier version of this essay concluded by saying that, if this government wishes to stay in power, it should think hard on how to make sure he does not change his mind. But perhaps it is too late. When we speak again in September, Max's voting intention has changed. He is excited

by Jeremy Corbyn and Zarah Sultana's new political venture. He, too, is done with Labour for now.

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Notes

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