

Chronic pain and ravaged mental health: this is the brutal reality of Britain's new working class
By Aditya Chakraborty, *The Guardian*, November 22nd, 2024

If journalists visit Mansfield at all these days, they come for one thing: the clichés. They want the market town where 70% backed Brexit. And they're not alone. Mansfield and its ring of former mining villages make up a petri dish of "left-behind" England, of isolation and anger and impoverishment.

5 Just outside Mansfield, Tony Blair's New Labour government ploughed £38m of taxpayer money into an old coalmine to attract a buyer. The new owner was Sports Direct, and its Shirebrook site created some of Britain's worst jobs. In 2015, Locals called it "the gulag".

10 In 2020, another massive warehouse opened up: Amazon, just outside Mansfield. This site also benefited from tens of millions in public funding. As the Common Wealth thinktank notes, in a report shared exclusively with this paper: "Towns like Mansfield were not 'left behind' but actively remade through ... enterprise zones, land sell-offs and financial perks for large businesses, most of which offered only low-paid, insecure work."

15 Karolina Sobczak arrived from Gdynia in northern Poland to join her husband and after a year at Sports Direct, she started at Amazon with a few small health conditions, among them mild back pain. The relentless handling of heavy boxes made her back worse and began to give her shooting pains down her wrists. Amazon's in-house occupational health team advised over and over that she should lay off the bulkier material for a while – but she reports her managers said they could not adjust the workload.

20 Health reports from Amazon's consultants document Karolina's decline. Early on, assessors describe her as "fit for work", but later they note "she is in agony" and "uses a cane" to walk. She was getting panic attacks and there are notes of "severe depression" and "severe anxiety". At the same time, Karolina says, NHS doctors were asking her to cut hours at Amazon or leave altogether. Her response was always the same: she couldn't afford to quit. This summer, Karolina's GP signed her off sick for weeks. At home, she stabbed herself in the thigh and took
25 every beta blocker she had. "I wanted to stop my heart beating," she says. An ambulance rushed her to the hospital just opposite the warehouse. She still came back to work the next week: she couldn't afford not to.

I put a number of detailed questions to Amazon and received a statement that read in part:
30 "The safety and wellbeing of our people is always our priority. Working in a fulfilment centre is physical work that might not be right for everyone. But ... if you want to work in a warehouse, you'll want to work at Amazon."

Generations ago, even as miners did jobs that could and did kill them, governments admitted they were essential to Britain's future. George Orwell famously admired their "noble bodies". No such respect is accorded to the likes of Karolina, even as they pack our Black Friday shopping.

35 More than a quarter-century after Blair became prime minister, Britain has another Labour prime minister who promises growth and jobs and multi-billion investors. The same big commitments will almost certainly lead to the same disillusionment. Sacha Hihorst, who wrote the Common Wealth report based on her PhD research, observes that Mansfield residents will certainly complain about migration – but that only lasts a minute or so: "The people they really
40 hate are politicians."