Call for papers for the Working Group Workplaces: Pasts and Presents

European Labour History Network Conference June 16-19, 2026, Barcelona

Grounded Work: Social, Spatial and Environmental Ecologies of Labour

We invite scholars to explore the complex entanglements between labour, sites of production, industrial geography and environments across historical contexts. We seek papers that examine how workplaces—whether factories, offices, shipyards, mines, farms, or digital infrastructures—function not only as sites of economic production, but also as dynamic ecosystems embedded in social, spatial, and environmental relations.

Workplaces are ecosystems with variable interdependencies of labour, space, technology and environment (Becker, 1990). Work has never occurred in a vacuum. It is shaped by and shapes architectural forms, infrastructural systems, material flows, climatic and territorial conditions and, of course, the social and technological organisation of labour. Workplace ecologies both reflect and reproduce social hierarchies, environmental transformations, and spatial configurations of power.

Environmental historians have argued that we should begin with work to understand how societies know and transform nature, insisting that people encounter and shape the environment primarily through labour (White). Concepts like "workscapes" describe the dynamic material settings forged by the interplay between labour and natural processes (Andrews). Labour historians, in turn, have drawn on perspectives including labour geography and environmental justice to explore how capital reorganizes nature—and how ecological conditions, in turn, structure relations of class, gender, and exploitation (Bailey and Gwyther, Peck). Workplace ecologies and infrastructures are also deeply intertwined with systems of imperial extraction and racialized labour hierarchies (Larkin 2013; Cowen 2014). These approaches unsettle disciplinary boundaries, bringing ecological analysis into labour history and reintroducing political economy into environmental studies.

This call for papers aims to foreground historical approaches that interrogate how the organization of labour intersects with ecological systems and spatial politics. We welcome contributions that analyze the reciprocal influences between the workplace as a constructed space and broader environmental and social processes. How have workplaces historically mediated relations between humans, technology, materials, and the environment? What role has the built environment played in codifying or contesting labour relations and environmental impacts? How has the social and spatial organisation of labour impacted resistance or accommodation to management control?

As a site where ecological processes and social struggles meet, the workplace enables a more grounded analysis of how human and nonhuman worlds are co-produced through situated practices of labour, contestation, and survival. Through an empirical and conceptual focus on the workplace as an interconnected ecosystem, and through interdisciplinary frameworks, this call for paper opens space to reframe these questions.

Possible themes include (but are not limited to):

- Spatial politics of labour: segregation, mobility, and infrastructures of control
- Ecological transformations in specific workplaces (e.g., mines, factories, ports, farms, warehouses) and their effects
- The role of industrial geography in shaping workplace ecologies and workers' lived experience across local, regional, and global scales
- How material infrastructures shape labour regimes and labour processes.
- Labour struggle and how they reshaped workplace ecology
- Methodological challenges in researching workplace ecologies: archives, oral histories, and interdisciplinary approaches
- Conceptual papers that explore the multidimensionality of workplace ecology.
- Environmental histories of workplaces: pollution, toxicity, resource use, and ecological change
- The embodied and metabolic experience of workers and the socio-natures that they interact with
- Gender, race, class, and the ecologies of workplace design and function
- Technological change and the environmental footprint of work
- Transnational and colonial entanglements in the construction of labour ecologies
- Digital and remote work and its spatial and ecological implications

Submission Guidelines

We welcome both individual paper proposals and session proposals. For session proposals, please include 3 to 4 papers, along with an abstract that outlines the overarching theme or common thread of the session. Each individual paper should also include an abstract.

- Each abstract should be a maximum of 500 words (excluding the bibliography).
- Your proposal should include your name, surname, current affiliation, contact information, and paper title.
- Abstracts must explicitly indicate which of the themes (from the provided bullet points) your paper or session addresses.

Please submit your abstract by **15 August 2025** to Görkem Akgöz (akgozgorkem@yahoo.com) or Nico Pizzolato (n.pizzolato@mdx.ac.uk).

About the ELHN "Workplaces: Pasts and Presents" Working Group

The working group has been active since 2014, initially known as "Factory History." The name change in 2021 reflects the expanding scope of the group, which now includes scholars studying a wide range of workplaces beyond the industrial context. It also acknowledges the growing contributions from scholars in fields like anthropology and geography, in addition to history.

The group is truly international, bringing together scholars at various stages of their careers from a wide range of academic disciplines. It has developed a rich library of working papers and primary materials and is fuelled by a wealth of energy and innovative ideas. The group also runs a digital platform for collaborative research exhibits and produces a podcast series.

If you are interested in joining or would like to receive updates from the group, please contact one of the coordinators at akgozgorkem@yahoo.com or n.pizzolato@mdx.ac.uk.

Bibliography

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