

SUMMARY NOTES

PRECARIOUS WORK AND WORKERS RESISTANCE:
REFRAMING LABOR FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

Interpretations of global labor in the age of neoliberal capitalism urgently demands robust and critical historical and comparative analysis. For decades, research on labor collective organization has focused almost exclusively on workers collectively employed on a stable basis in industrial settings or in the public sector, defended by collective bargaining, represented by trade unions and inserted within relatively stable systems of industrial relations. This view, however, it has always failed to take into account the transformative potentialities of that vast, rich, and meaningful array of “precarious” work experiences and relations that allow the production and re-production of capital as a whole.

Women’s labor in the sphere of social reproduction, low-waged workers who work outside conventional work as subcontractors in global production chains or in the informal economy of the global cities or as crowd workers in the digital economy, migrant workers whose exploited work often lays at the margin of legality, new groups of dispossessed people forced into the labor market, are categories of workers traditionally excluded and neglected by the labor relations literature as laborers; often considered unproductive, unregulated, and thus unrepresentable. Considering the speed of development and intensity of integration of global capitalist processes and the political turn to neoliberalism, which have brought about new (or refreshed old) paradigms to increase workers’ productivity and profits, absent has been the signal importance of these “invisible,” precarious workers, today representing not just the vast majority of workers in the global South but also increasingly shaping the social landscape of cities across the world.

Broadening research on this underworld of precarious and not represented workers is important to understand one fundamental dimension of the process of capital accumulation in the global age but it also helps to address deep theoretical concerns, put in evidence by heterodox Marxist currents across the social sciences, originating from the use of narrow conceptions about work and workers:

The conventional notion of the working class, based on the industrial, waged worker, has been questioned for not considering how different labor regimes co-

exist and contribute to the development of capitalism as a system, especially women engaged in social reproduction.

The social organization and militancy of workers it has been reduced to workers' resistance to official strikes organized by representative trade unions, the "institutionalised form of resistance," leaving aside the rich history and tradition of workers' self-organization. This remains crucial today in framing precarious workers organization and in setting possibilities for transformative agency.

In the past 30 years, one sided views of labor has been explicitly based on the political role assigned to the industrial workers. Either from a revolutionary or a reformist perspective this particular section of the working class was considered central to any transformative politics. The advent of neoliberalism has swept away many of the elements on which this centrality was built, leaving a *tabula rasa*, politically and theoretically speaking. From an empirical point of view, diversity, heterogeneity, unevenness, unpredictability characterize most workers' struggles of the twenty-first century.

Geographically research concentrated on struggles at the workplace without considering the linkages of these with broader struggles over workers' daily lives.

The papers included in this special issue aim to address some of the theoretical and empirical gap in knowledge described above. The issue is opened by an article of Silvia Federici on "Migrant domestic workers and the international production and circulation of feminist knowledge and organization." The article reflects upon recent experiences of migrant domestic workers and the differences between these and the 1970s feminist movement of "Wages for Housework." While both experiences of resistance highlight and make visible how domestic work is "socially necessary labour," thus fundamental for the reproduction of capitalism as a whole, Federici considers the struggles of women employed in household across the world and their confrontation with state institutions to obtain recognition potentially at the forefront of a broader movement of practices of contestation and organization, centred on self-activity and "the community of struggles" represented by migration. In the second paper, George Caffentzis tackles the issue of what strategies a Global Justice Movement should consider in addressing the increasing precariousness of wage labor produced by globalization. Caffentzis contests the idea, adopted by many unions and pro-labor organisations, that workers' rights can effectively be defended by inserting these into an international human rights regulatory framework. Caffentzis argues that this strategy, which has been partly successful to protect the rights of wage workers in the industrialized post world war II, can lead to partial victories in specific workplaces but remains far from protecting the manifold universe of work that exists beyond the shrinking archipelago of waged, contractual, "guaranteed," and non-coercive work.

In the third article, Rachel Meyer, using the case study of the Chicago Jobs and Living Wage Campaign and comparing this to other cases of precarious worker mobilization around the globe, focuses her attention on the bifurcation existing between the mobilization strategies used by different groups of workers.

While certain groups of workers located in key strategic sectors are still able to use the economic route to press for their demands, low wage migrant workers' have shifted toward political strategies and mobilization. She highlights the role of the neoliberal State in fragmenting the working class by granting or opposing rights and welfare benefits related to migration rules and citizenship rights to different groups of workers. But also how these same conditions have created class based *solidarities* in communities of workers.

In the fourth article, David Jaffee and David Bensman move the pendulum of the analysis back to the economic sphere by looking at workers 'employment conditions and actions in two interrelated segments of the logistics supply chain, port trucking, and warehouse/distribution centers, in the U.S. Workers in these sectors have a relatively strong workplace bargaining power due to their location within a chain of distribution that need to supply efficiently and quickly. However, management practices of outsourcing and individualization of employment and the securitization of ports and distribution centres produce very often dispersed labor actions. The recent support of warehouse employees to port truckers, on strike against common employers at the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach in October 2015, makes the forge of alliances between different groups of workers in the supply chain a central element in strengthening labor actions in the sector.

In the fifth paper, Gabriella Alberti provide an in-depth study of the mobilizations and organization building of a group of low wage migrant cleaners employed by the University of London. In doing this, the article then contribute to move the focus of the special issue to another key strategic sector for the accumulation of capital in global cities, that of hospitality and care. The article emphasizes how low paid service sectors jobs traditionally deemed as "unorganisable" from a traditional trade unions point of view, can be the locus of alternative forms of struggle and organization independent from existing trade unions. Thus, in doing this the article contributes to debates on the union form and its limitation to represent precarious workers. In the sixth and final article, Paula Varela looks at the interaction of precarious with formally employed workers in rank and file union formation using three cases from Argentina: the Buenos Aires underground, the Kraft biscuits company Terrabusi and the printing company Donneley. In the article, Varela stresses at the importance of the shifting economic cycles in shaping work and working classes reconfiguration and at the action of left parties and leaderships in forging new bottom up organization opposed to traditional union bureaucracy. The article then helps to connect precarious workers organization to long standing debates about union formation and the interrelations of this with broader questions of class and politics.

This issue on precarious work concludes with a review essay by Jane LaTour, "Danger: Men Working," on the Boston Harbor and the growth of dangerous, risky, and unsafe jobs.

Maurizio Atzeni and Immanuel Ness