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(Re)conceptualising precarity: Institutions, structure and agency

Jane Hardy

Abstract

Guy Standing's *The Precariat* has had a significant impact in stimulating a debate about the changing nature of work across the broad sweep of the global economy. He advances the notion of precarious workers, originally put forward by Italian autonomist Marxists, to suggest that they constitute a new and separate class. This article reflects on the notion of precarious work and addresses the temporal, historical and analytical weaknesses manifest in many accounts by proposing a political economy synthesis. The discussion takes place through a political economy theoretical lens that takes seriously the structures and institutions of capitalism and the agency of workers individually and collectively. First, it is argued that two key structural influences on precarity are the spatiality of capitalism and its endemic tendency to crisis. Second, temporal and institutional 'shapers' of precarity are discussed in historical and comparative context. Third, the agential influence on precarity is examined with regard to the possibility of the self-organization precarious workers and their potential for forging solidarity with other groups. The article concludes that precarious work is intrinsic to capitalism and therefore the precariat cannot be understood as a class-in-itself. The implications of this for activists is that solidarity needs to be forged between all groups of workers in order to organise for decent and stable employment.

Introduction

Along with classic texts such as *The Affluent Worker in the Class Structure* (Goldthorpe et al, 1969) and *Farewell to the Working Class* (Gorz, 1999) - *The Precariat; a Dangerous Class* (2011) by Guy Standing has reignited debates about the changing nature of the working class across the broader sweep of the global economy. The book raises critical questions about work and class in contemporary society and about the capacity of the working class for resistance and self-emancipation under conditions of neoliberal capitalism.

The contribution of Guy Standing's book has undoubtedly had a significant impact on this debate by advancing the notion of precarious work, originally proposed by Italian autonomist Marxists, to suggest that these workers constitute a class in themselves. The book has had global resonance as it speaks to the insecurity and degradation of work experienced by many – that is if they have employment at all. The Arab Spring, that began in December 2010, was ignited, at least in part, by the failure to meet the aspirations of employment of a new generation of educated workers. In Spain the mass unemployment of young people and their disenfranchisement from the workforce was central in giving birth to the *Podemos* movement outside the structures of traditional trade unions. It is also very important that Standing spells out the political ramifications of exclusion from the labour market reflected in the resurgence of fascism and the populist right across Europe. However, while there has been increasing precarity in employment, albeit uneven across and within countries, the notion of 'precarious workers' as a separate and 'dangerous class' is dangerous in itself. From an academic perspective it is fraught with temporal, spatial, definitional and theoretical problems and from a political/activist perspective it is potentially divisive.

Analyses of precarity have tended towards a binary divide of capital dominated accounts that privilege the impacts of neoliberal globalisation and mobile capital (Harvey, 2005) and those that have replaced the emphasis on the power of capital by stressing the autonomy and creativity of workers and their ability to bring about change (Gill and Pratt, 2013). This article aims to reconcile these tensions by positing a political economy of precarity by proposing a conceptual framework that takes seriously the

structures and institutions of capitalism and the agency of workers both individually and collectively. The structure of the argument elaborated in this article is as follows. Section two proposes a conceptual framework that examines the structural, institutional and agential influences on precarity. In focusing on the spatiality and crisis of capitalism section three elaborates structural influences on precarity. Section four discusses the temporal and institutional ‘shapers’ of precarity and the need to locate an understanding of work in historical and geographical perspective. The agential influence of precarious workers is examined in section five with regard to the possibility of their self-organisation and their potential for forging solidarity with other groups of workers.

Conceptualising precarity: a political economy framework

The novel taxonomy proposed in this article departs from other conceptualisations of precarity that have often drawn on institutional comparative approaches, by incorporating the notion of structural influences and the salience of agency. This does not propose deterministic or causal relationships, but rather that the elements are inter-linked and mutually constitutive.

Table 1

Influences on embeddedness	Dimensions	Outcomes
Structural influences	Dynamism and new spatialities	New sites of labour
	Endemic crisis	Restructuring capital Austerity
	Erosion private/public sector binary divide	Commodification

Institutional and temporal	Keynesianism to neoliberalism	New social contract of employment
	Variegated neoliberalism	Different regulatory market based structures
	Historical conjuncture	Temporal and comparative specificities
Agential	Class position	Potential for solidarity
	Skilled precarious (self employed) workers	Self-organisation
	Migrant workers	Trade union integration

Source: Author

Structural factors are the first set of influences on precarity. In general these refer to the parameters that limit the field of action in which agents formulate strategy, and broad imperatives which ultimately push firms towards particular ends, albeit via a number of diverse routes and managerial strategies (Schoenberger, 1994). More specifically with reference to an understanding of precarity there is an emphasis on the spatiality and the dynamism of capitalism and its endemic tendency to crisis. Further, in the context of the commodification of services the binary divide between the public and private sector is increasingly blurred.

Second, an understanding of precarity needs to be embedded in the institutional architecture of capitalism and its temporal dimensions. In particular, an understanding of developments in work demands a more nuanced analysis of specific national economies and their employment and industrial histories as meanings of precarity across countries vary.

Third, the taxonomy problematises agential influences on embeddedness through discussing whether the precariat are a class in themselves and for themselves or

whether and in what ways their potential for resistance and solidarity is contingent. The article now turns to elaborate these influences.

Structural influences on precarity: spatiality and crisis

Competitive accumulation and the incessant search for profits, drivers that lie deep in the structures of capitalism, render all work precarious. Three structural aspects that have a direct bearing on the precariousness of employment are the dynamism of the system and the constant creation of new spatialities; its endemic tendency to crisis; and the increasing commodification of the public sector under neoliberalism. Each of these are now considered in the following sub-sections.

Dynamism and spatiality

The highly dynamic social order of capitalism is reflected in the constant reorganisation of capital including the formation and disappearance of firms, their merger and fragmentation as well as their internal reorganization and downsizing. Holst and Doerre (2013) refer to the way in which an understanding of this dynamic has its lineage in the classical sociological thought of Karl Marx. Quoting from the *Poverty of Philosophy* (1936) they stress Marx's insistence on the contradictory consequences of capitalism as 'a source of so much misery [and] at the same time the source of all progress' with incessant revolutions in the economic structure. Previously high levels of standardisation of employment and work and the current trajectory towards destandardisation have to be understood as historical processes (Holst and Doerre, 2013) and need to be located in the post-1945 settlement in particular

One specific dimension of capitalist dynamics is the creation of new spatialities. In the words of Harvey (2005);

The geographical landscape of capitalist activity is riddled with contradictions and tensions and it is perpetually unstable in the face of all manner of technical and economic pressures operating upon it. These...all arise out of the molecular processes of endless capitalism in time and space. And these tensions are caught up in the general expansionary logic of a capitalist system in which the endless accumulation of capital and the never ending search for profits dominates... Capitalism perpetually seeks to create a geographical landscape to facilitate its activities at one point in time only to have to destroy it and build a wholly different landscape at a later point in time to accommodate its perpetual thirst for endless capital accumulation.

It has been argued that the ability of capital to move enables it to impose increasingly precarious forms of work. Hardt and Negri's *Empire* (2001) claims that 'Capital can withdraw from negotiation with a given local population by moving its site to another point in the global network', while Harvey (2005) argues that;

In the neoliberal scheme of things short term contracts are preferred to maximise flexibility...Flexible labour markets are established...The individualised and relatively powerless worker then confronts a labour market in which only short term contracts are offered on a customised basis" (:169-170).

There are two key problems with the argument that the increased mobility of capital is accelerating the precarity of employment. First, I have argued elsewhere that accounts of the mobility of capital are often exaggerated (Author). While specific sectors such as clothing and electronics have been hyper mobile since the 1970s a vast range of activities associated with producing the infrastructure (roads, airports) or social reproduction (the care sector, health and education) of national capitals are fixed and immobile (Author).

Second, the dynamics and spatiality of capitalism to which Hardt and Negri (2001) and Harvey (2005) point can be read differently. In advanced capitalist economies the restructuring and relocation of manufacturing has taken contrasting forms and followed different rhythms. While it may be the case that labour has been weakened in the locations from which productive capital emigrated, new working classes have been created and strengthened in favoured sites of new investments. According to Silver (2003);

...a reading of Volume 1 of *Capital* as a whole suggests a much less linear progression of working class power and one that strongly resonates with contemporary dynamics...This reading of Marx leads us to expect a constant transformation of the working class and the form of labour-capital conflict. Revolutions in the organisation of production and social relations may disorganise some elements of the working classes....But new agencies and sites of conflict emerge along new demands and forms of struggle (:19).

This of course is evident in the new working classes that have grown up outside the core capitalist economies in countries such as Brazil, Korea and China.

Endemic crisis

The second aspect of capitalism's structure that contributes to an understanding of precarity is its endemic tendency towards crisis (for example Carchedi, 2012; Roberts,

2016). This is reflected in more frequent and deeper crises since the mid-1970s; as weaker sections of capital go bankrupt individual firms and sometimes whole sectors in particular states go bankrupt and disappear. In the case of the UK the crisis of 1981 accelerated the decline of manufacturing which decreased by 20 per cent, while the 'transforming' countries of Central and Eastern Europe experienced fundamental structural change after 1990 (Hardy, 2009).

The commodification of the public sector

Related to the structural aspects of capitalism is the notion that there is a binary divide between public and private sector employment and in the case of the former it is assumed that employment is immune to the rhythms and turbulence of capitalism. Standing (ibid) defines the 'salaried' as those who are;

...still in stable full-time employment, some hoping to move into the elite, the majority just enjoying the trappings of their kind, with their pensions, their paid holidays and enterprise benefits, often subsidised by the state. The salariat is concentrated in large corporations, government agencies and public administration, including the civil service.' (:12)

Therefore this group is characterised by permanent work, guaranteed hours and pensions and are presented as a separate and privileged class. Zizek (2012) suggests that struggles to defend pensions comprise a "revolt of the salaried bourgeoisie" in danger of losing its privileges. However, the notion that public sector workers are a privileged group completely denies the realities of life in the public sector, which has faced commodification, marketization and have taken the brunt of austerity (Herman, Bach). In the case of Poland, many people in the public sector (mostly women) have (arguably) more job security, but wages are so low for the vast majority that they face a different form of precariousness – that of economic survival. Market-driven restructuring of health service in Poland has left nurses having more demands put on them with salaries that are barely sufficient for subsistence (Author).

In Britain public sector workers report feeling more precarious, but that is because the advent of new public management has hugely intensified work and brought about a rise in stress, bullying and mobbing in the workplace. In Britain various initiatives to intensify work began in the private sector, but they soon spread to the public sector in the form of the "New Public Sector Management" developed in the post-Thatcher period

of the 1990s. Subsequently these methods have been used increasingly —first in the civil service and more recently in schools, colleges and universities. While these spheres do not directly produce surplus value for capital, public sector managers nonetheless have the same interest in intensifying work to increase the amount of work squeezed out each worker and reduce costs. In other words, these workers face an economic oppression that is equivalent to that faced by workers in the private sector. It should be no surprise that methods new and old, developed in the private sector, have been and are increasingly being imported into the public sector. Often, given the difficulty of measuring the output of workers in the public sector in monetary or physical terms, this involves the imposition of seemingly arbitrary “targets” and “metrics”.

The precarity of public sector workers, particularly in those countries most affected by the crisis, has intensified in the wake of the austerity measures imposed by national and/or European ruling classes. The comprehensive assault on the security of workers in this period is clearly shown by Hermann (2013). In the case of pensions, workers have to pay more, work longer and receive less, while public sector employment has been subject to reductions in employment and wage cuts. In addition, a battery of labour market reforms have reduced labour rights and job security and promoted non-standard and precarious work.

Temporal and institutional influences on precarity

Echoing Silver (2003), the argument posited here starts from the premise that any understanding of labour needs to be recast in longer historical and geographical analysis and embedded temporally and institutionally in capitalism. Standing offers a specific definition of non-precarious work which includes;

workers in long-term, stable fixed hour jobs, with established routes of advancement, subject to unionization and collective agreements with job titles their mothers and fathers understood, facing local employers whose names and features they were familiar with (Standing, 2013:6).

The next two sub-sections examine the temporal and institutional specificity of this definition and elaborate a case for analysing precarity more firmly in time and across space.

Temporal embeddedness

In temporal terms the assumptions about work posited by Standing only refers to the post-1945 period. However, according to Breman (2013) this standard employment contract was specifically the outcome of a changed balance between capital and labour in the Western hemisphere in the cold war period. It is therefore instructive to go further back in order to underline the argument that historically precarious work under capitalism is the norm not the exception. In order to dispel retrospective notions of a homogenous working class two examples from British working class history are considered. In writing about iron making in South Wales (Britain) in the 1930s Williams (1978) notes that there were forty separate trades – hierarchically structured each with different levels of pay and security;

A striking feature of that working population was its sheer complexity and the strongly corporate spirit, which this often engendered among groups of workers who were self-recruited or organised by dozens of sub-contractors (:43).

Nevertheless despite the precariousness of many occupations - this ‘bewildering web of trades’ managed to come together in a massive insurrection (brutally suppressed) which led to the emergence of the organised working class in South Wales in 1831.

Nearly six decades later the ‘New Unionism’ was born in Britain from the Great Dock Strike of 1889, which organised unskilled workers into trade unions. In the docks in London in the 1880s there were 150,000 workers dependent on work in ports. Only 10 per cent had permanent jobs - the rest would wait outside the docks on a daily basis to try and get employment. As men struggled to get a ticket to work ‘Coats, flesh and even ears were torn off... mad human rats who saw food in a ticket’ (Charlton, 1977:32 citing Torr, 1956: 281). This was a fragmented workforce that was hierarchical with complex divisions of labour and sub-contracting arrangements as well as the presence of Irish migrant workers. Despite the obstacles - these workers organised a mass strike, which marked the beginning of the new unionism for unskilled workers in Britain. Citing these two examples illustrates the way in which the vast majority of these workers would have been regarded as precarious by Standing’s definition and yet were at the centre of the working class.

From the mid-1970s the ‘golden age’ of capitalism came to an end as growth rates fell in nearly all parts of the world (Maddison, 2001). The context of rising unemployment and inflation (stagflation) brought about the demise of the so-called Keynesian consensus,

and its replacement with what has subsequently come to be known as neoliberalism. This was spearheaded by Margaret Thatcher (UK) and Ronald Reagan (US) as a way of attempting to deal with the contradictions of capitalism and decisively shift the balance of power away from (organised) labour. From the mid-1980s a new era of globalisation was characterised by more porous boundaries for finance and capital and a further intensification of competition. Taken together these increased the trend towards 'flexible' labour markets as neoliberal policies became more widespread and reached more deeply into all aspects of production including welfare.

Institutional embeddedness

Whether employment is secure or precarious is a matter of degree and work standards are expressed, more or less, as institutionalised compromises on socio-economic regulation that are valid for historical conjunctures (Fritz and Koch, 2013). Hyman (2013) points out that in the case of the United Kingdom, for example, the existence of 'permanent' employment contracts have never imposed significant limitations on the employers capacity to dismiss and that in practise the most important constraints have derived, not from legal prescriptions, but from workers' collective ability to resist.

Barbier (2013) argues that 'precariousness' is a relative concept within each society related to the national system of social protection. *La précarité* entered the French language in the second half of the 1970s in the context of French Labour Law which specifically dealt with compensation for exceptions to the 'standard employment contract'. It was only in Italy and Spain from the 1980s and 2000s that *precaridad*/*precarietà* entered the lexicon evoking different meanings. Thus in the three Southern European countries, a more or less explicit consensus prevailed exemplified during renewed social protests about the fact that a standard job is permanent and everyone else is more or less exposed to employment precariousness of some sort.

While in the UK in the late 1990s only a limited number of researchers had adopted the lens of precarity, the situation changed in subsequent years and this was framed as vulnerable rather than precarious works by the agenda of the Trade Union Congress. The notion of zero hours contracts has emerged even more recently. In Germany the emergence of the notion of the *Prekariat* emerged as a result of labour market and social protections reforms (2003-2005). Barbier points out that while in Germany the

focus is mainly on work – atypical and poorly paid, *la précarité* in French carries multiple meanings. As O'Connor (2013) shows, despite the problems with accurate statistics, the Eurostat figures show marked differences between countries in terms of fixed term contracts as a percentage of total employment. From 2000 to 2010, according to official figures, these actually declined in the UK from 7.0 per cent to 6.1 per cent, remained the same in France and increased slightly in Germany. In Poland, with the highest number of workers on fixed term contracts, this percentage increased sharply from 5.8 per cent to 27.3 per cent in the same period. However, this pattern was not generalised across New Member States.

Neoliberalism does not operate as a coherent ruling class strategy – rather it is riddled with inconsistencies, obstacles and contradictions – and it is necessary to differentiate between the claims of an ideology and what those who hold it actually do. Further, there are divisions and tensions within the ruling class itself regarding the limits of neoliberal policies. This has implications for the debate on precarity because there are different views between and within states (as well as individual firms) about the efficacy of insecure contracts for capital accumulation. Some sections of the ruling class and employers understand that stripping bare the role of the state in reproducing labour and supporting the generation of surplus value may be inconsistent with developing competitive and innovative capital. Capitalists need the constant movement of workers, but also a degree of stability and embedded skills to compete with other capitalists.

With regard to developing countries Breman (2013) points out the historical development of precarious labour has followed very different patterns in the Global South. Imperialism led to even more intense exploitation and oppression in peripheral zones of the world economy, which led to not one, but a variety of regimes of informal/precarious labour.

Nor are these precarious populations unstratified: informality is a multiclass phenomenon structured by multiple levels of exploitation. No doubt all suffer from subjection to capital, but this comes in various shapes. These strata also differ in coping behaviour and resilience, some segments being more successful than other.

To compare those on zero hours contracts in advanced capitalist economies with workers in India, he suggests, is not helpful. In India 90 per cent of workers seek their

livelihood in the informal economy and therefore the meanings of work, workers and workforce have very different meanings.

Therefore precarity has to be set in historical context, which shows that the 'standard employment' that was the dominant model in the three decades after the Second World War in capitalism's 'golden era' reflected a particular historical conjuncture notable in determinate parts of Europe, North America and Australasia and was the exception rather than the rule. Further, precarity is the product of different regulatory structures and understanding in the context of the institutional architecture of comparative capitalisms.

The agency of precarious workers

The previous section could be read as a capital centric approach whereby competition between capitals and the process of accumulation shape and reshape the working class and the nature of work. However, the agency of workers and their resistance, acquiescence or passivity, is pivotal in defending wages, working conditions and security of employment in the context of the vagaries of capital. In relation to Marx's *Capital Volume 1* Silver suggests;

The core of Volume 1 can be read as a history of the dialectic between workers resistance to exploitation at the point of production and the efforts of capital to overcome that resistance by constantly revolutionizing production and social relations... (Silver, p.19)

This raises key questions regarding the agency of workers, first in terms of how far precarious workers can be treated as a separate class with distinct interests. Second, how far and in what ways can labour (self) organise against precarity and to what extent is solidarity important. This section begins by examining the notion of the 'precariat' as a 'class in the making' and goes on to discuss the strategies regarding one particular groups of precarious workers - migrant workers in low wage employment.

'A class-in-the making'?

One of weaknesses in Standing's book is the argument that this heterogeneous mass (chaotically including the student labour force, temporary and contract workers, interns, elderly workers, migrant and immigrant workforces) can become a class 'in itself' (it is described as currently 'a class-in-the-making') and therefore ultimately has

the potential to become a class 'for itself'. This is perhaps unsurprising when Marx's revolutionary class, the proletariat, is seen in this analysis as a dwindling minority, a remnant of a previous Fordist era of job stability and organised labour. But the image of a largely stable male, union card-holding and 'boilersuited' proletariat, as we have seen, has always been the cartoon version, and precarity has been woven throughout working class history (Neilson and Rossiter, 2008). As Gill and Pratt (2005) point out the problem with the notion of precarity activism is that it collapses very different experiences of precariousness into a single form and raises questions as to the premise for meaningful solidarity. Mitropoulos (2005) asks whether it is in the interest of the maquiladora worker to ally herself with a self-employed fashion designer. Standing draws on Weberian concepts of class, based on status, in making this argument, while Marxist concepts, based more clearly on relations of production, are completely absent (Randle, 2011).

Standing's juxtaposition of the precariat and the organised working class serves to place an unhelpful wedge between the two. It has already been argued that there is not one, but a variety of regimes of informal/precarious work and it is necessary to examine the nature of precarity within different economies – as it plays out – further it is necessary to look at the specificities of different sectors and work places in order to devise strategies that unite workers in a common interest.

Objectively the conditions always exist, because exploitation lies at the heart of capitalism, subjectively – workers have managed to organise under the most difficult conditions. The next section examines the agency and experience of organising migrant workers.

Migrant workers

Guy Standing devotes a chapter of his book to migrants as the 'light infantry of globalisation'. Indeed migrant workers are often engaged in the worst employment in terms of working conditions, pay and job security. However, to relegate them to the periphery of capitalism and see them as a separate precarious class is to misunderstand their role in capitalism and their centrality to the working class.

Migrant workers play a distinct role in capitalism both as a 'reserve army of labour' and as a means of raising the rate of exploitation. Employers do not simply want to obtain

additional labour – they also want to get workers who can be employed under specific conditions to raise the rate of exploitation. In general these conditions embody a form of control over the workforce that presupposes the powerlessness of workers assuming that their status will make them easier to exploit (Sasken, 1988).

If we take the case of the wave of migrant workers from the new EU countries into the UK, it is not the case that they constitute a segmented and hermetically sealed part of the labour market. While it is true that some sectors are dominated by migrant workers, for instance in agriculture and food processing, they are also employed alongside British workers as bus drivers, on building sites and in distribution centres.

Migrant workers are not passive victims of capital and neither are they unorganisable because of the sectors they work in. Migrant workers have often been at the forefront of strikes, union organisation and political activity (Guerin-Gonzalez and Strikwerda, 1993). However, solidarity between workers is not automatic - historian James Barrett (1987) found that “the existence of separate racial and ethnic continuities could lead to either unity or fragmentation, depending on the role played by important community leaders or institutions”.

The American working class has always consisted overwhelmingly of immigrants and their children (Milkman, 2006). The 1965 amendments to the immigration laws in the United States set the stage for a massive influx of newcomers that would greatly enlarge the Latino community. Recruitment of migrant workers was central to rebuilding the labour movement and in the 1990s a series of dramatic successes demonstrated the potential for bringing foreign born workers into the unions. In 1995 a new progressive leadership won the contested elections of the AFL-CIO union federation and this was reflected in a new focus on immigrant workers, especially in California. The *Justice for Janitors* campaign was a major success story of immigrant organisation. This was part of a top-down strategy to rebuild the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), but involved rank and file immigrant workers.

There were other major disputes organised by rank and file workers themselves. In 1990 there was a spontaneous strike at the American Racing Equipment Company by first generation Latino immigrants, who won higher wages, health insurance and union recognition. In 1992, after months of preparation, thousands of Mexican immigrant

construction workers achieved a stunning victory for higher pay after a five-month stoppage that shut down housing construction from North Angeles to the Mexican border (Milkman, 2000).

The lessons of these disputes were that immigrant workers could be recruited or take industrial action themselves and win, even in the most difficult circumstances. The industries in which they organised had little or no union membership, or in the case of construction had faced a sustained attack by employers. The workers themselves, who often spoke little English, won in the face of intimidation, violence and the possibility of deportation.

In the UK from May 2004 workers from the new member states of the EU in Central and Eastern Europe, two thirds of them Polish, seeking work in the UK, constituted its largest single in-migration. This new wave of migrants was younger and more feminised than previous ones, with 82 percent aged between 18 and 34 and women comprising 43 percent. The TUC and its affiliated unions responded positively, partly as a result of labour policies fought for by activists in the movement and through the history of self-organisation of black workers. The response of trade union leaderships was also driven by a recognition that between half a million and one million new workers were a fundamental change to the labour market and not to organise these workers would weaken the movement as a whole.

The recruitment of Polish workers posed new challenges for unions. Large numbers were concentrated in the private sector and in agency employment where unions have less power and influence. Language barriers, a lack of bank accounts, aggressive and vicious employers, and stretched union finances added to the problems. Nevertheless, British unions at a grassroots level have shown themselves to be imaginative in deploying a new range of tactics. These included the secondment of a Solidarnosc union organiser from Poland to the north west TUC, using the Union Learning Fund to recruit workplace representatives to provide English classes, and working with law centres, churches and community groups to organise “know your rights” events.

Where Polish workers have been in organised workplaces they have been on strike alongside British workers. In December 2005 a strike took place at the Iceland distribution depot in Enfield, North London, over pay and management bullying. Some

of the placards on the picket line read “*Strajk Oficjalny*” (“Official Strike”), reflecting the large number of Polish workers involved. British and Polish TGWU members were involved in a dispute over pay and pensions with First Bus in the Midlands.

The disputes in the UK construction industry and in oil refineries in January 2009, under the slogan of “British Jobs For British Workers”, were a salutary lesson in the importance of uniting indigenous and migrant workers, and of the role of trade unions and activists. This referred to the complex events during the Lindsey oil refinery dispute. In January and February 2009, about 6,500 construction workers affiliated to the Unite union went on strike, in contravention of trade union legislation, protesting against the increased use of posted workers from various subcontractors using workers from Italy, Poland, Portugal and Spain, which contravened the sector’s national agreement. The then Prime Minister Gordon Brown’s slogan ‘British Jobs for British Workers’ had a strong influence in the first wave of strikes. It is not the case that the dispute was overtly xenophobic as the slogan was quickly replaced with one ‘Fair Access for Local Labour’ and the British National Party (fascist) and UK Independence Party (right-wing populist), which sought to capitalize on the dispute were turned away from picket lines. However, this ‘moment’ demonstrated the potential for division between native and migrant workers in general, and native and posted workers in particular. The contradictory and volatile nature of solidarity is revealed, when demands for discrimination in favour of native workers are parallel to solidarity initiatives in other workplaces.

There are problems and dangers in failing to treat the precariat as part of the working class. Rather than a competition for ranking who is the most exploited the challenge is to identify commonalities – and look at how to build bridges between different groups by looking at what they have in common. It is dangerous to entrench artificial distinctions which encourage xenophobia as migrant and indigenous workers are viewed as rivals rather than sharing a common bond of exploitation.

Conclusion

The spirit of Guy Standing’s book deserves recognition for its vivid exposure of working class lives under capitalism. However, the challenge is to see those on precarious contracts as part of the working class and not a separate entity. The key questions to

pose are what are the key structural changes in the world economy, how these have affected the prospects for radical change and what group(s) can bring this about. Rather than analysing the current period as one of the replacement of one class by another, neoliberal capitalism should be viewed as a concerted attack by capital to roll back the gains that a particular generation of workers were able to fight for. Those on temporary and part-time contracts have not got distinct interests from those in full-time and unionized jobs. It is only by looking at the commonalities of these two groups and how they can work together that there is a chance of securing decent work. Any attempt to build a class based movement must put issues of equality on the basis of gender, race and sexuality at the centre of their agendas.

The ultimate precariousness of capitalism lies in its tendency towards booms and slumps – increasingly more frequent and severe since the 1970s. In times of boom short-term contracts are less problematic as bargaining power increases and employment is easier to find. However, the recent period of slumps, downturns and austerity reveal sharply, how irrespective of contract, no employment is secure.

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