

Introduction au Numéro thématique: Nouvelles voix sur la précarité du travail et sur la résistance ouvrière

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Résumé

Dans le contexte de la crise économique mondiale actuelle et des politiques d'austérité qui en découlent, de plus en plus de gens sur la planète sont aux prises avec des conditions de vie et de travail précaires. Dans ce contexte, les migrants et les nouveaux immigrants doivent affronter diverses formes d'exclusion économique, politique et sociale. L'interaction entre les politiques de travail, la flexibilité des marchés, la mondialisation économique et les régimes d'immigration néolibéraux génèrent plus d'emplois précaires, transforment la nature même du travail et érodent le pouvoir des syndicats, affectant ainsi plusieurs millions de personnes, au Nord comme au Sud. Les formes de migration internationales et internes forment une dynamique majeure du marché mondial de la main d'œuvre, parallèlement à la précarité croissante de l'emploi. Cette conjoncture force les syndicats à repenser leurs stratégies et leurs tactiques, car les conditions de travail et les modes d'intervention qui ont toujours semblé opérer « en marge » du mouvement deviennent plus répandus. Par contre, de nouvelles formes de résistance naissent au sein des communautés ouvrières et viennent remodeler les organismes dans lesquelles elles œuvrent, engendrant ainsi de nouvelles structures de pouvoir populaire.

Ce numéro thématique de Travail, capital et société rassemble une diversité de nouvelles voix, avec leurs nouvelles perspectives sur le syndicalisme et les autres formes collectives d'organisation et de résistance ouvrières. On y traite aussi de la croissance des politiques qui viennent amplifier la précarité du travail au niveau local et mondial, en se penchant de plus près sur les États-Unis, le Salvador, le Canada, le Luxembourg et l'Union européenne. De toutes ces luttes émergent des possibilités de bâtir et consolider les mouvements ouvriers au niveau local et international.

Introduction to the Special Issue: New Voices on Labour Precarity and Resistance

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Amidst the current global economic crisis and attendant politics of austerity, more and more people across the world contend with precarious working and living conditions, not least migrants and new immigrants who face multiple forms of economic, political and social exclusion. The current context also sheds new light on the challenges confronted by trade unions since the end of the 1970s when they entered a triple crisis: a loss of bargaining power towards employers and governments; a decreasing and divided membership; and political disorientation following the crisis of the social democratic project. As trade unions are forced to rethink their strategies and tactics, conditions of work, and modes of organizing which have often been considered to function ‘at the margins’ are becoming more widespread. International and internal forms of migration remain a major dynamic in the global labour market. The interplay of policies of labour market flexibility, economic globalization and neoliberal immigration regimes generate more precarious employment, transform the nature of work and further erode the power of organized labour for many millions of people, North and South.

The severity of the financial and economic crisis that started in 2008, but also the growth and spread of social movements and reactions to it, has led some to consider it to be an “exceptional moment” somehow detached from its historical context. On the contrary, this crisis and the various forms of resistance which have emerged from it must be analyzed as the latest manifestations of a neoliberal order imposed since the early 1980s. Labour, both organized and unorganized, has been at the centre of these recent dialectical dynamics that must be studied from a historical perspective.

Attacks on collective representation are at the centre of the neoliberal project. Pressured by capital and the strength of “market forces”, governments have been coercing and weakening trade unions for decades (Panitch and Swartz, 2003). The rise of precarity

and atypical forms of work (Castel, 2009) has led to a disarticulation between trade unions and their membership, challenging the traditional association between the labour movement and the working class (Gagnon, 2003). Even countries considered as “safe haven” for unions are reconsidering the role and legitimacy of these organizations (Pernot, 2005 ; Mahon, 1998). Many ways towards “renewal” have been put forward, from renewed alliances with other social movements (Clawson, 2003) to an internationalization of union activities (Harrod and O’Brien, 2002 ; Stevis and Boswell, 2008) to a more inclusive and democratic functioning (Camfield, 2011; Ross, 2008). Behind those analyses often appears the idea that the labour movement suffers from a broader ideological and political crisis that has had consequences which include impacts on its tactics and strategies. New patterns of social and political resistance give rise to McNally’s (2011:169-70) observation that perhaps we are seeing the start “of a coming together of working class communities that dramatically refashion the organizations in which they work – unions, community groups and social movements in particular – and in so doing generat[ing] new institutions of grassroots power”.

This special issue of *Labour, Capital and Society* brings together new and diverse voices and fresh perspectives on trade unions and other collective forms of workers’ organizing and resistance, alongside the rise of policies which extend precarity at local and global levels, focusing on the USA, El Salvador, Canada, Luxembourg and the EU. The articles here critically theorize these challenges and shifting contexts – for example, for day labourers and home-based childcare workers in the USA, to temporary agency workers in Canada, and vulnerable workers in El Salvador - and analyze forms of collective workers’ action, such as workers’ centres, community-union alliances, and the revitalization and radicalization of trade unions which fight for workplace justice and broader social change. In addition, this issue focuses on perspectives and contexts which are less explored, such as the dynamics of sociopolitical representation of migrant workers in Luxembourg. As well as exploring the organizing strategies of initiatives outside of the trade union movement, this special issue attends to union-community alliances (Black, Avendaño and Hiatt), and discusses trade union policy challenges as well as state regulation of labour migration and the political participation of migrant workers in the host country (Clement). In their articles, Purser (in the USA) and

Choudry and Henaway (in Canada) highlight not only the conditions and social relations which characterize “on-demand”/temporary agency staffing, but point to the structural and regulatory ambiguity of such triangular employment relationships, and the ways in which these discipline, contain and control vulnerable workers. From these struggles – with all their tensions and limitations - emerge possibilities to build and strengthen working class movements locally and internationally.

In one sense then, this special issue builds upon and complements the two most recent issues of LCS – Vol. 44: 1 on the formal/informal divide, and Vol 44:2 on the politics of organized labour and continues to interrogate themes associated with precarious work. It joins a growing body of literature which critically analyzes labour struggles, the transformation of work, and the role of the state in an era of what Justin Akers Chacón calls “neoliberal immigration” (2006: 90). These include Robyn Rodriguez’ (2010) critical ethnography of the Philippine state’s role in exporting its citizens as commodified labour, Voss and Bloemraad’s (2011) edited collection on the mobilization of immigrant and migrant workers in the spring of 2006, and Biju Mathew’s (2005) richly-textured examination of the structure of the New York taxi industry in the context of the city’s neoliberal transformation, and an engaged analysis of the struggles of mainly recent immigrant drivers to organize for justice and dignity. As Mathew (Ibid.: 146) contends: “In the age of globalization, the world is indeed becoming smaller and easier to traverse—for capital and for those who manage and represent its interests. But for those who labor, the nation and its borders have thicker walls. To them, national boundaries sometimes seem as formidable and impenetrable as the barbed wire surrounding a prison”.

This edition of *Labour, Capital and Society*, following Mathew (Ibid.), interrogates the “borders of globalization” and illuminates the shifting and increasingly precarious nature of work in the global North, not only for migrant workers from the South, but for other racialized communities— and, beyond this, the implications of such precarity for all workers. Indeed, temporary foreign-worker programs, day labour and multiple forms of labour brokerage are on the rise—and the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) shows few signs of slowing down the entry of undocumented immigrants from Mexico and Central America to

do the dirty, dangerous, and poorly paid but vital work that keeps much of the U.S. and Canadian economies going (Choudry, Hanley, Jordan, Shragge, & Stiegman, 2009). The current situation in Europe also shows how the traditional boundaries between the North and the South are being challenged. The drastic austerity measures imposed on many countries (in particular Portugal, Spain, Ireland and of course, Greece) mirror Structural Adjustment Programs that the International Monetary Fund (IMF) has used to “discipline” numerous Southern countries. The situation of increasing numbers of workers in Europe resembles the precarity that many workers in the South experience. Within, and among countries, the spread of precarity raises questions about conventional conceptions of “centre” and “periphery”. Indeed, at the same time as migrant and immigrant workers from the South are struggling to survive in crisis-hit European economies, many European workers are being pushed to seek jobs overseas as migrant workers themselves. The European Union (EU) as an economic and political union of 27 member states, is both a major Northern player and producer of a certain form of neoliberalism and of new definitions of what workers, wages and social policies should be. Thus, no thorough understanding of those dynamics at the global level can avoid a serious analysis of the evolution of European socio-economic policies. This special issue also discusses the challenges of foreign workers representation in an integrated economy (Clement).

Therefore, rather than conceptualizing the working conditions and struggles of racialized, migrant and immigrant workers in the North as peripheral or marginal, we contend that with the erosion of union power and the deregulation of the labour market, increasing numbers of all workers face precarity and uncertainty. Vosko (2000, 2010), for example, draws on a feminist political economy lens to trace the transition away from the ‘Standard Employment Relationship’ (SER), based on the pillars of a bilateral employment relationship between employee and employer, standardized working time and continuous employment. SER is already not the norm for many workers and therefore Vosko critiques SER-centric approaches to understanding the transformation of labour relations. Alongside this there are challenges for trade unions and other forms of working-class movements, which are sometimes community-based and/or built around worker self-organizing (see articles by Avendaño and Hiatt, Black, Vance, Choudry and Henaway).

We view precariousness as a continuum, concurring with scholars such as Vosko and Purser (in this issue) who eschew a dichotomous approach to labour precarity and what the latter, in this issue, understands as the “rapid-fire expansion of a heterogeneous and chronically insecure social class referred to as the precariat [i.e. precarious proletariat]”. Purser’s rich ethnographic work reveals the day-to-day workings of the brokered employment relationship at the heart of the growing “on-demand staffing” industry. Choudry and Henaway, grounded in their involvement in the work of the Immigrant Workers Centre, Montreal, focus on the context and conditions for temporary agency workers in Canada. Their article discusses the building of agency/immigrant and migrant worker leadership and independent organizations of agency workers in education and action campaigns against the practices of the thriving temporary recruitment agency industry in Quebec/Canada. They argue that these conditions and temporary agency workers’ struggles for labour justice and respect must be contextualized in relation to broader historical and contemporary trends in national and global labour, immigration and economic policymaking, as well as local/global networks of resistance driven largely by migrant and immigrant workers themselves which have emerged in recent years.

Avendaño and Hiatt base their article in their own work as two of the architects of the AFL-CIO’s Worker Centre initiative, sharing their perspective on the inside story of the AFL-CIO’s formal and informal partnerships with worker centres and their networks, which formally began in 2006. These include national networks and individual centres which organize day labourers, carwash workers, guestworkers, domestic workers and taxi drivers. As well as discussing some of the international aspects of this work, including support for workers’ centres in Mexico, on organizing campaigns, policy initiatives and legislative and other joint efforts, the authors ask whether this AFL-CIO initiative is building sustainable worker economic power and consider the impact it has on efforts to revitalize the labour movement in the USA.

Black discusses two union-led efforts to mitigate precarious employment in New York City’s home-based childcare sector, among a gendered and racialized workforce evaluating their strengths and limitations at a time of neoliberal austerity at municipal, state and federal levels. The first of these initiatives was led by the Consortium for Worker Education, a non-profit training and education

organization affiliated to the New York City Central Labour Council. The second was initiated by the community organization ACORN and the United Federation of Teachers. What, he asks, constitutes effective care worker mobilization in an age of austerity? Black suggests that in spite of some hard-won gains, home-based childcare workers still face multiple forms of employment precarity, and that building coalitions between care providers and consumers, as well as with other care workers, is crucial to improving conditions.

Vance's article brings together a discussion of worker self-organizing efforts among the labour precariat in two cities - Toronto and San Salvador - in the context of domestic state economic and social policies at national levels in Canada and El Salvador respectively as well as their places in the global economy. Cognizant of the differences in the geohistorical contexts of the two cities (and connected as they are through significant migration from South to North), through extensive interviews and macro-economic policy analysis Vance's article aims to inform the potential bases for unity to combine the power of labourers in precarious conditions with that of other sections of the working class. He argues that workers' experiences fighting against precarity can and do make important contributions to liberatory struggles of the working class.

Clement analyses an original case of migrant labour representation in the "Grande Région", a territory centered on Luxembourg with foreign workers coming mostly from Belgium, France and Germany. The article shows how even in a "developed" and highly economically integrated area, the issue of migrant labour representation remains a challenge. Even if institutions exist, such as the "Chambre des salariés", to represent those workers, they remain underused and poorly efficient. Initiatives taken by unions in the region seem more promising but remain limited in scope.

We believe this collection of original and thought-provoking articles will not only contribute to renewing research on the challenges faced by workers and their organizations today, but also open new paths for analysis and action. New voices have to be heard and engaged with. This issue of LCS is an important step in that direction.

Endnotes

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