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EDITORIAL

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The Global Disappearance of Decent Work? Precarity, Exploitation, and Work-Based Harms in the Neoliberal Era

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Abstract

This thematic issue offers an international perspective on precarious work and the social harms generated by such work. In the following introduction, we contextualise these trends in relation to entrenched neoliberal policy, rising contractual insecurity, the proliferation of borders, and other forms of institutional discrimination and inequality. We distinguish between formal contractual insecurity and the subjective experiences of precarity, interrogate the types of harms that accompany precarious work, and set out a social justice perspective for an engaged critique of precarious work. The collection is truly global in its scope, encompassing case studies from Bangladesh, China, Czechia, Ecuador, Finland, Italy, India, Jordan, Latvia, and Spain. These case studies draw out the diverse contexts for rising precarity, ranging from post-soviet, post-socialist, and neoliberal transitions to post-colonial and neocolonial contexts, examining how precarity is shaped by and interacts with divisions of ethnicity, migration status, gender, sexuality, and class. This thematic issue arises out of the work of the (In)Justice International Collective and is dedicated to the organization's founder, Dr. Simon Prideaux, who passed away in 2023.

Keywords

contractual insecurity; globalisation; multiplication of labour; neoliberalism; precarious work; precarity; social harms

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1. Introduction

This thematic issue brings together a series of articles on the nature of "global precarity" in work and employment—a seemingly universal phenomenon manifested in a variety of forms and producing a diversity of consequences (Shin et al., 2023). Processes regarding the global commodification of labour have opened up a discussion about the nature and constitution of precarity for workers around the world (Shin et al., 2023), firstly, in terms of its framing—low-wages, insecure contracts, absence of training and progression, lack of status, and exposure to a range of work-based harms (Lloyd, 2021; Scott, 2018)—and secondly regarding the nature of the social harm associated with and caused by work-based precarity. How can we conceptualise the physical, psychological, economic, and cultural impacts (Canning & Tombs, 2021) of precarious work?

These explorations are even more pertinent in the context of accelerating global labour commodification and historically entrenched neoliberal employment policy. Recent years have seen a stripping away of legislative and regulatory protections, increasingly rendering populations as insecure, "precarious," and disposable (Standing, 2011). We see globally that this ranges from migrants and ethnic minorities—where varying citizenship statuses and structural racism may relegate them to the fringes of the labour market (Anderson, 2010)—to young people, who may also face ineligibility for support mechanisms and a lack of opportunities in increasingly fractured and fragmented transitions to work (Formby, 2023; MacDonald & Marsh, 2005). Moreover, a lack of appropriate social policy responses to contemporary global challenges including the financial crisis of 2008 onwards, Covid-19, and post-pandemic inflationary pressures exacerbated by the conflict in Ukraine, ongoing neo-colonialism, and climate change, have left increasing numbers of workers facing uncertain futures.

Yet, we acknowledge that there is nothing new about "precarity." Much of the framing of the so-called "standard employment contract" fails to acknowledge that the security that accompanied the shift to social democracy in the colonial and neocolonial societies of the Global North persisted only for a few short decades in the aftermath of the Second World War and was never available to workers in the Global South, or to certain categories of workers in the metropoles (Hardy, 2021; Munck, 2013). More specifically, women and migrants were largely excluded from such contractual provision and social security support. Nevertheless, the diffusion of neoliberal politics centred on deregulation, privatisation, and "responsibilisation" has, to a significant degree, unpicked the security that existed for some workers in the Global North while leading (in combination with neo-colonialism) to greater informalisation, hyper-exploitation, and outward migration in the Global South (Standing, 2011).

In part this is a consequence of neoliberal structural adjustment (Harvey, 2005), capital restructuring, deregulation of labour markets and employment contracts (Lloyd, 2019), and attacks on organised labour (Gallas, 2015). But it is also linked to a proliferation of borders as an aspect of contemporary globalisation. These borders serve as a method of social division and *multiplication* (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013), carving up social and political space, while multiplying differences between categories of workers (citizen, guestworker, undocumented migrant), rendering them more vulnerable to exploitation and intensifying their rhythms and conditions of work. The consequent growth of global-work-based precarity has disproportionately exposed younger, ethnic minority, migrant, and working-class people to increasing insecurity, relegated to "gig work" or "bogus self-employment," zero-hour and fixed-term contracts, short-term agency work or "off

the books" employment within the informal or illegal economy (Formby, 2023; Shildrick et al., 2012; Wood, 2020).

There is also a need to consider that even where the trend towards increasing precarity is open to debate, in the strict sense of an increasing number of insecure and atypical contracts (Choonara, 2020), the wider gamut of neoliberal policies that are repressing wages, intensifying workloads, tearing up social security and fuelling attacks on trade unions are generating widespread *feelings* of precarity (Alberti et al., 2018, p. 449). This directs us towards an understanding of precariousness as lived experience, with precarity indicating the differential vulnerabilities and inequalities in social protection that groups of workers face (Millar, 2017).

In such a context, reflecting on the lived experience of precarity (linked to diverse and global labour markets), considering experiences of youth, ethnicity and migration status, gender and sexuality, disability, and class is integral. Such analyses are connected to questions of political economy, globalisation and "neoliberal statecraft" (Wacquant, 2009), the presence or absence of welfare systems that support people out of and into work (Jeffery et al., 2018), the class composition of workforces (Jeffery et al., in press), the freedom to operate and vitality (or otherwise) of labour movements that are capable of organising, supporting, and defending workers (Holgate, 2021), the role of technology in facilitating or inhibiting different forms of work (Delfanti, 2021), and the significance of culture and ideology in reproducing various workplace regimes.

Moreover, there is a need to recognise that the failure to address work-based "harms" is a matter of social injustice. As Pemberton (2016, p. 1) articulates, if social harms are "entirely preventable, a product of social relations that could be organised very differently to meet the needs of the many and not just the few"—the universal nature of work-based precarity (and associated harms that disproportionately impact underrepresented communities) raises the question of why and how employment and welfare regimes ignore and displace work-based harms.

2. The Thematic Issue

This collection of articles is deeply indebted to our friend and colleague Dr Simon Prideaux and his commitment to developing a global platform for raising and interrogating questions of social justice through the (In)Justice International network ((In)Justice International, 2023; Prideaux et al., 2023). Simon was a critical social scientist, whose interventions on disability policy (Prideaux et al., 2009), state crime (Monaghan & Prideaux, 2016), and political ideology (Prideaux, 2005) have had a significant impact across a range of academic disciplines. (In)Justice International, the organisation he helped create, has brought together social justice academics, activists, and practitioners from around the world to create a platform for social change, reflecting Simon's commitment as an academic activist seeking both utopian and practical interventions at global, national, and local scales. As a mentor, teacher, and researcher, Simon was inspired by his commitment to social justice—and his concomitant anger at forms of social injustice that undercut human dignity and fairness. He is deeply missed.

This thematic issue on the global disappearance of decent work explores themes of precarity and exploitation, labour conditions, globalization, policy and regulation, and agency and resistance. It also covers many of the topics that Simon advocated and fought for, including the rights of migrant workers, minoritised

ethnicities, the working class, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people, and all of those marginalised by the neoliberal assault.

The thematic issue is loosely organised into four sections: legal and political constructions of precarious work; subjective experiences of precarious work; ethnicity and migration in precarious work; and gender and sexuality in precarious work. However, we note that these are somewhat arbitrary distinctions, and most of the themes we have discussed above crosscut the entire collection (especially the way that those who are precarit*ised* often belong to minoritised ethnicities and are internal and transnational migrants).

Firstly, Seikkula's (2024) article explores the issue of precarious labour in the Finnish wild berry industry, focusing on the socio-legal aspects that facilitate short-term migration, primarily from Thailand, for the berry picking season. Since the initial recruitment of Thai citizens in 2005 to pick forest berries for the Finnish industry, the sector has increasingly relied on migrant labour. However, these pickers operate in a regulatory grey area, as they are categorized outside of Finland's labour laws and are thus an example of how border regimes produce precarious labour (Anderson, 2010; Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013). The article examines how this situation—where berry picking occurs without labour rights—has been justified at a policy level.

Lukeš Rybanská and Čada (2024) continue the discussion of legal and political constructions of precarious work. They explore the portrayal of self-employment in public policy discussions in Czechia, focusing on how political figures define self-employment and the moral implications of these definitions. Utilising critical discourse analysis and examining transcripts of parliamentary debates from 2021 to 2023, the authors uncover how lawmakers attach economic and moral meanings to the self-employed, depicting them as alternatively vulnerable (Henley, 2023), entrepreneurial (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2018) or deviant. These significations inform divergent policies aimed at supporting, encouraging, or regulating self-employment.

The following two articles centre on the subjective experiences of self-employment. In the first, Ronde (2024) looks at the insecurity of labour conditions within the humanitarian sector in Jordan. Drawing on a year of fieldwork in Amman, the capital city, and interviews with 39 aid professionals, she examines the experiences of national and international workers facing precarious employment situations. Embracing perspectives from feminist and decolonial scholars, the study views labour's entanglement with broader life spheres and explores precarity through an emotional lens (Ahmed, 2004). The article argues that the structural nature of this work engenders precarious subjectivities, manifested in feelings of stagnation, exhaustion, and paralysis.

Ķešāne and Spuriņa (2024) also explore first-hand experiences of precariousness, in this case in relation to food delivery workers in Riga, Latvia—a nation that has undergone significant neoliberal restructuring since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. This article goes beyond the existing research—largely centred on Western Europe and America—that has detailed the temporary nature of gig work, its lack of legal safeguards, and the imposition of algorithmic management. Instead, their article aims to understand why individuals opt for gig work despite its precariousness. Drawing on the distinction between precarity as a condition and precariousness as a subjective experience (Millar, 2017), the study, based on 56 in-depth interviews, develops an innovative typology to account for the full gamut of gig worker experiences, ranging from lifestyle choice to trap.

The following three articles explore how issues of ethnicity and migration interact with precarious work. Wang and Meng (2024) investigate the evolving landscape of employment relations within China's platform economy, amidst a global rise in non-standard employment arrangements. Through interviews with platform company managers and food delivery workers, their research sheds light on the emergence and evolution of precarious employment in post-socialist China. More specifically they explore the various labour arrangements that are applied to the largely internal migrant workforce of food delivery couriers. This leads to the important finding that is also these arrangements—and not simply the presence of algorithmic management—that serves to intensify (or "multiply"; Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013) the platform couriers' work.

Kalarivayil et al. (2024) also focus on the fate of an internal migrant community, in this case, the so-called Tea tribes of Assam. This refers to the workers from the tribal communities of West Bengal, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, and Orissa who were originally brought to the tea gardens of Assam as indentured labourers during the colonial period. Despite the post-colonial context, the working conditions of the tea gardens have become more precarious in recent decades as neoliberal reforms have led to under-investment and the driving down of terms and conditions. Utilising a spatialised concept of precarity (Banki, 2013) and aiming to correct for the predominance of Eurocentric analyses of precarity (Munck, 2013), the authors explore issues of tied-housing, wage structure, surveillance, and discrimination to elucidate the contemporary drivers of precarity in the tea gardens.

Célleri's (2024) study contributes to debates around differential inclusion in South–South Migration, and access to labour and social protection through the case study of young Venezuelan migrants and refugees in Ecuador. Despite initially adopting progressive policies in relation to this migrant group, a more restrictive approach has been in effect since 2019, which has created a complex dynamic of differential inclusion (Corrigan, 2014; Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013). Yet rather than understanding the young migrants and refugees as passive victims, the author draws upon the examples of four participants (taken from a larger ethnographic study) to explore their resilience strategies of accessing social provisions whilst coping with informality and irregular status, and the intensification of labour.

The fourth section explores precarity in relation to gender and sexuality. Firstly, Shewly et al. (2024) explore the experiences of precarity among female internal migrant workers in Bangladesh's ready-made garments (RMG) industry. In recent decades, the expansion of the RMG sector has drawn economically disadvantaged rural women away from traditional domestic and agricultural roles. These women, predominantly young and perceived as flexible labourers, are employed on low wages with limited union representation. Their status as "unskilled" workers within a gender-stratified labour market, compounded by socio-cultural power dynamics, constrains their ability to advocate for improved conditions effectively. Through in-depth ethnographic research in Dhaka and Gazipur, the article elucidates the complex interactions between global supply chains, insecure labour conditions, and gender norms (Bhaiya & Wieringa, 2007). It highlights the significant role of socio-cultural power dynamics in shaping the vulnerability experienced by female migrant workers.

Finally, Tomaselli (2024) investigates entangled intersectional experiences of precarity, including but also moving beyond the "big three" axes of inequality—gender, ethnicity, and race (Davis & Zarkov, 2017). More specifically, the article focuses on the challenges faced by women and LGBTQIA+ individuals who are part of ethnic minorities or migrant communities in accessing decent labour conditions. The article highlights how various social factors like age, class, and ethnicity, combine with discrimination and gender-based violence to

produce structural inequality and exploitation in the workplace. Using South Tyrol in Italy and Catalonia in Spain as case studies, both areas characterized by low unemployment rates and high migration, Tomaselli examines the intersectional dynamics at play.

3. Conclusion

Overall, this thematic issue adds to the emergent literature that locates and challenges global manifestations of work-based harms. Our contributions articulate and demonstrate both the extent and depth to which work-based harms impact underrepresented communities, their complex fluidity, and provide insight into welfare and policy responses (even in the context of the evident failures of social policy in most of these cases). We hope this collection helps frame novel and multifaceted understandings of social (in)justice and in-work precarity. Most of all, we hope those understandings provide stimulus to all those seeking to tackle work-based harm and who are fighting injustice and challenging precarity.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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