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Precarity and the working class

We're All Precarious Now

- Debate -

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Neoliberalism isn't a new concept any more. Using it, along with "deindustrialization," to describe changes in the core economies since the 1970s has become a kind of truism. But more recently, activists have started to consider what the implications of this regime of capital have been on class structure: is something fundamentally new and different happening? Does the condition of insecurity and fragmentation of labor change radical perspectives on the labor movement, invalidating strategies for trade unionism and reform?

What some have started to call "the precariat" is a concept that bundles together these feelings and theories, and is a term that has gained currency with many on the Left.

Charlie Post, author of the book [American Road to Capitalism](#), argues that "the precariat" is a misleading category for understanding the changes working people face today. This interview, conducted by Tessa Echeverria and Andrew Sernatinger for [Black Sheep Radio](#), discusses how radicals should relate to the existing labor movement and how our tactics should change in response to new economic conditions.

Let's start with some background. Can you tell us why socialists, communists, anarchists, and other radicals have traditionally been interested in organized labor?

I want to break that down into a couple of pieces. Historically, the socialist/communist left has been interested in the workplace and in the *industrial* working class: workers in manufacturing, transport, etc. That flows from an analysis that these workers have social power. Their work and the withholding of their labor is socially more disruptive to the operation of capitalist society than workers who work in stores, smaller workplaces, and the like.

Industrial workers also, because of their position in production, can develop a collective interest in a democratic collectivist socialist society. That's the foundational reason that Marxian socialists of various stripes, anarcho-syndicalists, and others have been focused on the workplace. Thus, the issue becomes the importance of organization at the workplace.

So are you distinguishing here between the "proletariat" and the working class in general?

Hal Draper [1] used that distinction. I generally want to talk about the distinction between industrial workers, those in manufacturing, transport, construction, telecommunication and the like, and workers in other areas of social life. Historically, the Marxian and anarcho-syndicalist left have always had a *strategic* focus among workers in industry, even though they've also been involved with teachers, hospital workers, and others.

There's also the understanding that without organization, even workers in large workplaces who have potential social power are not going to act in a class manner or become class conscious. Workers under capitalism have a dual existence: both as collective producers struggling against capital for control of the workplace, for hours and wages, but also workers compete with each other as sellers of labor power. [2]

This gives rise to what the early twentieth century Marxists used to call "sectional interests": divisions along the lines of race, citizenship, nationality, gender, sexuality, etc. So the question of the organization of the workplace first and foremost through the formation of militant, democratic unions has also been a historic focus.

Then there's the third element that really comes into debate in the course of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century for radicals and revolutionaries who are interested in organizing at the workplace and building consciousness: "How do we relate to the existing unions?" Because since the early twentieth century, the labor movement has been really dominated by top-down-run bureaucracies that are more interested in cutting deals with the bosses, often at the expense of their own members, than with actually struggling against the boss.

Before the First World War, the revolutionary left was all over the place. Some people said what we need to do is build revolutionary red unions; that was the response of anarcho-syndicalists with the [IWW](#) in the US. Other people said you have to work within the existing unions and build opposition to the bureaucratic leaderships. Still others said that you could somehow convince bureaucrats, trade union officials, to be more progressive.

Since probably the 1920s, the revolutionary left has mostly been aligned with that second position (opposition within existing unions). The reality is that workers in unorganized workplaces, when they begin to organize themselves and struggle against the bosses, they're going to first look to the existing unions to organize them and carry on the struggle. Thus revolutionaries and radicals need to relate to those existing unions, otherwise when workers start to move they'll be isolated from the activity.

Continuing with that we wanted to get into, how have radicals used tactics in organized labor to radicalize the workforce or to bring their socialism into the organizing? How do you see that changing as the structures of labor have been changing in the last few years? There's a different relationship to work and a different character of the workforce since the 1920s . . .

Right. The 1920s bear some superficial resemblance to today as only a small portion [\[3\]](#) of the workforce, mostly skilled, was unionized but in sharp decline, and the bureaucracies were cutting deals left and right.

By the 1930s revolutionaries had shifted towards the internal opposition strategy mostly, arguing that where these unions existed they had to relate to them, be members of them, argue for industrial unionism, etc. For workplaces that aren't organized, they should try to create non-majority unions "groups of workers who organize workplace actions over immediate grievances, recognizing the activists and organizers of these unions would for the most part be the radicals in that workplace.

In the late 1930s and early '40s, the Communist Party started to argue that as bankrupt and bureaucratic as the unions are, they needed to not only relate to the existing unions, but to find leaders who are progressives and support them. This would frame the position of most of the socialist left in the US toward the labor movement ever since.

So you get socialists who were incredibly enthusiastic about the election of John Sweeney [to be president of the AFL-CIO] in the early 1990s, believing that his rhetoric about organizing new groups of workers and immigrants was going to lead to the revitalization of the labor movement. [\[4\]](#) Later, a lot of radicals were interested in the model put forward by the Service Employees International Union under Andy Stern, because they were talking about organizing new groups of workers. Today we see the same thing with people trying to relate to local, progressive union officials through citywide central labor councils.

Unfortunately, many of these people who they want to relate to, while they're good on the war in Iraq or may say good things about health care, in the workplace these people carry out the same kind of policies of cooperating with the employers that the more conservative unions do.

We're All Precarious Now

Only a [relatively small current](#) on the US left in the last thirty or forty years has been committed to rebuilding militancy from below. What that looks like is building reform caucuses, the most successful being [Teamsters for a Democratic Union](#). Or in non-unionized workplaces, which are the vast majority of workplaces in the US, building non-majority unions – small groups acting like a union but without going through the National Labor Relations Board election process.

At this point, the percentage of the organized workforce is actually lower than it was before the right to bargain was won through the National Labor Relations Act. I think there's a lot of young people who see labor as important to the socialist project or at least to building a fighting element in the United States, but their argument is that there have been some substantial changes to the economy, and the concentrated industrial strategy doesn't apply anymore. They reference this thing called "the precariat," and I was wondering if you could introduce the concept and explain why it's something people find attractive.

The notion that there's the emergence of a new social class or a new layer in the working class is something that goes back to the beginning of the neoliberal offensive in the late 1970s or early '80s. The idea is that there's a category of people whose conditions of life are marked by short-term, temporary, part-time work, at lower-wages without social protections or benefits.

By the late 1980s, there were a number of French sociologists who were talking about "precarious" work. In the English-speaking world, the book that's attempted to make this argument most systematically is [The Precariat](#), by Guy Standing. What he's arguing is that the precariat is a distinct social class, separate from the working class. He defines the working class as the 1950s and '60s unionized working class in the industrialized world: people who had full-time employment, job security, who stayed with their employer for twenty or thirty years, who could not be hired or fired at will and the like. [5]

The precariat, according to him, is the growing number of people, particularly among youth and people of color, who are increasingly employed in non-union workplaces, and are part-time and most importantly to him precarious, short-term; people are constantly turning over jobs, moving from one job to another. Standing's argument, then, is that it is this layer, the precariat, who have a more radical potential.

The problem I have with this is that I'm not sure empirically the description of the precariat as a distinct, precariously employed sector of the working class, or even distinct class, is in fact accurate. There's a very good book by Kevin Doogan called [New Capitalism?](#) For the most part, it focuses on this issue of precarity.

On the one hand, there's been a clear growth in part-time work: in health care, retail and big box-type stores. But what he points out is that while all of these employers are using more part-time work so that they don't pay medical benefits or pensions, the work is very steady. People aren't working for only a few months, but rather are working sometimes ten or fifteen years for the same employer, and they just can't get full-time.

Doogan argues that the reason that the notion of the precariat has gained so much resonance is not because there's this growing number of people whose attachment to employment has become more precarious, or that there's a distinct group with distinct interests, but instead the defeats of the last thirty years, the rise of neoliberalism and the dismantling of the welfare state, have made the consequences of unemployment much more severe for workers today than they were in the postwar period.

When I was much younger, in my late teens and twenties, I was first radicalizing in the 1970s, and I had a lot of friends who'd get jobs at the post office or the Brooklyn Navy Yard. They knew that if they got laid off or fired for political activity, they could collect unemployment, get food stamps, probably get on Medicaid, or they could pick up

another job quickly. Since the successful neoliberal offensive, we have seen that it is much harder to get full-time employment that have social benefits, and in general the welfare benefits have degraded or disappeared.

The consequences [6] of getting laid off or fired today are much more severe today than they were just a few decades ago. This is what contributes to a growing sense of precariousness among all workers. That starts with workers who are so-called "privileged" with full-time jobs, down to those who are working part-time for Walmart with no prospect of a full-time job.

This has contributed, along with the series of defeats and declining organization of the workplace, to a growing sense that the objective social power that workers once had in this society has dissipated. This goes along with a tendency that many on the Left have had to believe that the relative decline in the percentage of the industrial working class is something new. They argue that there's a historic change in the history of capitalism.

The reality is that the percentage of workers employed industrially has been shrinking since the 1880s and 1890s! This is a result not of geographic mobility of capital leaving the core, but the result of mechanization.

We have seen a very sharp increase in mechanization and in speed-up, or "lean production" [7] — a hyper-scientific management where you break up jobs into very simple and repetitive operations, you eliminate or combine jobs, get people working even harder and faster. You get a situation where today more cars are produced in the United States than in any time over the last one hundred years, but with many fewer workers, and the percentage of those workers organized in unions is very small because of the employers' offensive.

So this notion of precarity goes along with the notion of deindustrialization. Unfortunately, it's also the argument of the trade union officials! What they say is that the reason the trade union movement is in such bad shape is that employers have broken the post-World War II social contract: they're no longer hiring us full-time, they're no longer giving us benefits, and they're moving to China. They say that instead of confronting the dead end of bureaucratic business unionism — reliance on the NLRB to maintain union density.

Do you have any thoughts on how people could use this common sense to guide them in action? How to organize some of these part-time or service jobs that lend themselves to the idea of the precariat?

The most useful way to use this concept is to do what [Richard Seymour](#), who runs the blog *Lenin's Tomb*, has done and say, "We're all precarious now." Deunionization, the neoliberal offensive means that all working people face precarious conditions of one sort or another. It's only through organization that we can begin to overcome this, with the recognition that a lot of the struggles of precarious workers are to become regularized and get full-time hours, job security, and benefits.

This means that those of us who are radicals need to bring in a strategic vision. There's been lots of discussion of how do you organize Walmart, which is the biggest retailer in the United States. Many of the unions who have been trying to do it have been going store by store. To be honest, my sense is while it's important and should not be given up, this will not be strategically central because no group of workers in these stores, even those employed regularly, has the social power to disrupt their operations and force Walmart to give in to something.

What's been interesting to me is that the United Electrical Workers, which has been one of the unions who have most done non-majority organizing, in their organizing they have focused on not the stores but the distribution centers: the places where all the crap comes in and goes out to maintain the just-in-time inventory systems. [8]

Those who are trying to figure out how to organize retail, industries where most people are today working, and we also want to reorganize the traditional industries: auto, rubber, transport, and the like. In order to do this, we need to do this strategically, and if young radicals are thinking about how to organize Walmart, you need to think is the key getting a job at a store or a distribution center? At the latter, a small, concerted group of radicals can make an impact to disrupt and bring the company to its knees for a short period of time and exercise more social power.

On the one hand, deskilling, fragmentation, speedup and greater precariousness for all workers has weakened workers. But other aspects, particularly in lean production [9] and just-in-time inventories, have given more power [10] to strategically placed groups of workers.

If people are serious about organizing Walmart, they should follow the UE's example of focusing on these distribution points, because if you can shut those down you shut down dozens of stores, not just a single one. For auto, think about key suppliers of certain parts. In transport, look at the elements of the transport network.

So what you're saying is that the natural resting place in capitalism for its workforce is a state of semi-precarity? Precariousness is not a distinct category or phase, and it's the conscious organizing of ordinary working people that combats precarity and puts stability in people's lives.

Exactly. If you look at the condition of workers before the First World War, say in the 1890s, the vast majority of working people lived an incredibly precarious existence. I was doing some research on skilled workers in Victorian England, the so-called labor aristocracy. Most of these people were working half the year, subject to long bouts of unemployment, and if they were out of work they could lose housing. You had some minor sections of the working class with what we think of as regular full-time work, but not many.

The sense of what most people alive today thought was "the norm," was actually the historical exception. The 1940s through the early 1970s was an exceptional period for working-class people in the industrialized countries. In the 1930s and 1940s, workers had posed a major political threat and forced capital to concede major reforms. Once the pressure of competition and profitability forces pushed capital in a different direction and they're not meeting resistance, then we go back to where we were in the 1880s and 1890s.

Could you talk about the approach that unions have been taking of putting pressure on city governments or state agencies in order to win labor reforms? The idea is that the workplace is too small or they don't have enough power, so they'll do it through the government. I wonder if you could get into this distinction of pressuring capital versus state agencies?

I should preface by saying I think that putting pressure on local governments for better labor standards is part of a repertoire of tools for organizing. It is a way for workers who are organizing to reach other to others in their communities.

However, the problem is that the American union officials, particularly United Food and Commercial Workers and the Service Employees International Union have been using this as a substitute for organizing at the workplace. It goes along with this idea that we're too weak at the workplace, so we're going to get the government to step in and regulate. This is part and parcel of the worldview of the trade union officials. They say, "We don't have to sit down, or occupy factories. We can rely on the labor board."

The reality is that unless workers are exercising some real social power there's no reason government officials should buck the people who finance their campaigns or "provide jobs in the community." Unless workers have this

workplace social power, their ability to win these local campaigns for government regulation is very limited.

If you look at many of the living-wage campaigns, where they have not been accompanied by concerted workplace action they've either been unsuccessful or the laws have been highly restricted or just unenforced.

There's a critique farther on the Left that the problem is the reliance on cooperation with the state. They identify Taft-Hartley and the NLRB as never making it possible to succeed in any real way. Their model tends to focus on the IWW and concerted illegality. Your position has tended to be somewhere in between there, and I was wondering if you could draw that all out? It's very understandable for people to say, "Look at how this has been stacked against us, so fuck the whole thing."

For the most part, that's a healthy reaction. But it's not a substitute for a real strategy. The problem is that it harkens back to the idea that in each isolated workplace, we have enough power to take on capital. It leaves open, how do you coordinate actions between workplaces?

Some of the Wobblies back in the 1980s were pointing to some Spanish dockworkers that had very strong organization, but because of their syndicalist influences didn't engage in nationwide bargaining. The problem was, as the employers became more aggressive, they pitted one group of militant dockworkers against another "threatening to move one port to another" and got them to agree to lower wages and gutted work rules.

The question is, how do you negotiate the interface between strong workplace organization and coordination in a democratic, bottom-up way? How do you use whatever rights workers have won historically, in terms of legality, to advance that?

There's a really good book that everyone interested in a better labor movement should be reading called [Reviving the Strike](#), by Joe Burns. He's written a very good and balanced framework for the National Relations framework and how it appeared to work in the boom years of the 1950s and 60s. But since that boom ended, employers have become more aggressive, and it has become more of a restriction to workers in unions to fight back.

He does not say that you should now ignore the NLRB, but he argues that unions have to be ready to break the law in a more systematic way: extend strikes, spread strikes, take illegal actions, go beyond jurisdictional boundaries, etc.

He talks there about people who have done non-majority actions: we build groups that act as though they're a union, organize around grievances, link up with other groups of workers in similar industries. But how to press for employer recognition? There the question becomes balancing maintaining real power and pressure from below, and then participating in NLRB elections. That's something the labor left needs to go back to, because the labor left has been polarized between those who say, "We'll just figure out a strategy to win NLRB elections" and those who say, "Fuck all this. We'll just organize individually."

How do you respond to people who find the notion of the precariat still very attractive? You've presented some very compelling arguments for why as a category the precariat maybe conceals more than it reveals, and the working class as a whole is experiencing more insecurity that leads to a general feeling of unease and precarity. But for those who aren't interested or able to leave behind a service or retail position, how would you think they should proceed?

On a broad level, I think it comes back to the argument that we're all precarious now. But I think you should go through the experience of organizing where you are. No one should be saying, "I told you so" about limitations, but

rather you should go through and consider, "What power do we have in the workplace where we are? Can we leverage that through our potentials and limits?"

It's part of an ongoing discussion of how to organize Walmart, or the big-box stores, home health care aids, nonunion hospitals and the like. Go through the experience and carry on the conversation about what it will take and what we can do in our organizing attempts.

If there's any group of people thinking about organizing their workplace, I'm the last person to say it's a waste of time. That's the kind of conservatism that's gotten the far left a bad name, and deservedly.

From [Jacobin](#).

[1] Hal Draper, [Marxism and the Trade Unions](#).

[2] Marxist Internet Archive, Glossary of Terms [labour](#).

[3] Irving Bernstein [The Lean Years
A History of the American Worker, 1920-1933](#).

[4] Jane Slaughter, Solidarity [John Sweeney's New-Old AFL-CIO](#).

[5] National Conference of State Legislatures [The At-Will Presumption and Exceptions to the Rule](#).

[6] *Monthly Review*, Michal Kalecki [Political Aspects of Full Employment](#).

[7] Charlie Post and Jane Slaughter, ["Lean Production: Why Work is Worse Than Ever, and What's the Alternative?"
A Solidarity Working Paper \(2000\)](#).

[8] UEW website [Warehouse Workers for Justice](#).

[9] Verso Books, Kim Moody [Workers in a Lean World: Unions in the International Economy](#).

[10] *Jacobin*, Jim Allen ["Studying Logistics"](#).