

Senior Editors' Note

This special issue of *International Labor & Working-Class History* revolves around “precarious labor,” a growing concern in both the Global North and South, as well as of increasing interest to scholars everywhere. In the mid-twentieth century, the progressive improvement in unionized worker incomes, benefits, and working conditions in the developed countries of the North led many to believe that this organized working class with a middle-class life style was the future for workers in the countries of the South as their economies industrialized and their societies modernized. This evolutionary vision was often associated politically with social democracy, socially with the welfare state, and contractually with the so-called “standard employment relationship.”

The growth of precarious labor in recent decades under neoliberal pressure, even in the North—the heartland of the standard employment relationship and the welfare state—is a disturbing sign that a middle-class life style for the workers of the world may not be the future after all. Some analysts have even argued that the replacement of the proletariat by the “precariat” is the new defining characteristic of our time.¹

As this issue of ILWCH makes clear, however, precarious labor is neither a new phenomenon nor solely a concern of the Global North. On the contrary, in most of the world for most of human history, precarious labor has been the norm, not the exception. Viewed in this longer historical perspective and from this broadened geographic vantage point, the working and living conditions of formal-sector workers in the Global North during the mid-twentieth century era of Fordism and the welfare state were atypical, not “standard.” Moreover, even in the Global North during the era of the “standard employment relationship,” women, undocumented immigrants, and ethnic and racial minorities were often excluded from its benefits and condemned to precarious labor in a society where many white male workers had transcended precarity.

This is clear from the first part of the special issue, three articles that explore the history and experience of precarious labor in South Africa, China/USA, and Italy.

In the first, Bridget Kenny traces the continuity of precarious work in South Africa’s retail sector back to the apartheid era and its “regimes of contract” and pass laws, concluding that race (and skill) defined precarious work in South Africa.

In the second, Tracy Zhang uses the case of skilled Chinese acrobats in former state companies to show how spatial mobility in a globalized service industry led to intensified job insecurity, low wages, and no labor rights, even as these performers starred in high-profile entertainments like Cirque du Soleil. Thirdly, Eloisa Betti reveals the gendered character of precarity in Italy

during the postwar era, evident in the exclusion of women (and especially migrant women workers) from the benefits of “standard” employment relationships that have survived in the post-Fordist era.

The second part of the special issue presents three case studies of solidarity and resistance to precarity. Marcel Paret compares the organizing strategies of low-wage workers in Gauteng, South Africa, and southern California, showing how workers moved away from wage demands to embracing community needs in South Africa and citizenship issues in California. Rina Agarwala then analyzes the innovative ways in which self-employed women workers in India have used cooperatives and organizations like the Self Employed Women’s Association (SEWA) to build power and press both for state welfare and a minimum wage based on piece rates. Lastly, the article by Hugo Sarmiento, Chris Tilly, Enrique de la Garza Toledo, and José Luis Gayosso Ramírez, compares street vendors and day laborers in Mexico and the USA, exploring their use of community-based organizations and political alliances to pursue both economic and political goals.

These six articles are preceded by an illuminating introduction to the special issue by its editors—Sarah Mosoetsa, Joel Stillerman, and Chris Tilly—that is a valuable contribution in itself. In addition to introducing the six articles that comprise the special issue, the editors survey the literature on precarious labor, analyze the different definitions of precarious labor, trace its historical development, and compare precarious work in the Global North and South. They also comment on sectoral differences in precarious labor and on intersectional precarity in theory and practice, emphasizing a focus on race, gender, and citizenship as significant factors that matter. These theoretical and historiographical discussions are accompanied by an extensive bibliography, which itself repays careful reading.

In short, this special issue on precarious labor is at once a perfect introduction to this important problem in labor studies and the world at large and a critical exploration of far-ranging case studies that call into question important conventional wisdoms.

The special issue is complemented by the rest of *ILWCH* 89, which includes a Classics Revisited piece by Marcel van der Linden, review essays by James Oakes and Sara Smith and a free-standing article by Dennie Oude-Nijhuis.

In his Classics Revisited feature, Marcel van der Linden recalls the path-breaking work of Robert Castel on the “social question” in the cities of an industrializing Europe in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, where both working and living conditions were precarious and the working class was considered a “dangerous class” by the elites. In particular, van der Linden focuses on Robert Castel’s 1995 book *Les métamorphoses de la question sociale*, an instant classic that has stood the test of time. Conscious of current debates, van der Linden rereads Castel through the lens of precarity and concludes that precarious labor is neither just a recent phenomenon nor a purely twenty-first-century problem—nor is the “social question” absent from our own time.

In addition, this issue features two review essays of books that focus on very different kinds of precarious labor: slavery and queer workers (including sex workers).

If a lack of control over one's working and living conditions is an index of precarious labor, arguably slave labor is the most precarious work of all. In a major review of four influential recent books on capitalism and slavery (and the US Civil War)—Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom*; Edward E. Baptist, *The Half That Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism*; Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: A Global History*; and Calvin Schermerhorn, *The Business of Slavery and the Rise of American Capitalism, 1815–1860*—James Oakes offers a nuanced critique that should be of great interest to *ILWCH* readers, but also to historians of US, Atlantic, and global history in general. His review essay should be of particular concern to scholars and students interested in the history of capitalism, slavery, commodities, the industrial revolution and the US Civil War. The books he reviews promise a fresh take on these much-studied subjects.

Sara Smith, on the other hand, reviews foundational books about a field that is still under construction, which she titles “Queer Labor History.” The books that she reviews—Allan Bérubé, *My Desire for History: Essays in Gay, Community, and Labor History*; Miriam Frank, *Out in the Union: A Labor History of Queer America*; Barry Reay, *New York Hustlers: Masculinity and Sex in Modern America*; and Phil Tiemeyer, *Plane Queer: Labor, Sexuality, and AIDS in the History of Male Flight Attendants*—are diverse in their subjects and styles but together sculpt the contours of an emerging subfield of labor history. It is also a subfield of the study of precarious labor. Queer labor is precarious because of the risk of exclusion and victimization. But some queer labor—sex work, for example—is particularly precarious because of risks of physical violence and/or sexually transmitted infections.

Even this issue's freestanding article, “The TUC and the Failure of Labour's Postwar Social Agenda” by Dennie Oude-Nijhuis, relates to the history of precarious labor. The author's intent was to write an article about the limitations of the welfare state in postwar Britain because of the opposition of occupationally based craft unions to any relative or absolute loss of income in the minimum wage and pension schemes proposed by the Labour government. Viewed through the lens of precarious labor, however, the article can be read as an account of the persistence of insecure employment and two-tiered benefits schemes even in the heartland of the first industrial revolution during the era of standard employment relations and the welfare state under a leftist government that wanted to end precarious labor by insuring all workers against the vagaries of the labor market and risky work. Moreover, these welfare measures were blocked not by the opposition of capital or the state, but rather by the actions of mainstream unions representing longtime union members, despite the fact that half of the workers they condemned to precarious labor were themselves union members.

Taken together, the articles and essays that comprise *ILWCH* 89 offer a varied and sophisticated introduction to and discussion of precarious labor, one of the salient issues of our time and increasingly a major focus of labor studies.

Franco Barchiesi, Prasannan Parthasarathi, and Peter Winn

NOTE

1. See, for example, Guy Standing, *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class* (London, 2011).