1. Introduction: globalization and precarious forms of production and employment: challenges for workers and unions

Carole Thornley, Steve Jefferys and Beatrice Appay

INTRODUCTION

When the collapse of one American finance house in September 2008 can set in train a process that the International Labour Organization (ILO) forecast led to 20 million people losing their jobs within a year, it is not surprising that globalization is now attracting an intense interest. Whilst economic globalization has been a tendency throughout the era of capitalist organization, the increases in its speed and spread in the last few decades,¹ aided by forms of new technology and global deregulation, have made research in this area ever more pressing. Production has nearly everywhere become a movable feast. It can be switched off and switched on, or relocated much more easily than ever in the past. With respect to production, a deepening deindustrialization process in the mature capitalist economies has seen important shifts of manufacturing and also some service activities to the newly industrializing countries (NICs), the former command economies within the Russian sphere of influence, India and China/South East Asia. Simultaneously wholesale shifts in governmental ideologies and policies have seen sweeping privatizations in both goods and services sectors, and a blurring of the public/private boundaries more generally. As a result of these processes, both production and employment are becoming systematically more precarious. While the main transmission mechanisms for these changes have been finance markets and transnational corporations (TNCs),² the employment effects of the increasing concentration of world economic power in a few tens of thousands of huge firms have been experienced everywhere: full-time permanent jobs that were the hallmark of industrial growth in the second half
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of the twentieth century are in decline; the legal status of ‘permanent’ is being challenged in some countries, while everywhere the ‘norm’ is shifting towards ‘flexible’, part-time, fixed term, temporary or agency jobs. Much of this work is now increasingly carried out by migrant workers, whether fully documented or partially documented. Labour market segmentation is on the increase. The challenges for labour organizations – and for citizens and democratic concepts – produced by this increasing precariousness of production and employment, the process and politics of which can be defined as ‘precarization’, are the core issues addressed in this book.

This collection of research monographs brings together a series of international contributions. While the editors are based in the UK and France and speak both English and French, with two of them having lived and worked for a time in the USA, the book’s contributors are based in North and South America, Europe and Australasia. One of the editors identified the shift towards precarization in the early 1990s. Chapters consider, from a number of viewpoints, the rapid changes in global production and employment systems being experienced currently in different parts of the world, as well as the implications for, and responses by, workers and their representative organizations. The chapters collectively encompass: new forms of production and working methods; the role and behaviour of TNCs; flexibility, insecurity, individualized and precarious work; individual and collective responses, including the role of trade unions; and ideological dimensions. Each chapter combines reviews of key contributions in the relevant literatures, while offering new reflections and research findings. The details of illustrative example and specific case studies employed within individual chapters draw on a full range of industries and sectors (manufacture [auto industry], services, agriculture, state and private).

The book does not lay claim to providing either a ‘textbook’ or ‘exhaustive’ coverage of countries or of themes. Its main contribution is in providing a reader with cross-disciplinary, up-to-date, specialist and innovative approaches – many of these from academics and researchers working in non-English-language environments whose work we proudly introduce to a wider international audience. While global, national or individual specificities are of interest in their own right, each contribution has been picked for its potential to cross boundaries and to offer insights and meaning for other contexts. It is hoped this volume will stimulate debate and further research around the concept of ‘precariousness’ – and worker responses – within a burgeoning literature on globalization that has tended to neglect these aspects.
THEMATIC PROGRESSION

The progression of the book as a whole, from macro (studies adopting a global perspective) through meso (studies looking at national elements and institutions impacted by the global) to micro (the micro-sociology of individuals, organizations and institutions), coincides to a degree with a passage through the above themes. But this structure is not intended to limit: some issues – most obviously, ideological dimensions of changes in production and employment – run through the whole, and at each stage individual contributions pay attention to cross-connections. In many respects, this corresponds to the intuitive: ‘precariousness’ may be something which is induced by global events and national actors but which may be experienced by individuals as an isolating and frightening life event. Equally, any resultant collective intervention may occur at any of these levels, and it is frequently the interaction between levels and actors which is in itself a focal point of interest for our contributors.

The book commences with a chapter by Nelson Lichtenstein (Chapter 2) which well illustrates the breadth and depth of our core theme, and brings home the vital nexus between the individual, the national and the global in experiences of precariousness. Lichtenstein explores precarious work and authoritarian management through a case study of the retail supremacy exhibited by the US-based Wal-Mart and its global supply chain, arguing that the nature of globalization has itself changed in the very recent past. For Lichtenstein, the retail giant’s global supply chain is anchored by largely female workers, both in the export zones of China, Central America or South Asia, and filling the sales stores: ‘In both instances, at both ends of the retail supply chain, work has become precarious: low paid, highly contingent, non-union, and with relatively few social protections.’ The conditions of work for both groups of workers and high turnover rates are graphically illustrated in this chapter, which concludes with a note on the politics which underlie such supply chains and a call for ‘humane and democratic’ reconstruction.

The theme of democracy – and the challenges for it – is addressed in Chapter 3 by Beatrice Appay in her wide-ranging exploration of ‘precarization’, the process by which production, employment and social protection are becoming more precarious. It confronts the issue of flexibility as contributing to legitimate unfavourable changes for workers. Appay traces the provenance of each conceptual tool and explores linkages with global production and employment regimes (including that of ‘lean production’) and the degradation of workers’ conditions – both ‘full-time’ and ‘casualized’. Drawing in particular from research in the USA and France, she then analyses new forms of union response and argues that these are
clearly a response to ‘precarization’ rather than a narrowly construed ‘casualization’. For Appay, the breadth and depth offered by this former concept, which ‘refers to the making of precariousness and the changing relations of power’, offers to the Anglo-Saxon corpus not only a more powerful analytical tool but also a potentially important tool for mobilization and social change.

Dan Coffey and Carole Thornley in Chapter 4 further explore global concepts and practices through a reconsideration of ‘production myths’ (including ‘lean production’) and their role in ideological legitimation of production and employment regimes that are antipathetic to workers’ interests. Employing case study material from the global automotive industry inter alia, they argue that there is little empirical support for either ‘post-Fordism’ or ‘lean production’ as these concepts are commonly used by academics, policy makers and practitioners, but that these concepts carry a powerful ‘baggage’ which becomes a mediating tool in the ideology of production and employment and which skews the terms of debate. Coffey and Thornley conclude that ‘new’ and global terminologies are ones which themselves require careful re-evaluation both for analytical reasons and to inform collective response to the increasing precariousness of production and employment.

The restructuring of TNCs in the global auto industry and collective negotiations aimed at reaching transnational agreements is then the very timely topic of Chapter 5 by Isabel da Costa and Udo Rehfeldt. After a review of the global provenance and significance of this trend to transnational agreements, the authors review the European situation, providing case study examples from Ford Europe, General Motors Europe and Daimler. They conclude that the recognition of the European and world works’ councils by these three companies is in itself an achievement, as is the further negotiation of European agreements with these new institutions for worker representation: trade union strength has been a ‘necessary’ if not ‘sufficient’ condition for this, but achievements are unlikely to be replicated in other sectors where unionism is weak, and a lack of clarity in European law and the recession and associated downward spiral of concessions to protect jobs may put gains at risk.

Chapter 6 by Sylvie Contrepois and Steve Jefferys moves us towards the meso-level and also focuses on the role of multinational corporations (MNCs) and trade unions, in a study focused on Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), drawing in particular on case study research in Bulgaria, Hungary and Poland. The authors explore the complex processes behind the performances of CEE10 trade unions as a result of changes before, during and after EU adhesion, and the increase in precariousness in all its forms which has gone further than in the rest of Europe. Contrepois
and Jefferys conclude that the evidence fully vindicates neither the ‘Euro-optimists’ nor the ‘Euro-pessimists’: ‘The overall context is one where greater job security for some of those who are fortunate enough to secure employment in the “globalized” sectors of CEE economies is counterbalanced by a huge extension of precarious working in the rest of their economies’, but it is early days.

Béatrice Mésini explores the experiences of migrant agricultural workers in Chapter 7. This chapter serves to act as a reminder of globally displaced labour in processes of globalization: the migrant workers here come from many different parts of the world, including CEE countries. Mésini’s chapter emanates from a study with a group of trade unions and other associations offering legal support for migrant workers in Southern France, and focuses on the legal precariousness suffered by these workers, and attendant poor conditions of work and security. The author argues that such legal precariousness is ‘sometimes purposely maintained’ with policies which (following Morice, 2004 and Morice and Michalon, 2009) act to produce ‘work without workers’ as well as an ‘injunction for forced mobility’.

Insecurity of employment is also the topic in Chapter 8 for Iain Campbell, who provides a detailed exploration of the rise in precarious work and union response in Australia. Campbell distinguishes two distinct but overlapping processes: the resurgence of certain forms of non-standard employment that are characterized by substandard rights and benefits; and the spread of precariousness within sections of what has usually been regarded as the core workforce, supposedly protected by a full-time ‘permanent’ employment contract. Research from a wide range of sectors is drawn upon to explore trade union responses, and Campbell concludes that ‘None has succeeded yet in reversing or even pausing the two processes that have been identified. Nevertheless, it is possible to detect at least a few promising initiatives and a certain amount of experimental energy.’

Chapter 9, by Isabelle Berrebi-Hoffmann, Michel Lallement, Martine Pernod-Lemattre and François Sarfati, explores the concept – and realities – of ‘hyper-flexibility’ in the IT sector, drawing examples from their research in France. The authors argue that the specificities of flexibility of IT work can only be understood if systems and interactions between actors are analysed simultaneously: sectoral firm strategies, the dynamics of transnational markets, and national industrial relations regulation. The authors find that the sector is in fact more characterized by an increasing concentration of production than by ‘start-up’ activity, with cost-cutting and ‘offshoring’ an increasingly important concomitant of global competition accompanied by increases in spatial and temporal flexibility requirements for workers. The authors conclude that the
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elastic quality of professional time and working conditions – which at a time of offshoring, many employees feel are getting harsher . . . – as well as relatively uncertain and muddy career perspectives . . . oblige us to paint a landscape which decidedly has little in common with the fascinating image drawn by the advocates of out-and-out flexibility. Even if the stability of the contract is still the rule in French IT services, the trend is towards a work intensification and harsher conditions for workers.

The ‘hyper-flexible’ worker, in the sense of a ‘master of his or her own destiny’, is seen to be a myth, and precariousness is here experienced in the form of working conditions rather than the form of employment per se.

Jens Thoemmes in Chapter 10 explores working-time flexibility and the increasing use of ‘market’ concepts in negotiations, through a study of company-level agreements in a region of Southern France. Thoemmes traces the shift in the regulation of working time by state, employers and trade unions from a preoccupation with the ‘health’ of workers to a preoccupation with ‘market’ flexibilities. However, in a chapter which carefully documents accommodations and changes over time, Thoemmes notes that such changes have involved ‘core’ workers rather than a shift towards a more ‘casualized’ workforce, and has also involved renegotiating important elements of employment protection. He concludes that new rules were only able to be established through the ‘organizing work’ effectively conducted by trade unions, and that this represents a form of ‘negotiated globalization’.

Juliana Frassa, Leticia Muñiz Terra and Alejandro Naclerio in Chapter 11 explore trade union responses to privatization and restructuring of production in Argentina in the 1990s through two case studies of state-owned companies: shipyards and oil. Their analysis focuses on company dynamics and environment at a time of Argentina’s economic structural transformation, and on the actors’ behaviour. For these authors, similarly to Thoemmes above, change here needs to be understood as a ‘collective creation process’ rather than as imposed by a political or economic environment. In each case, trade unions adopted different strategies to address the precariousness involved in restructuring. The authors conclude that the variables explaining the differential track records of the companies under study were the particular characteristic features of each company, the international climate of the sector, and the strategies developed by actors towards privatization policy.

Chapter 12 moves the discussion further towards the micro level. Heather Connolly draws on ethnographic research of the new French trade union SUD-Rail to analyse the ways in which some of the most vulnerable and precarious workers in the cleaning sector in France are organized and mobilized, in part through unions building on strategies
conducted in other countries such as the USA. Connolly notes that the organization and management of employment are based ‘on a quest for maximum flexibility in terms of variation in both employees’ working schedule and wages, as well as on external flexibility – by outsourcing . . . by compressing production costs to a minimum’. In a detailed and carefully argued piece, Connolly concludes that organizing strategies have been very successful, but mobilizing strategies rather less so. However, the turn towards organizing the most marginalized workers is ‘important for helping to limit the worst aspects of global capitalism’.

Rachid Bouchareb in Chapter 13 continues the exploration of the ‘continuing relevance of collective response’ in the face of growing power asymmetries and individualization through case studies involving interviews with individual workers and trade unionists in the small and medium enterprise (SME) sector in France: IT, retail and hotel/catering. Bouchareb notes that, despite diversity in the sectors, they have generally seen a rationalization trend in production which has produced new forms of both SMEs and precarious working. Employees are scattered and individualized in their work but there are a number of attempts at resistance and collective opposition: whilst employees are pushed towards more individualized forms of defence, such individualization does not take place ‘without reference to more collective frameworks available in society’.

Chapter 14 returns us to the auto industry. Alex de Ruyter, David Bailey and Michelle Mahdon offer an unusual insight into the ‘aftermath’ of global restructuring: in this case the closure of MG Rover in the UK. The authors focus on precariousness and labour market adjustment as this pertains to tenure, income and union representation, utilizing the findings of a longitudinal survey of ex-MGR workers and qualitative data obtained from interviews with ex-MGR workers and trade union representatives. The authors note that an initial labour market adjustment was relatively successful. However, ‘low pay and insecurity of tenure are now the norm for many in the workforce’, along with a ‘decline in representation security’ which raises issues about union renewal: pressing issues indeed in a context of global recession.

The book concludes with another unusual chapter, Chapter 15 by Patrick Chaskiel, which brings us full circle to Nelson Lichtenstein’s broader questioning of political, social and economic rationales and democracy. Chaskiel’s topic is the ‘politics of production’ in the French nuclear industry and the divergences between workers as producers and consumers and as ‘citizens’, with the dilemmas consequently posed for trade unions. Whilst workers here struggle with the usual work-related dilemmas, in part a consequence of economic globalization, they are also
impacted upon by the precariousness introduced by the ‘globalization of ecological protests’, which restricts the ‘breathing space of high-risk industrial firms’. Chaskiel notes that to the extent that ecological movements have ‘a general and universal claim, which abstracts from the monetary or politico-strategic requirements of the “system”, no collective bargaining is possible between civil society and decision makers . . . tensions run through unionism’. In concluding that trade unionism’ has focused for the main part on its traditional protection of the worker-consumer, and has left to other groups the role of citizen on environmental issues, Chaskiel notes that ‘The question is how far societal values are susceptible to coverage by unionism’: a vital challenge for the future.

In sum, our contributors collectively show the continued relevance and importance of collective response and broader social questioning of a rising precariousness of production and employment introduced by different forms of globalization. These crucially concern political and normative questions about democracy.

NOTES

We gratefully acknowledge the responsiveness of our contributors in the editing process. Our thanks also go to our editors at Edward Elgar for their help and patience.

1. An excellent introduction to economic globalization is provided in Dicken (2007).
2. Frequently backed or enabled by states.
4. There has been an increasing literature on international employment issues (varying in country coverage) – see, for example, Debrah and Smith (2001); Fairbrother and Rainnie (2005) on state and state employment; and the volume by Gazier and Bruggeman (2008). However, the thematic focus on ‘precariousness’ and worker response is a very distinctive feature of our contribution – its importance being also signified in the recent book by Vosko (2010) exploring the issues for international regulation.
5. The ten accession countries situated in Central and Eastern Europe.

REFERENCES