

Table of Contents

Is Precarity Enough? 1

Is Precarity Enough?

By Kidd McCarthy

Before the precariat came the mass worker. Kidd McCarthy puts precarity in historical perspective and challenges those working around the term to overcome their reproduction of existing power relations

The ChainWorkers CreW's call, 'Chain+Brain Workers Unite!' is bold, brash, and necessary for a reinvention of first person politics in the work place, but while ChainWorkers and BrainWorkers both share precarious work environments and social conditions, the precise conditions of their exploitation are critically different. The word precarious is difficult to properly translate into English, as in English it has a purely negative meaning. Webster's defines precarious as 'dependent on chance circumstances, unknown conditions, or uncertain developments; b: characterised by a lack of security or stability that threatens with danger.' This definition is an accurate characterisation of the working conditions of precarious labourers and a stark relief to the post World War Two socio-economic guarantees. These guarantees of wages tied to inflation, health care, housing, paid time off, unemployment insurance, and pensions were given to those workers who were deemed necessary, like the factory or mass workers, but were not given to students, part-time workers, and housewives. The past 30 years have been marked by a removal of these social guarantees from all working classes, and the fight to both retain and go beyond them.

In the United States, because of weak social movements and strong state repression, the protections of the welfare state were never as thorough compared to other industrialised countries. The removal of these social guarantees is much more advanced and complete than in other industrialised states. In 1999, when the founders of the CreW traveled in the US, they saw first hand what the reorganisation of waged work and the destruction of social safety net looked like, and knew that other industrialised countries, like Italy, would soon follow in a similar direction. The ChainCreW, composed predominantly of skilled media and technology workers and using the term 'precarious' to cover both skilled and unskilled labour, first organised in Milan as a web zine, and then expanded to include other actions and events. Since organising their first Mayday in 2001, they have used this day as their primary vehicle for defining and spreading their identity of precarity. I had the honour and privilege of working with ChainWorkers from the first meeting of 2004 to the first successful EuroMayday. In this article, I explain how the precarious identity was developed in both the Italian context and globally, and ask the question, 'Is the idea of precarity enough to honestly describe a wide variety of working experiences and bind us together to fight and to win?'

MAYDAY AS POST-MASS WORKER PROJECT

The project to dismantle the mass worker as the central object for labour struggles and place it on the shoulders of the more encompassing but diffuse idea of the precarious worker is an ambitious, yet necessary one. If we are to understand the precarious worker as a response to the mass worker, first we must understand the mass worker. The mass worker describes the generation of male, unskilled, assembly line workers of the gigantic factories that were first built in the 1900s but become ubiquitous after World War 2. In many places, Italy and the United States serving as two examples, this rise of the mass worker was accompanied by waves of internal migration from the rural south to the industrial north, and the firing of the female workforce that had entered the factories during World War 2. These massive factories, built for tens of thousands of workers, had many separate points of weakness that, when attacked concertedly, would halt the entire assembly line. During the global wave of struggles from roughly 1959-1977 factory workers were able to exploit these weaknesses. By using techniques such as checkerboard strikes organised on alternative days, lightning stoppages up and down the line, and the self-limitation of production, workers could collectively refuse to work, forcing factory bosses into negotiations.

From the mid-1970s, politicians and world leaders dismantled the controls imposed on capital by the Bretton Woods agreements', suspending the convertability of the dollar to gold (the gold standard).¹ With these controls gone and other shifts in the global economy, mass factories were replaced by smaller specialised factories, which were often moved to 'international' locations. New technologies facilitated automation in the factory and the factory worker became more disposable than ever before. Taken together these shifts dramatically changed the nature of the factory-based labour force. Fewer workers were required, and the ability for these corporations to transfer operations and financial capital to other locations meant they were much less vulnerable to protest, attack, sabotage, and pressure from inside the factory than before. With the overall decrease in the factory workforce, for the first time in generations, new generations would not be condemned to the factories, yet they faced the insecurity of having no guarantees of long-term employment or financial security. This insecurity and constant turnover was a dramatic change from working one job for thirty years, which not only provided a form of economic security but also a solid social identity. Once, the expectation was to get a job and keep that job or employer until retirement. Now, being part of a 'flexible' work force means having six or seven careers in a lifetime. Without an expectation that any of these jobs will be held for long, identity has become more grounded in life outside of work, life outside of work being both more self-managed and secure than waged work. It also meant that since workers are unable to disrupt production using classic methods, workers would have to develop new strategies to force factory owners and investors to negotiate and/or capitulate.

The destruction of the manufacturing base has been accompanied by the stagnation of wages and the rise in working hours. The United States and England are two telling examples. In the United States, the average two parent, middle income family now works 16 more weeks per year than in 1979², and the workforce in the US in 2002 worked five more weeks a year than Germany.³ 20 years after British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher broke the miners' union, British workers now work more hours a year than anyone else in the European Union.⁴ Yet, despite the destruction of the manufacturing base, the mass worker still remains the central figure in the work force in the western world.

THE ABSENCE OF A CRITIQUE OF SOCIAL POWER

The CreW lacks an analysis of power and how it functions across lines of race, gender, class, and sexuality. Because Italy is relatively racially homogeneous, issues of class and gender are of prime importance. Directly related to gender is the invisibility of domestic work. In fact, globally, most people are not even 'wage labourers', but actually work for no wages. Most people perform the work of basic work necessary for day to day living and social reproduction: cooking, cleaning, childcare, tasks that in other words encompass the wide range of basic labour that is usually considered 'woman's work'. No analysis of wage labour can be complete without an analysis of unwaged labour. This glaring blind spot colours solutions like a 'social wage' or 'income for all'.⁵ Through the co-optation of feminist struggles in the 1960s and '70s, the home has been transformed from what was usually a place of patriarchal domination to what is now another site for wage labour.

BRAIN OVER CHAIN

BrainWorkers are creators, writers, artists, musicians, programmers; people who are hired not for their general labour but for specialised skills or their creativity. Though their time and creativity is stolen from them and sold back to us all as commodities, as software programs, movies, jingles, and advertising clips, they are more socially respected and able to command higher wages. In comparison to ChainWorkers, BrainWorkers have much greater control over their working conditions. The very nature of the work makes it impossible to Taylorise⁶ and there is more flexibility at work to use the time directly as they wish. This is impossible for the ChainWorkers of Walmart, Starbucks, McDonald's, etc. They are automatons and the only thing they have to sell is their labour. With the introduction of computerisation and the commodification of all forms of information, an extreme form of rationalisation pervades the entire workplace: hamburgers are now measured in 15-minute blocks, and keystrokes are measured by the hour. For ChainWorkers, there is all the discipline of the factory

with none of the interdependency and vulnerabilities which formerly allowed workers to fight back.

CONCLUSION

The CreW, being a very media-savvy organisation, has been able to change the terms of the debate about work in Italy. However, issues around social power remain formally unaddressed and despite the call for unity, BrainWorkers dominate the group. The CreW operates as a relatively closed group, intervening in the work place from the outside, encouraging workers to assert their rights and to make contact with the self-managed unions in Italy. Perhaps, instead of treating all forms of labour insecurity and exploitation as the same, it might be more effective for ChainWorkers as an organisation to empower chainworkers by transmitting its skills and tactics in creating media, so that ChainWorkers can control their own struggles. And, perhaps, we activists in the English-speaking world can join the debate around precarity and begin to grasp how waged labour has changed over the last 30 years, so we can challenge and destroy it.

This is an edited version, of a text that originally appeared on the website of Greenpepper Magazine <http://www.greenpeppermagazine.org/process/tiki-index.php?page=Contrarian+Article>

FOOTNOTES

¹ The Bretton Woods system of international economic management was set up at the end of World War 2. A chief feature was the maintenance of fixed exchange rate between currencies back by (US) gold reserves. [Mute editor: For a fuller analysis of the significance of the end of dollar-gold convertability see Michael Hudson's book 'Super Imperialism'. Free download at:

<http://www.soilandhealth.org/03sov/0303critic/0303socialcriticism.html>]

² http://www.epinet.org/content.cfm/newsroom_releases_swa090102

³ International Labour Organisation:

<http://www.ilo.org/public/english/employment/strat/kilm/kilm06.htm> or CNN:

<http://www.cnn.com/2001/CAREER/trends/08/30/ilo.study/>

⁴ <http://money.guardian.co.uk/work/story/0,1456,1256144,00.html>

⁵ Dating back to the late '60s, the idea of a 'social wage' or 'income for all' was theorised by Italian far left groups to challenge the immediate hierarchies of skill and command found in wage labour and to uncouple income from productivity.

⁶ Taylorism or the theory of Scientific Management, is the theory that there is a most efficient way to do any task. In this view the workers are machines to be reprogrammed with better and more efficient instructions.

Kidd McKarthy is the author of this text. It is published under a licence granting the rights to copy, distribute, display, and perform the work. You are also free to make derivative works, under the following conditions: you must give the original author credit; You may not use this work for commercial purposes; If you alter, transform, or build upon a text, you may distribute the resulting work only under a license identical to this one. Thanks to Alan and Steve. For their history and insights, written and otherwise