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Precarious, Precarisation, Precariat?

ByThe Frassanito Network

Impacts, traps and challenges of a complex term and its relationship to migration

I. Precarious literally means unsure, uncertain, difficult, delicate. As a political term it refers to living and working conditions without any guarantees: for example the precarious residential status of migrants and refugees, or the precariousness of everyday life for single mothers. Since the early 1980s the term has been used more and more in relation to labour. Precarious work refers to all possible forms of insecure, non-guaranteed, flexible exploitation: from illegalised, seasonal and temporary employment to homework, flex- and temp-work, to subcontractors, freelancers, or so called self-employed persons.

II. Precarisation at work means a growing transformation from guaranteed, permanent employment to less well paid and more insecure jobs. On a historical and global scale, however, precarious work is not exceptional. In fact the idea of a generalisation of so-called guaranteed working conditions was itself a short lived myth of the 'welfare state' era. In the global South, in eastern Europe, as well as for most women and migrants in the north – altogether the great majority of the global population –, precarious working conditions were and are the norm. Precarisation describes moreover the crisis of established institutions, which represented for that short period the framework of (false) certainties. It is an analytical term for a process and hints at a new quality of societal labour. Labour and social life, production and reproduction cannot be separated anymore, and this leads to a more comprehensive definition of precarisation: the uncertainty of all circumstances in the material and immaterial conditions of life of living labour under contemporary capitalism. For example: wage level and working conditions are connected with a distribution of tasks, which is determined by gender and ethnic roles; residence status determines access to the labour market or to medical care. The whole ensemble of social relations seems to be on the move.

III. Precariat, an allusion to proletariat, meanwhile is used as a combative self-description in order to emphasise the subjective and utopian moments of precarisation. Through the mass refusal of gender roles, of factory work, and of the command of labour over life, precarisation has, in fact, a double face: it is possible to speak indeed of a kind of flexibilisation from below. Precarisation is not simply an invention of the command centres of capital: it is also a reaction to the insurgency and new mobility of living labour, and in this sense it can be understood as the attempt to recapture manifold struggles and refusals in order to establish new conditions of exploitation of labour and valorisation of capital.

Precarisation thus symbolises a contested field: a field in which the attempt to start a new cycle of exploitation also meets desires and subjective behaviors which express the refusal of the old, so-called fordist regime of labour and the search for another, better – we might even say, more flexible – life. However, we think that, as a new term of struggle, precariat runs into an old trap if it aims at a quick unification and creation of a dominant social actor. The Precariat has potential to become a farce, if, because of the increasing involvement of leftist activists in precarious labour and life conditions, the radical left tries to legitimise itself as the main force in its representation. But the real point is that, taking into account the hierarchies which shape the composition of contemporary living labour (from illegalised migrant janitors to temp-working computer freaks), the strong diversity of social movements and their respective demands and desires, nobody should simplify precarisation into a new identity. We are confronted here with the problem of imagining a process of political subjectivation in which different subject positions can cooperate in the production of a new common ground of struggle without sacrificing the peculiarity of demands that arise from the very composition of living labour.

In these conditions, we think that precarisation, as a complex and contested process, can offer a frame:

- to bring different subjects into an intensified exchange, on a social as well as on a political level;
- to mediate contradictions and even concurrences within respective realities;
- to pick out comprehensive questions as common themes.

We are thinking of a process based on the autonomy of various struggles, which fosters the communication between struggles, which invents new forms of cooperation and which opens new fields.

IV. Particularly because migrants experience all the above mentioned forms of depreciation and precarisation of contemporary work, and particularly because mobility is their answer through and against borders and identities, they manifest in their subjective conditions all the main characteristics which shape modern labour as a whole. In their subject position a common ground of the existence of social labour today finds a peculiar expression. To talk about migrant labour means to talk about a general tendency of labour to mobility, to diversity, to deep changes, which is already affecting – although with different degrees of intensity – all workers. Because of the possible extension of these conditions we speak of the political centrality of migrants' work. The position of migrants represents the social anticipation of a political option to struggle against the general development of labour as it is being extended to the whole of society and the whole life of all people. At the same time, we are aware that migrant labour as well as precarious labour doesn't represent a homogeneous subject: the process of subjectivation we are talking about is a process which must go through migrant labour itself, and which can be fostered by an increasing communication with other struggles and with the demands of other sections of contemporary living labour.

The Frassanito Network <frassainfo@kein.org> was named after an area in Puglia, Southern Italy, where a NoBorder camp was held in summer 2003. The network shares a conception of migration as social movement and sees migrants' struggles as crucial to the development of the whole global movement