

Reviews

Nice Work if You Can Get It: Life and Labor in Precarious Times

Andrew Ross

NEW YORK UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2009

New Capitalism? The Transformation of Work

Kevin Doogan

POLITY PRESS, 2009

Reviewed by Nicola Smith

Since the start of the recent recession thousands of workers have lost their jobs, and as this year progresses many more will continue to face real risks of redundancy. The downturn has led to rising rates of underemployment, and temporary jobs are also on the increase. Work certainly looks and feels much less secure than it was two years ago.

The recession has also exacerbated existing labour market trends. Those with the lowest skills are now even more likely to face unemployment; young people face ever higher risks of worklessness; and older people who lose their jobs are increasingly less likely to find new ones. The gap between male and female employment rates continues to shrink; the most rapid reductions in jobs have been in manufacturing; and part-time employment continues to grow.

But although working people's risk of unemployment has certainly increased over the last two years, has this been part of a longer-term move towards greater job insecurity across developed economies? This contentious question lies at the heart of these two publications.

Andrew Ross outlines the existence of a global 'precariat', describing the 'march of contingency' into sectors including the creative and knowledge-based industries. He talks of an unprecedented scale of labour and capital mobility where new technologies play an integral part in the rise in off-shoring as jobs move around the world. For Ross, it is the 'increasingly small minority' who can now expect any form of job security. His narrative describes the ongoing flight of US manufacturing jobs to the developing world and the creation of a situation where 'no one' can expect fixed patterns of employment as a result of an 'explosion' of atypical work arrangements (a category which Ross takes to include part-time employment) and a reduction in long-term tenure – trends that have been accompanied and supported by a reduction in social welfare and union contracts. Ross holds that growth in corporate-driven globalisation, deregulation, subcontracting and

outsourcing has led to work becoming increasingly characterised by long-hours, reduced employee autonomy and declining job security. This is described as a 'flexploitation' that hits both professional knowledge workers and migrant labourers alike.

Ross therefore suggests the need for increased solidarity between the global North and South, arguing that both migrants and 'formal employees in select high-wage and low-wage sectors' increasingly find themselves in a 'precarious work-life environment'. He is keen to encourage 'cross class alliances', which will require organisers to 'understand, and build on, the experience of precarity as a central element of people's lives'. He believes that 'if the labor movement is to be a resurgent force on the new landscape of irregular work, then the most precarious may have to be accorded moral, and ultimately organisational, leadership under cross-class coalitions'.

This selection of essays provide a descriptive account of recent social and economic changes which have impacted on creative and academic work. For example he discusses the failures of government's creative industries policies to create secure creative jobs; the damaging impact that corporate assertions of intellectual property have had on the livelihoods of creative workers in the developing world; and the ways in which the marketisation of education has eroded 'the stable professional securities of a teaching career'. It all amounts to a critique of the role of government and corporate forces in creating an increasingly neo-liberal market economy where creative work has lost its potential to provide meaningful self-actualising employment, and is instead characterised by extreme and pervasive risk and uncertainty.

Nice Work is an interesting and wide-ranging read, and in particular the chapter that considers the gap between the rhetoric and reality of Olympic-based regeneration provides a pertinent warning about the risks that legacy strategies face. But as a comprehensive and accurate analysis of contemporary working conditions it doesn't stack up: while modern, often de-regulated, labour markets are characterised by constant change, the statistical reality is that job *tenure* is not falling, and permanent work remains the predominant form of employment relationship (albeit not in some creative industries and in parts of academia).

Ross's conclusion is where Kevin Doogan starts. A detailed analysis both of the narratives of 'new capitalism', and their substantive content, reaches the unambiguous conclusion that 'when researchers go in search of job instability it is fairly elusive. Certainly there are sectors of the economy that have declined and groups of people and communities whose lives have been blighted by layoffs and redundancies ... however there is little support for any broad generalisation of a decline in job stability that would support the Cassandran pronouncements about the end of salaried employment'.

Doogan's comprehensive statistical analysis includes a number of pertinent conclusions. Over both the short (pre-recession) and long terms, there has been a significant shift towards greater job retention in Europe and North America. While there are sectors in which long-term jobs have been lost, these losses have affected a minority of the workforce and do not indicate a relationship between the 'new economy' and insecurity – on the contrary 'the fastest growing sectors increasing prioritise labour retention'. The significance of temporary employment practices has been elevated far beyond its actual scale – where it has increased, it is often a consequence of national economic factors (such as the share of agricultural labour or an expansion in public employment programmes that provide temporary work), rather than global drivers.

His critique covers the full spectrum of 'new capitalism' discourse. For example, while

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recognising the role that technology plays in allowing the development of new forms of corporate organisation, he refutes the premise that technology is the driving force behind global labour market change. And while taking account of the increased role of multinational corporations, he demonstrates that the extent of their transnationality and mobility is often overstated. He also identifies the tendency of many contemporary narratives to conflate part-time and temporary work in their descriptions of the 'flexiworkforce', showing that part-time jobs are no less likely than full-time employment to be permanent in nature, and that involuntary part-time work affects the minority of the part-time workforce (a fact which, despite the recession, is still true in the UK today, where despite significant increases in underemployment only 10 per cent of women and 25 per cent of men in part-time work would rather be working full-time hours).

Nevertheless, numerous studies show that many people do feel more insecure at work today than they used to, regardless of what data on job tenure tell us about actual risks of unemployment. Doogan therefore acknowledges that while insecurity can be a property of jobs themselves, it is also an effect of the environment in which jobs exist, and of workers' subjective experiences. An increase in corporate mergers and acquisitions, the impact of the 90s recession on white collar workers – who previously felt more secure – and media coverage suggesting the inherent precariousness of employment are all held responsible for the new narrative of persistent insecurity.

Doogan argues that this perception serves the interests of the employers seeking to create more compliant workforces. He therefore warns against talking up the problem of insecure jobs, implicating trade unions and the left in contributing towards the overstatement of workplace insecurity and 'mainstreaming' what are in fact minority experiences. This, he believes, inadvertently adds support to the neo-liberal attempt to undermine labour, validating a discourse that hands responsibility for job quality and security to unpredictable and uncontrollable markets and fails to recognise the value that companies really place upon labour retention. The 'new capitalism' is an ideological offensive that is not reflected in the reality of the labour market's operation.

It is certainly true that the very worst insecurity is experienced by the minority at the bottom of the labour market, as the recently published report of the Equality and Human Rights Commission into conditions in the UK's meat and poultry processing sector dramatically illustrates. There are no politically motivated assertions here, only hard evidence that out of a sample of 260 agency workers, 80 per cent said that they received worse treatment than permanent staff. In qualitative testimony, workers reported experiences that ranged from being woken up by employment agency staff who had entered their homes to require them to work on their days off, to being sent home without work. Insecurity for these workers is combined with extreme mistreatment – including verbal and physical abuse, and health and safety violations: some women told researchers that they were forced to remain on the production lines while experiencing heavy periods, meaning that they bled onto their clothes.

Stamping out such exploitation, and increasing employment security (not least through modernising the UK's complex law on employment status, which consigns the minority of workers without 'employee' status to far poorer and more insecure conditions) needs to be a political priority, and trade unions will make no apologies for fighting to highlight the conditions these workers face.

But is the left overstating the case for wider precariousness at work – and are workers who report high levels of insecurity only doing so as a consequence of the

growth in corporate mergers and increased media fascination with the promotion of a less secure world? It's certainly true that these factors play a part. But wider labour market and regulatory change has also had a real effect on people's experiences of work, an area which perhaps, given the depth of his analysis in other areas, Doogan does not discuss enough.

Families today are in far more debt and are more reliant on credit than in previous generations – and when people's financial responsibilities are greater, the risks of job loss rise. Relative to earnings the real terms value of unemployment benefits is at a historic low (Jobseekers' Allowance is around 13 per cent of median earnings now, compared to around 30 per cent in the 80s, and the amount of redundancy pay that can be received before tax has been frozen since 1989). And there is also evidence that the relative pay people receive when re-entering the labour market after unemployment is lower than it once was – the cost of job loss is likely to be higher today than in previous decades. Such low-benefit, de-regulated Anglo-Saxon labour markets leave workers more vulnerable to economic shocks than countries that have followed the Scandinavian flexicurity model of greater employment protection – workers in the UK are right to fear recessions (and while unemployment has risen less than expected during this downturn, rates of increase have been far lower in some better protected European nations).

There has also been change in the types of jobs that many can expect to do. The evidence base on job polarisation continues to grow, demonstrating that while jobs in the 'middle' have declined, the respective shares of high- and low-wage work have increased. The TUC has shown that in recent decades those who remain on median incomes have not done well, experiencing low pay growth and a loss of real purchasing power. For a significant group of workers, lower trade union density (in part a consequence of ongoing labour market de-regulation), rising inequality and consequent falling social mobility have led to poorer terms and conditions than would once have been achievable. It is quite plausible that such a decline in job quality and earnings potential has led workers to feel insecure about their future prospects.

Both these books provide interesting insights into the contemporary labour market. While Doogan provides a strong analysis of the factual reality, he spends less time on workers' subjective experiences – experiences that Ross has arguably generalised his narrative from. And although Doogan is correct to call on wage bargainers to recognise the limits of new capitalist discourse, and refrain from overstating the problem, it is also important to recognise, as Ross does, that unions today are operating on new ground and that labour markets have changed. Supply chains are longer, large numbers of jobs in the well-unionised manufacturing sectors have been lost and markets are less regulated – for example, despite a modest re-regulation of the labour market, the Labour government in the UK has taken little positive action to extend the coverage of collective bargaining, with trade union recognition contingent upon workplace membership of above 50 per cent. Building a fairer labour market will require new union organising solutions, but is also dependent on governments acting to provide better employment protection and improved out-of-work support, and upon the development of a new understanding of the positive contribution that modern unions can make to workplaces and to economic prosperity.

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