The Nomad, the Displaced and the Settler

Work in the 21st century

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In many countries there has been a debate as to the nature of the changes in western workplaces; in Britain they talk about increased casualisation of the workforce, in the US they talk about contingent labour and on the European continent they use the language of precarity. Central to in all these debates is the issue of job insecurity.

A number of issues are being discussed. Firstly has the workplace changed fundamentally such that people increasingly are in temporary work rather than permanent work? Secondly is the division between work time and non-work time dissolving, are we spending more of our lives 'in work'? Thirdly are the non-work aspects of life becoming increasingly insecure?

In this article I argue that the world of work has changed, yet it has also stayed the same. There has been a decline in the numbers working in manufacturing jobs, and an increase in numbers working in the service industry. There have also been the creation of totally new occupations based around computer work. However, it is also the same in that there has always been fragmentation within the workforce. There has always been a diversity of experiences. What is important is that we identify the different workplace realities that exist and that we develop strategies that allow us to address a variety of struggles.

The end of a job for life?

As mentioned above, many accounts of today's workplace concentrate on the job insecurity and the end of a job for life. Yet the argument that work in the private sector is more insecure now, implies that in the past work was more secure. However the idea of a job for life, is an idea that held true for a very specific time, place and workforce. The economic boom that followed the Second World War and lasted until the oil crisis of the 1970s was perhaps rather unique. It led to the growth of mass manufacturing in certain areas in certain western countries. In northwest Europe this industrial region stretched from the English midlands, to Northern France, Belgium and Southern Holland, to the Ruhr area of Germany with some isolated pockets in Northwest Italy and Southern Sweden. In North America a similar industrial region existed in the north-east, also based on the mass production of cars, machinery and domestic appliances. Those employed in these huge factories became known as the 'mass worker'. The rise of the welfare state, and employment in the public sector paralleled the growth in mass manufacturing.

Sociologist Colin Crouch describes the idea of a job for life that existed here as the 'mid century compromise'[1], that is, there was the expectation that in return for a commitment to the employer, men would receive job security. Permanency and mass workplaces facilitated union growth and power. In Michael Moore's first film 'Roger and Me', he showed how the manufacturing belt had turned to rust, and depicted the enormous social cost of the destruction of this dream.

However it is worth making a number of points. While the job for life (for the blue collar worker) or career (for the white collar worker) was a realistic expectation for some, it was not a realistic expectation for all. For example in the Republic of Ireland, with almost no manufacturing base, emigration rather than job-stability was the norm and remained the norm almost until the Celtic Tiger boom of the 1990s[2]. Similarly for most women the expectation was that after marriage, work in the home would replace paid employment and indeed until 1977 in the Irish civil service this expectation was formulised by the marriage bar which required women to leave

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[1] The only exception to the trend toward emigration was the period after we joined the EU in the 1970s.
[2] Crouch, C. (1999). Social Change in Western Europe. Oxford, Oxford University Press

work once they got married. Even in industrialised nations not all workers experienced job security. For example in the UK in the 1960s only half of all male workers and two thirds of all female workers had been in the same employer for more than 5 years[3]. Many occupations, such as dock work, construction and domestic work have always been insecure. So the job security, which many nostalgically refer to, was never a reality for all.

Is job instability increasing?

So much for then, what about now? It is very difficult to get exact data on job stability in the workplace. Certainly there has been an increase in part-time work and this is often cited as evidence of an increasing insecurity in the workplace. The mid-century compromise was based on male full-time workers, not female part-time workers. Until very recently part-time work was associated with fewer benefits than full-time. However recent EU directives are aimed at reducing this discrimination[4]. Furthermore, part-time work is not necessarily temporary work. It is not necessarily insecure.

Another way of measuring job stability is to look at those in long term employment, however definitive data on job stability is difficult to find. Researcher Kevin Doogan, using European Labour Force data argues that contrary to received wisdom, the number of people working long term (that is more than ten years for a single employer) has actually increased in most European countries. Yet he also shows, citing European social attitude data, that across the occupations, there is a growing sense of insecurity. So here there seems to be a contradiction, on one hand there is more job security, on the other, there is a sense of foreboding about the future.

Why do people feel more insecure?

There are a number of factors that can account for this. Firstly, with the dismantling of the welfare state, the cost of losing one's job is increasing. In the US the popular saying goes 'you are only two pay packets from the gutter'. In January 2005 the Irish Central Bank noted that for the first time ever, borrowing had exceeded incomes. Our economic growth has been accompanied by increased house prices, which has forced people to live further and further from the cities and become increasingly dependant on private transport in order to get to work, shops, hospitals etc. In addition our health service fails to meet basic needs. While there has been a huge increase in the number of women in paid employment, there is almost no support for childcare or care of the sick and elderly (jobs that traditionally were the responsibility of women working in the home), Increasingly many of the services which were previously provided by the state are now being charged for. The introduction of a waste collection charge is to be followed by a water tax. Electricity, gas, telephone and transport costs have all increased in recent years and unless further privatisation is successfully resisted, are likely to increase even further. Job loss therefore might also mean losing one's house or having to watch an elderly parent being denied adequate

[3] Stimpson, Alex (2004) Mobility in the eEconomy

[4] Richard, Greg (2001) Mobility in the European tourism sector The role of transparency and recognition of vocational qualifications, Cedefop Panorama series, Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, 2001

health care for lack of money. It is these fears that cause even the most secure employee to feel anxious for the future.

Secondly, Kevin Doogan argues that in the private sector this is the era of outsourcing and mergers. Employees find their employers changing about them and are left unsure as to what their position is within these ever changing organisations. This process of re-structuring is mirrored in the public sector. Most recently in Ireland the public sector has introduced Benchmarking and has altered their organisational structure in a way that has left many unsure as to where (or whether) their job will be in the future. In the past, for those with a job for life, the future was secure and dependable. These days the future seems more uncertain and unpredictable (though this may be more perception than reality).

What have we lost?

Returning to the death of the mid-century compromise, why was job-stability for the few important and why is its death lamented? To the Marxist organisations, whether they be revolutionary or reformist, in the mass worker could be found the revolutionary subject. That is, here was a section of the working class[5] whose industrial strength and organisational capabilities could be mobilised to bring about political change (whether that be a welfare state or a revolutionary society). Though the anarchist perspective doesn't seek to identify any particular sub-section of the working class who will 'lead' the rest, we have to be aware what we have lost in the end of the mid-century compromise.

Where workers expect to be spending a considerable proportion of their lives in the same workplace, it is in their interests to improve the terms and conditions of their workplace as best as they can. Collective organisation is based on relationships and trusts built up over time. It is not surprising therefore that these mass workers built strong trade unions and were able to exercise considerable industrial and political power. Their demands contributed to the creation of the welfare state. For those others working in more normal, unstable conditions, the mass worker provided the good example, the alternative, the example of workplace power which could inspire those working in less permanent jobs. With the mass worker came a rhetoric of rights and expectations, which even if it did not hold true for all, provided an important challenge to the power of capitalism.

Yet, it can also be argued that the job for life is a limited demand, in that work was/is often mundane, boring and tedious. In itself there is no liberation from capitalist control over our lives. It places limitations on the ways in which capitalism exploited us, but it does not challenge the servitude itself (as the slogan goes, 'bigger cages, longer chains).

It is also true that, despite the expectations of many in the traditional left, many workers embrace job flexibility and impermeancy because it gives them the opportunity to either modify their working conditions or to reduce the role of work within their lives. This can particularly be seen in Ireland in those working in the Information Technology sector (ICT). These workers are a very small, yet fast growing segment of the Irish working class (7.5% of all jobs are within the ICT sector). It is a sector in which there are skill shortages and high job mobility. Put

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[5] By working class, I mean the majority who do not own the means of production and therefore have the most to gain by the destruction of capitalism. I'm not defining class in terms of occupation or income level. As the discussion outlines, the working class is not a particularly homogeneous or unified group.

simply, if people are unhappy with their working conditions, they leave and move to a new (and hopefully better) position. It is worth noting that although there are no reliable figures on the numbers working on temporary contract it seems that in Ireland numbers working in contract positions has decreased within this sector. This is a mobility from permanent position to permanent position, a mobility that is chosen and not forced, that is not based on insecurity. While it is difficult to get statistics on over all job-mobility, case studies indicate that there is also high job turnover among less highly-skilled occupations for example, high job turnover has been reported among those working in the hotel and restaurant sector.

There are a number of points worth making here. Firstly, embracing flexibility in this case is as much a strategy as the mass workers' call for job security. Here we have the difference between nomads, and settlers in that while settlers have a long-term interest in improving the place they have settled in, nomads seek improvement via exit. The settlers solution is collective, the nomads individualistic. Secondly, the nomadic strategy makes sense only in very particular economic conditions. Ireland in 2005 has very low unemployment, and many sectors experience skill shortages. It is these particular economic conditions that switch the balance of forces, such that employers are willing to offer security, while employees are rejecting it. Thirdly, the risks are minimised where there is a welfare state to soften the blow. It is within this context, that government policy seeks to redress the balance in favour of the employers, as we have seen above, by increasing the gamble that workers take when they move between jobs.

Lastly whereas there has been a tendency to speak of the mass worker as if that was the experience of work for all in the post 1960s, there is also a tendency to speak of the workplace today as if the experience of particular countries (the US and the UK) reflects the experiences of all. From the above it is obvious that the experience of job stability and instability is not the same for all. Different countries have different levels of social welfare provision, legal protection and unemployment rates; and even within countries, instability can be experienced differently. For example the illegal immigrant worker in Dublin had a very different experience of impermanence than does the software worker mentioned above. For some job mobility is an often successful strategy to improve working conditions borne out of labour market strength or resting on the welfare state's safety net. For others it has the exact opposite effect. It is imposed, unwanted and arises out of employers strength and employee weakness. Here the end of a 'job for life' represents a significant defeat for the working class.

How do we develop strategies?

So what are the implications of this diversity of experience? Can we develop a strategy that encompasses those who jump, those who are pushed and those who stay; the nomad, the displaced and the besieged settler.

One approach to the issue of organising is to try and identify which category of worker will fill the shoes left vacant by the demise of the mass worker. Some focus on the two sectors that have been the fastest growing in Europe, the expansion of those working in the knowledge economy and the rise of the service sector. The difficulty is that, firstly these are sectors that have very different experiences of work, expectations, problems and needs. Beyond the fact that both are paid labourers, it is hard to see what is gained by trying to establish a one-size-fits all strategy that can be applied to both of these groups (or should that read, one size fits nobody). Secondly,

there doesn't seem to be any practical rationale for elevating the experiences of these groups of workers, above the experiences of more traditional workers. We shouldn't be blinded by the shiny and new at the expense of the old and dusty.

This may seem like a trivial point, but we do need to be aware that there is a political legacy that seeks to identify the 'leading sector' of the working class, a legacy which runs counter to the anarchist ideal of a revolution in which power is exercised and held by all in society. The elevation of the mass worker, full-time and male, came hand in hand with the marginalising of the experiences of the woman worker, the part-time worker, the woman working in the home, the unemployed, etc. We shouldn't repeat this mistake. Instead we need to identify the diversity of experiences, and develop multiple strategies that address this variety, and ways of writing which can highlight the experiences of some without excluding the experiences of others. And when for reasons of limited resources, we focus our organisational efforts on one group we need to be clear that our decision to do this is driven only by pragmatism.

Politics is global and local

The first thing we need to do is be aware both of global influences and the local particularities which create the stage we revolutionaries act upon. The second thing we need to do is, within these structures, identify the problems and opportunities within different sections of the working class mentioned above, the displaced, the settlers and the nomads. In doing this we are identifying areas of struggle because we want to both improve our position in the here and now, and to build the confidence and skills among our class and the sense of collectivity that will be necessary to overthrow capitalism.

For example, what is the structure of the Irish political and economic environment? As in many countries, the Irish economy is increasingly globalised (indeed Ireland is cited as one of the most globalised economies in the world[6]). Also as in many countries the ruling party in Ireland (Fianna Fail) has adopted a strongly neo-liberal agenda, an agenda which is dismantling a welfare state. Unlike many European countries, we have never had strong social democratic legacy so that our experience diverges from those in Northern Europe and in the UK in that our welfare state has always been weaker. Fianna Fail is a party that has, since the founding of the state in the 1920s, successfully managed to sell itself both as the party of the working class and of big business. Despite multiple corruption scandals it is extremely good at getting itself re-elected. Ireland diverges from its own history (and also from other European countries) in that the last ten years have seen sustained growth in the economy, skill shortages, enormous decreases in unemployment and immigration instead of emigration. Finally, and possibly the factor which has presented the most difficult to us, and has coloured much of what I am going to say below, is that for almost twenty years the major trade unions have participated in social partnership[7]. This has resulted, for the most part, in stagnant, conservative unions, who have been incapable of capitalising on our economic growth and have atrophied at the shop-floor or grassroots level (the phrase 'couldn't organise a piss-up in a brewery' comes to mind). In the final section of this

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[6] Ireland ranked as the most globalised of 62 states due to exports. Irish Times. Dublin. 8th of January

[7] Social partnership refers to the arrangement whereby the government, the business organisations and the trade-unions come to centralised agreements on a range of industrial issues, including wage increases. This means that that there is very little trade union activity at the workplace level.

article, I look at the different segments of the Irish working class in order to identify possible areas of struggle and opportunity.

The Displaced

Firstly we have the displaced. By this I mean the temporary or insecure worker, what sociologists refer to the peripheral labour force. They are hired and fired according to the whims of the market place. These are the low skilled, the low paid, the woman worker, the young worker, the student and the illegal. In terms of time, here the issue is the increased unpredictability and fragmentation of working hours that comes with working shifts and Sundays.

A key need here is security and protection from the vagaries of the employer and the market. The trade union movement should provide this protection, but here we meet the first shadow of partnership. The experience of unionising has not been positive in Ireland in recent years. Although there have been a few successes in terms of campaigns for trade union recognition[8], there has also been a string of defeats[9] which reflected a failure on behalf of the union bureaucracy to fight seriously on this issue. At a partnership level the unions have failed to win the legal right to union recognition[10]. In other instances, once recognition has been won it has only been in the short term. On one hand the employers have managed to isolate and exclude trade union activists, on the other, as partnership has destroyed the local life of the union, the membership see less and less reason to actually belong to the union and membership gradually erodes over time.[11] Finally, high turnover within the sector brings with it all the difficulties of creating a sense of collective identity, solidarity and power within a frequently changing group.

The difficulties are considerable, how do we overcome this isolation and at the same time change the trade union movement in Ireland? This is a problem we have been struggling with, and we have not found any easy answers. In face of such difficulties there could be the temptation to avoid a union focus altogether, yet unions provide the stable support which temporary workers need. Without a union, as activists we would be condemned to a life of continually re-inventing the wheel, continually fighting the same battles over contracts, working hours, pay, working conditions while providing a worse service than our existing unions.

Yet there are some strategies that can be adopted. One is to build networks which work both within and between the trade unions. A first step in this process is to, through our propaganda, highlight the similarities of experiences that exist within these groups, break down the isolating effects of the workplace and of temporariness, to build a sense of collective identity. To those not in unions we can raise awareness of rights that already exist. We can provide encouragement and support when trying to unionise. And critically, after unionising is successful, we can use the networks to force our unions to respond to our demands. It is sometimes assumed, in error, that unions are incapable of organising the transient worker. In a sense we are recreating the struggles of the early trade unions, such as the ITGWU, a century ago.

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[8] The defence of the unions right to negotiate in the retail shop Dunnes Stores

[9] Ryan Air, Nolans Transport, Pat the Baker.

[10] While anyone has a legal right to join in Ireland, there is no legal requirement on behalf of the employer to negotiate (ie there is very weak legal support for the right to join a trade union).

[11] For example, this occurred in the archaeology sector.

The Settlers

The second groups of workers I referred to above are the settlers, those who are in long term, stable employment. These are often unionised, yet thanks to partnership, rarely involved in union struggles. Within the WSM, the attempt to build networks within the unions is not a new strategy, and to be frank, we have found it extremely difficult. We have been most successful when we have addressed this section of the workforce, not in the workplace, but on issues outside the workplace. So for example we fought against the imposition of the water charges (successfully), the bin tax (unsuccessfully) and will probably be faced with another anti-water charge campaign in the new future. However, despite the difficulty in building a grassroots trade union movement, it is not a strategy we should abandon in favour of a focus outside the workplace. Union work is very dependent on having people in the workplaces at the time when disputes occur. Though the level of workplace struggle has decreased, occasionally conflicts do emerge. We can't control whether we are going to be in any particular workplace at the right time or place, but if the opportunity does arise for political activity, it would be foolish not to capitalise on it.

The Nomad

Finally, we reach the nomad, the highly skilled, highly paid worker whose mobility reflects labour market strength. The unions here have even less appeal. Partnership pay rises of 3–5% per annum (barely in line with inflation) represent a pay cut to those who can expect 10% rise on switching jobs. Even the dot com crash did little to dent their security as it was relatively short lived and many received redundancy packages far in excess of the statutory minimum. It is also a sector in which the dream of getting rich quick and thus escaping work altogether is particularly widespread. Within the workplace, these are difficult to mobilise. However there are aspects of their working conditions which cause tensions. In terms of time, here the issue is an increased vulnerability to long working hours and the ending of the separation between work time and non-work time (for example being on call, that is carrying a mobile phone during non-work hours and being forced to return to the workplace is the need arises).[12]

A more central time issue, which affects both the settler and the nomad, may be the erosion of 'free time' caused by long commuting hours as people are forced to move further and further in search of affordable housing and the government's prioritising of private transport over public transport.

Whether it be in a computer company or in a supermarket, people co-operate, communicate and work together to create an enormous range of services and goods, the services and goods that fundamentally alter our lives. In a very real sense, the world is of our making. Though most of us are in one way or another part of this enormous collaborative effort, we do not have ownership of our workplaces, we do not have control over what we do. Despite the cooperation that occurs daily, an increasing sense of isolation seems to be the hallmark of contemporary society. This is a contradiction that creates enormous barriers to those of us who are trying to change society, contradictions that we have to find some way to overcome. However there is no point in adopting a one strategy suits all approach, no point in prioritising one field of struggle

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[12] Though a significant proportion resist and working hours in this sector are lower than those in the UK and US.

above all; instead we need to struggle both in the workplace and between workplaces, in our unions and between our unions.

Workplace struggle is often seen in a narrow sense as struggle that occurs only within the walls of the factory, shop or office. Yet if we look at the early trade union movement we see examples of workplace organisation been conducted hand in hand with organising outside the workplace. For example, a number of years ago I conducted a piece of research on Irish dockworkers.

As part of this research I came across magazine known as The Waterfront, which was produced by one of the dockers' unions in the 1960s. Its by-line proclaimed, that this was 'the paper for the port, produced for the workers, by the workers'. Not only did it seek to present the port workers' side of the story; but they also employed three doctors, introduced a sick and medical pay scheme for all port workers, men and women, Christmas savings schemes and children's scholarship schemes. They arranged socials and cultural events (interestingly this was a Catholic union, so these events often centred around the church — a tactic we aren't likely to copy). Many of the articles were aimed at creating the type of solidaritistic identity that we now take for granted. Here was a trade union that managed to organise one of the most insecure workforces, and did so by engaging dockers on a number of different levels; on the docks, in the communities and culturally.

As fragmentation of the workplace continues, we need to examine again strategies such as these. We need to adopt a variety of tactics, some will address the settler, some the displaced, some the nomad, and we need to create networks that will link the struggles of all. In the end the question we must answer is where can we win, because few things are more powerful than victory.

Work in Ireland

Alex Foti of the Italian Chainworkers group coined the term Chainworkers and Brainworkers to describe new types of work. By Chainworkers he means the 'workers in malls, shopping centres, hypermarkets, and in the myriad of jobs of logistics and selling in the metropolis'. By Brainworkers he means the knowledge workers, the programmers, the creatives and the freelancers. How do these categories pan out in the Irish labour market?[13]

In 1996, just over 3 million people were over the age of15. Of those just over 1.8 million or 58% were in the labour force (i.e. either working, looking for their first job or unemployed). A third of these workers lived in the greater Dublin area. Of those not considered part of the labour force, 34% were working in the home, 27% were students, 25% were retired, and 10% were not in the labour force due to illness of disability.

The big change in Ireland in the last 10 years had been the rapid increase in the number of women in paid employment. Female participation rates rose rapidly from 36.5% to 47.9% during the 1995–2000 period (The EU average in 2000 was 46.9%). Not surprisingly this has been mirrored by a drop in the numbers of women working in the home, from 661, 510 in 1986 to 417, 663 in 2002.

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[13] Data from the 1996 census as reported in Proinsias Breathnach (2002) 'Social Polarisation in the Post-Fordist Informational Economy: Ireland in International Context', Irish Journal of Sociology, Vol 11.1

The largest category of workers are indeed the Chainworkers, the unskilled workers concentrated in manufacturing and the service sector (these accounted for almost a third of the Irish labour force). Those in personal services (the waitresses, the cleaners etc) experienced the highest growth rate of any occupation (their numbers grew by 49.7%).

However the second largest category are the blue collar workers found in manufacturing, construction and the drivers. These account for almost 20% of the Irish labour force. Finally the third largest group, are also in a more traditional form of employment, those employed in the public sector (13.5%). So a third of the Irish labour force are employed in the 'newer' service occupations, while a third are in more traditional fields.

How about the Brainworkers? These are a relatively small percentage of workers, representing 7.6% of the labour force. However they are also the category of workers that has experienced the second greatest rate of growth (their numbers grew by 35.6%).

These figures highlight that the numbers of displaced and nomads are growing, but also that a significant proportion of those working in Ireland, continue to be settlers. This has implications for the type of propaganda we produce and the struggles we are active in.

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