

# **Focus On Precarity**

Workers Solidarity Movement

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## An Introduction to a Word

Precarity is a term synonymous with precariousness. It is perhaps best conceived as chronic insecurity. In recent times with the dismantling of the welfare state, the destruction of social security, workers' existence is becoming more and more insecure. Precarity is a term that has been developed to describe these changes and the new form of working class existence that has developed due to them.

The term is used in particular to refer to the demise of the job-for-life and job security. In this sense it is closely linked to the process of casualisation. For anti-capitalists the significance of these changes has been quite large. The social-democratic/mass trade union model of working class action does not seem fit to deal with this new situation. The level of union membership in the working class is continuously on the decrease. This decrease in union membership is, unfortunately, not being replaced with any new form of workplace organisation.

The difficulties posed by organising precarious workers have led the trade union movement to, for the most part, abandon these workers. Precarious workers, those who are most in need of protection and organisation are today the least organised.

As many anti-capitalist activists are precarious workers, the issue of precarity is one that has been widely debated within the international anti-capitalist movement.

Some hold that it is a completely new phenomenon, while other hold that it is a return to what existed before the exceptional period of Keynesian capitalism, or social-democracy. Still others question whether the 'job for life' ever existed for the mass of society.<sup>1</sup>

Part of the whole debate about precarity is driven by those who once identified industrial workers as the vanguard of revolutionary change, and who now see precarious workers as fulfilling this role. While this may not be a particularly useful analysis, we should not ignore the question of how to organise these workers.

Here we offer a few samples of what is happening around this issue of precarity. We open with an article by James Redmond on some attempts by Irish libertarians to engage with this issue. He discusses the 'Get Up, Stand Up' campaign which attempted to direct some of the anti-capitalist energy thrown up by the 'anti-globalisation' movement into grassroots workplace organising. He also writes about the Polish Temp Workers Defence Committee and the struggle in the Tesco distribution centre and how our involvement in organising solidarity with those workers raised issues about the content of the 'Get Up, Stand Up' campaign. We follow this with an article by a member of the British anarchist group, the WOMBLES, and a T&G (Transport and General Workers Union) activist on the organising drive taken up by the T&G. He discusses both the potentials and limitations of this model of union organizing for activists. This model is based on that developed by the SEIU (Service Employees International Union) on the States. The SEIU's new attention to organising has led to them being the major driving force behind the Change to Win Coalition, which split from the AFL-CIO last September. The final article, by Alan Mac Simoin, a WSM member and SIPTU activist, discusses this split, its significance and its limitations.

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<sup>1</sup> For a detailed look at work in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century see 'The Nomad, the Displaced and the Settler: Work in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century' in *Red & Black Revolution* 9.

## Ireland: Get Up, Stand Up

Over the past year there has been an emerging preoccupation among anarchists and socialists with precarity as it's an expression of a new work discipline imposed by neo-liberalism. Already there have been several precarity forums in European cities aimed at etching out a sense of the identities formed through the shared experience of the demands of job market flexibility.

There have also been five successive years of Euromayday parades across Europe calling for "flexicurity." None of this escaped the notice of Irish activists. In Ireland, the WSM has so far been involved in two campaigns that can be linked to the issue. Our members were involved in providing solidarity to a group of Polish temp workers in an attempt to highlight the exploitative use of agency staff by Tesco, and also in giving out information on workplace and union rights in the *Get Up, Stand Up* Campaign.

The *Get Up, Stand Up* initiative emerged from discussions between members of the Workers Solidarity Movement, Irish Socialist Network, Independent Workers Union and other individuals in order to spread information on unions and workplace rights to the largely unorganised sectors of the main retail streets and malls in Dublin city centre.

Starting off on Mayday 2005, the campaign distributed over 5,000 multilingual leaflets containing information on basic employment rights and union contact details, directly to workers in high street shops and shopping centres. The campaign also played another role, by attempting to revitalise the idea that workers and bosses have nothing in common. We argued that this manifests itself most clearly in the need for distinctly worker based organisations like unions.

The campaign also offered an alternative to the spectacular and short term strategies that characterised much of the recent anti-capitalist era. It was at this level that the precarity discussions were most influential, allowing ourselves to reevaluate the class relationship as well as increasing our political work that is more closely related to our own everyday experiences. Speaking of ourselves as part of a class, instead of as an activist community and develop coping mechanisms which can strengthen and broaden the appeal of our politics as a result of this recognition.

Already there is a wealth of statutory bodies who give out information on workplace rights; equally the unions should be taking a much more proactive approach to this work. In a sense the campaign just ended up substituting itself for these bodies, with no real sense of going beyond and developing a coherent and valid criticism of them. Eventually dialogue within the campaign revolved around questions of what shopping centre should be leafleted next. The ability to learn from the activity we were engaged in was sidelined for the safety of a campaign of information dispersion, with the campaign's aesthetics speaking of one thing but the form of the campaign remaining very much short sighted.

Later in the summer and independently of *Get Up, Stand Up* contact was made with a group of young Polish workers, who were facing into protests with management of a Tesco distribution centre in Greenhills. Coming from a background in militant politics, these workers took the initiative to use their own experiences as temps used to undermine the security of the workforce as a propaganda vehicle to highlight an increasingly common work experience. Tesco never breached a piece of employment legislation; the workers' direct employer was an agency called Grafton Recruitment. To Tesco they were immediately disposable and the old rights we relied on in the *Get Up, Stand Up* Campaign were no longer relevant. Members of the WSM provided solidarity, by helping organise a protest outside a Tesco store on Baggot Street and in calling for solidarity elsewhere, which led to several demos across the UK and Poland co-ordinated by

activists in the libertarian milieu and organisers in the T and G. The protests garnered a huge degree of media attention within the new Polish media in Ireland and back in Poland.

For a time these two experiences were a healthy breakaway from the sort of activity that is dependent upon mobilizing for the next big event, as well as a start to formulating strategies of how we move towards workplace-gear activity. Equally, here were opportunities to explore a political language of struggle based on how identities are emerging in workplaces rather than having to rely on the baggage of an awkwardly represented archaic class struggle; a rhetoric that in the long run only isolates us from those who class struggle anarchists need to enter into dialogue with.

The application of organizing skills which have developed out of the anti-globalisation period, the use of subvertisements, the aesthetic separation from the corporate branding of mainstream unions, the success of internet based organisation in mobilising for the Tesco pickets can only be a positive addition to an organizational vocabulary that can speak to workers apathetic and distrustful of a politics and unions which to a large extent simply do not challenge the reality facing increasing numbers of people.

During the Irish ferries dispute, Irish unionism had a moment of brief respite. Contrary to the fears of many, huge numbers of workers left their employment and protested in solidarity with the workers of Irish Ferries. Listening to popular chat shows and reading bulletin boards left an impression that there was a considerable popular desire to mobilise in employment sectors where there are weak unions or bullying bosses. There's a lesson here that significant organisational drives are needed.

Had *Get Up, Stand Up* retained a more self-critical awareness of the work it was entering into, it might have been a forum where issues of workplace solidarity could have been raised and teased out separate to the capital political parties seek to gain from them. With the breakdown in democracy in many unions, and the recent Collen and Delaney cases there's no doubt that there is a need for the permanence of such a network within the movement.

*Get Up, Stand Up* style initiatives and ventures such as the Polish Temp Workers Defence Committee have a role to play in briefly sketching and experimenting in how this can be done both from within and outside the unions. For the moment though, many of those involved in these campaigns have become active in the IWU, setting up a Polish Workers Section and joining its recruitment drives.

## **UK: Organising with the T&G, and beyond?**

In the UK union membership has been in steady decline for the past 25 years, not least due to how people are being employed – casualised labour, increased imposition of agency work, temporary, short term contracts & contracts of ‘self-employment’, along with the general lack of confidence in unions after years of complacency, compromises and defeats. One of the UK’s ‘big four’ unions, the Transport and General Workers Union (T & G), has sought to address this by adopting the model created by the American Service Employees International Union (SEIU) with its strategy of a national unit of professional ‘union organisers’ to target traditionally untouched areas of unionisation (precarious work in fragmented workplaces – most significantly in the UK Polish immigrant labour in the north & cleaners on London Underground and in the City). A lot of finances and resources have gone into ensuring this experiment is a ‘success’. The model is on

a 3 year probationary period and for this year the organising unit should have recruited 10,000 new members.

On the surface this looks an impressive undertaking, especially the work done around the Polish workers in Crewe, yet we need to look closely just how they are operating and how much they encourage solidarity and militancy rather than compliance and acceptance of union leadership.

An organising team is typically made up of a team leader, an organiser and an organiser in training. These teams are usually from an activist or academic backgrounds (“because of their political commitment & willingness to work extra hours”) who go to workplaces to talk to and encourage workers to join the union. The more militant workers are encouraged to become organisers themselves who in turn organise in their respective workplaces.

The problem with this imposed structure is it is geared towards getting results. Essentially your energy and responsibility goes into meeting targets rather than meeting the needs of the workers (this is amplified when you do not share the same common conditions and problems at work). In effect organisers become the tools of the union teaching workers how to organise rather than being the delegates of workers in the workplace. It is an artificially informal hierarchy that re-imposes the formal hierarchy of the leadership, although a lot of effort is done on the ground to alleviate the impression the members answer to the union.

What is retained though is the leadership speaking on behalf of the workers, as evidenced with workplace grievances being dealt with directly by the ‘representation team’, sidelining any progressive dialogue between organisers and the people they’ve unionised, indicating the primary objective of ‘union organisers’ is to simply recruit new members. Plus this doesn’t bode well if we look at way the T & G handled the Gate Gourmet dispute, where the union stepped in to negotiate to get all the sacked workers reinstated only to sell them out in a compromised deal. Ironically the evening of a tube cleaners’ organisers meeting at T & G headquarters there was a picket outside by Gate Gourmet workers demanding their hardship pay be reinstated, having been withdrawn by the union. Despite all the fine words, activist commitment and workers’ militancy the union leadership will always have the last say.

The question then is can there be a genuine model for grassroots rank and file political activity and organising within a union setting, and if not what are the alternatives?

One initiative has emerged, on the back of the T & G tube cleaners campaign, called The Solidarity Collective – a group set up by people involved in the IWW, the Wombles, T & G organisers and other left groups to support ongoing workplace struggles independently of union hierarchy. How this develops is dependent on those involved but the intention is to link up with, and support the development of, autonomous and self organised workers struggles (not reliant on unions or political parties) as a means to foster forms of solidarity and collective strategies sadly missing in this current political climate. What is paramount is the recognition that we must work together in creating methods of confronting capital together. These are our collective struggles and we all have a part to play in them.

## **USA: Change To Win**

Last September saw a split in the USA’s Congress of Trade Unions, the AFL-CIO. The Change to Win Federation held its founding convention in St. Louis, Missouri, where they set out their plans: cut down on bureaucracy, devote a lot more resources to organising the unorganised,

and start building industry-wide super-unions. The seven founding unions were the Teamsters (a general union and the USA's biggest), the Building Labourers, Service Employees (third biggest in the USA), UNITE-HERE (clothing and restaurant workers), Farmworkers, Food workers, and the Carpenters. Together they made up about 35% of the AFL-CIO's members.

Literally from day one, we could see this was not going to be some radical break from the undemocratic practices of the AFL-CIO. There was no membership vote over affiliation to this new federation, the handful of people on each union executive took the decision themselves.

So, is this new formation simply an attempt by a few discontented senior union leaders to increase their power or do they have ideas that merit serious consideration? Most of their literature has been long on describing the problems faced by working people, but short on offering solutions.

Well, there are very real problems in the US trade union movement. Whether you are a radical or a conservative, you can't avoid the fact that the percentage of American workers in a union has dropped to an all-time low of about 12%. And that's an open invitation to the bosses to stick the boot in, an invitation the bosses have been more than happy to accept.

*"We are focusing our resources on organising tens of millions of workers who are without union representation. We are shifting our resources into organising"*, said Anna Burger, Change to Win Chair. Indeed the federation has put it like this:

- "1. Working people, including current union members, cannot win consistently without uniting millions more workers in unions.*
- 2. Every worker in America has the right to a union that has the focus, strategy, and resources to unite workers in that industry and win."*

Among their proposals to achieve these objectives are encouraging unions to organize on an industry-wide basis, merging smaller unions into a few large unions, and spending more money on organising as opposed to electoral politics.

All well and good, but unions have to be seen to do more than merely hold the line against employer demands for cutbacks. They need to actually spearhead a fight for higher wages, more job security, better healthcare, shorter hours and improved pensions. There has to be a sense that we are going forward, that any sacrifices or risks we are asked to take will be worth it.

Just as important, even a brief look at labour history suggests that ideas, politics, and grassroots worker involvement are far more important than changes in organisational structures in the recipe for reviving union strength.

There are no shortcuts to rebuilding our movement, and that it will take far more than a few mergers or spending more on recruitment to produce the reversal in union fortunes that so many of us desire. After all, that's what has been done here by SIPTU and IMPACT, to name but two of our own big unions which were formed through mergers.

This is not to say that the heads of the new federation are "sell-outs", "traitors" or any of the other silly names that sometimes get thrown at union leaders. By and large they represent the general ideas of the members who elected them. When most workers see no alternative to the conservative political parties, let alone to capitalism, we should not be surprised that our unions are not some sort of revolutionary movement.

What is needed is not "better leaders". We are not sheep who simply require a better or more farsighted shepherd. Real change necessitates the active participation of a lot of people.

All over the world we need to convince our work colleagues and fellow union members that a militant fight for workers' interests is a good thing, that ordinary member involvement and control of our unions is a good thing, that a fundamental change in the way society is ordered is possible.

In our unions, whether in the USA or Ireland, experience suggests that we need a programme that puts far greater weight on political and social change, rank-and-file education and empowerment, and a commitment to reinvigorating collective bargaining as well as rebuilding membership. This was the experience of Connolly and Larkin, of the US Congress of Industrial Organisations in the 1930s, and of every large-scale union movement since.



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