

IN FLUX: PRECARIOUS LABOUR AND FRAGILE HOPES

“ I DON'T THINK IT'S HELPFUL TO SPEAK ABOUT THE VOICELESS WITHOUT ENABLING AND FACILITATING THAT VOICE' – SAYS EWA JASIEWICZ. "IT LACKS CREDIBILITY; IT CAN REPRODUCE DISEMPOWERMENT; IT DOESN'T CHALLENGE THAT UNEQUAL POWER DYNAMIC' – SHE ADDS. POLISH-BORN JOURNALIST ANALYSES CASUALISED WORKPLACES, LEVERAGE CAMPAIGNS AND THE COLLECTIVE NEED TO BUILD AN IDENTITY.

INTERVIEW WITH **EWA JASIEWICZ**
BY AGNIESZKA FILIPIAK, ELIZA KANIA

Who are precarians – are they a new class or just a group of outraged, young people?

The precarians are not young – this could be a myth that originates from people thinking that precarity is new somehow or that agency and casualised¹ work is relatively new and applies to new people in the labour market. The truth is that many migrant workers end up working through agencies and become casualties of casualisation, but migrant workers are of all ages and generations and by no means all young. I would say that my experience of organising in casualised workplaces showed me that workers were of many different backgrounds and age groups. What united them was poverty, lack of choices, lack of power, all being exploited, and many of them unable to speak English.

Which keywords would you include in the precariat pocket dictionary?

Vulnerable, exploited, un-organised, divided, hyper-casualised, tenacious, defiant, angry, unsustainable, in flux.

Is there any common denominator among the representatives of this group?

A common denominator is that they are on temporary contracts or zero hour contracts. The common denominator isn't anything inherent or even specific to an industrial sector per se as you are getting a lot of casualisation and precarious work for example in Academia, even in the public sector, through outsourcing. Largely though, my experience is that a common denominator is poverty or financial insecurity: low wages, low-tech work, in large workplaces.

But precariousness also exists in more “middle class” and smaller workforce workplaces. I guess a commonality is that they are all being controlled by capital to a larger extent than workers on contracts or in stable jobs. Another would be that most are not trade union members. They are not organised. They do not collectively bargain – even though, they have the potential to do so.

Is it truth, that lots of precarians appreciate some aspects of unstable work?

No. I think that's fiction. I have met perhaps 1% of people who hold this opinion. The overwhelming majority of workers that I have worked

¹ To casualise: to become casual, to convert from regular to casual. (Editor's note – JvDB)

with as an organiser, feel manipulated by the conditions and power relations that they are subject to. They want stability and choice and regular work – in order not to call or be called up at the end of the day to find out whether they have work or not. They resent living under fear about whether they can make ends meet because at any point they can be told ‘sorry, no more work for you.’ And certainly, they feel afraid of joining a union or organising because again, they are in a vulnerable position where they can be sacked effectively without any repercussions. They feel as if they have no rights, no protection, no support. Many have referred to feeling like machines. I’m talking here mainly about workers in manufacturing, grocery retail logistics, construction, aviation, and agriculture. It’s not that workers here see themselves as victims, or that they cannot experience anything positive within their working environments or relationships but they are highly aware of not having any power or very limited power or security.

You are quite familiar with Guy Standings’ book: “*The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*.” What could be your main objections to his conception?

Standing compiled a lot of useful statistics and his analysis was useful and is important. His book is well worth reading! But, my main problem with the book is that there is a stark absence of voices of precarious workers. There is virtually no self-representation; too much objectification. The front cover shows faceless workers sitting on the ground in “hi vis vests,”² and by the end of the book they are just as faceless as they were in the beginning. There was almost no representation of precarious workers organising or resisting, and while it’s true that there are not that many examples, but Unite, the Union I work for did undertake this task as have others like the RMT³ and Unison⁴. Delving deeper, making use of the experiences of union organisers in order to reach these voiceless and faceless people, should have been a part of the book’s narrative and I mean that in a political way – I don’t think it’s helpful to speak about the voiceless without enabling and facilitating their voice. It lacks credibility. It can reproduce disempowerment; it doesn’t challenge that unequal power dynamic.

² High visibility vests: typical safety gear worn by workers operating with and near vehicles. (Editor’s note – JvdB)

³ RMT is a British trade union, with more than 80,000 members from almost every sector of the transport industry. (Editor’s note – EK)

⁴ Unison is the biggest public sector trade union in Great Britain with more than 1.3 million members (Editor’s note – EK)

I felt that his analysis about how the working class can turn to fascism, not organised in its own interest – in the context that there wouldn’t be a working class voice in it – was alarmist and felt demonising and restrictive in terms of class identity and agency. It felt very “othering” and ‘let’s be afraid of ‘these angry people.’ And as for the constitution of the precariat as a new class – no, I don’t agree with it as a separate class. Precarity is a form of exploitation, an advanced form and state of casualisation, a state of work devoid of rights, but the class is the same, the position is the same. It’s just that the nature and form of exploitation has changed, intensified, capital is stronger; the relationship between capital and worker has become one of increased domination by capital.

What experience connected with working for the “*United*” association would you consider the most enriching?

The leverage campaigns we are involved in – these involved a much more confrontational attitude, a street and protest-informed tactic, and one where we feel like we were winning and actually where I feel as a worker, most in control of my own labour. It also felt good to see such organisation grow in a workplace and see people become empowered and resist, but workplace organising can often not win and we can find ourselves undermined and locked out and sometimes, ignored.

When we take the agenda and support workers in their struggle – workers that have decided fully on fighting back and were already engaged – and we back them up, that feels like a confidence-building, abuse-challenging, fight that we can win and unions do need to be more combative and responsive and able to include non-members and resistance outside the workplace. They also need to exert power over companies that feel above the law and unaccountable. Leverage has been used on the London Buses campaign, BESNA (Building Engineering Services National Agreement), MMP (Mayer Menhoff Packaging) and now, the Big One – Crossrail and the shameful and illegal practice of blacklisting and union busting.

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THE MAIN CHALLENGES ARE TO BUILD OUT AN ORGANISATION, COLLECTIVE IDENTITY AND A CULTURE OF RESISTANCE

Is it possible and valuable to organise precarians in the way trade unions are organized?

Definitely, but the arenas of struggle are changing and the involvement of new people, workers and activists from outside as well as inside the workplace is needed to address these changes. We sometimes do need to take the fight outside of the workplace in case an organisation isn't strong enough on itself; especially in light of the nature of precarious work and the level of power employers have over workers, can result that organising in casualised workplaces is risky and difficult. Such organizations are prone to demolition very easily: e.g. your casual agency worker activist, being identified by the bosses as one of the organisers, can be easily dismissed. In those situations, you need to be able to threaten the employer with consequences from a different direction.

What, in your opinion, is the biggest difference between the Polish and British labour space at the level of employee's awareness?

There may be a greater sense of community in Poland and perhaps less migrant labour within Polish workplaces, which can result in a lower language barrier between workers. I don't know enough about Polish workplaces to be able to compare. I once had a Polish organiser – a young guy – to describe *Solidarność* as the biggest collective action and workplace mobilization that you can possibly imagine, and that it failed. It had undermined his faith in collective action. If it can arise on such a massive scale as it did in Poland and still get co-opted, diverted and stifled by Capital, then, is there really hope? I wonder how common that view is in Poland. The flipside is that I would think that workers in Poland had and have a more intimate experience of workers co-operatives, small land plots and union organisation which mean there has been more of social security net for people and that can create more confidence. Also fighting an authoritarian government, censorship and fascism - the history of Poland is so different in terms of extremes of oppression and destruction, followed by collective rebuilding and then the polarisation of narratives and beliefs in capitalism vs. communism. These histories do have implications for how people view power, their own relation with power access and how it is generated locally.

What are the main challenges for the so-called precarians? Should they be more specific about their demands?

The main challenges are to build out an organisation, collective identity and a culture of resistance. I know what my demands and that of many people I worked with would be but, saying what demands should other people should have is difficult.

Demands I have heard frequently are – contracts, permanent contracts, union membership rights without being victimised for being a member, overtime pay, higher pay, shorter hours, more family-friendly shifts, equality with directly employed workers. But there are also more radical demands to be made or perhaps, more sustainable and fundamental demands to be voiced that can bring about serious change – workers' control of workplaces, co-operatively organised and managed production and services. An economy orientated towards maximising human welfare, respect, wellbeing, time, personal freedom, collective and personal responsibility, environmental protection and sustainability. And end to the rule of money, an end to class, progressive taxation, democratic control on levels of production and consumption, energy generation, construction and governance.

Ewa Jasiewicz is a Polish-born journalist and human rights activist, living in Great Britain. Jasiewicz was one of the few western journalists present in Gaza during the Israeli attack on the turn of 2008 and 2009, known as the „Cast Lead.” Her reports from Iraq and Palestine appeared in such journals like “The Guardian,” “The Daily Telegraph,” “The Independent” and “Le Monde Diplomatique.” She took part in the controversial convoy with humanitarian aid to the Gaza Strip attacked on 31 May 2010 by Israeli commandos, which resulted in the death of nine activists and about 20 injured. She is the author of the book „Light the Gaza Strip.” Currently she is working as a social activist, dealing with workers rights.

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