Not Waving but Drowning: Precarity and the Working Class

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In 'Not Waving but Drowning: Precarity and the Working Class', Mark Hoskins takes a critical look at the idea put forward by some academics and even parts of the anti-capitalist movement that the "precariat" is the revolutionary subject of our epoch. After examining the subjective conditions of the precarious subject today and comparing its objective conditions to those of the working class of the last century, he goes on to explore how these conditions relate to our end goal, a communist society and what lessons that can teach us in our attempt to get there.

Since the birth of the organised labour movement there have been intermittent claims that some alteration in the conditions of workers had rendered class struggle irrelevant or who suggested that class stratification meant that different workers had different interests and thus could not take united action. This was apparent in the struggle between craft unionism and syndicalism in the days of Connolly and Larkin, or the mantra that "the class struggle is over" in more recent times.

The current economic crises and the neo-liberal program of austerity that has ensued has blown the latter theory out of the water but the idea that different groups of workers have interests so disparate that unity is impossible has arisen in a new form. The "precariat" is heralded by some, both inside and outside of its ranks as a new class whose conditions and interests are separate from the traditional working class. If this was true, the view of class struggle as capital versus labour would be obsolete. Anarchists and other socialists would have to completely rethink their politics and possibly even give up on the idea of building a movement capable of carrying out a radical transformation of society.

The precariat can be loosely defined as workers in short term, part time labour, working irregular hours, who experience intermittent periods of unemployment and who, when not selling their labour, are working to sell themselves by writing C.V.'s and attending job interviews. The precarity of their economic situation seeps into the rest of their lived experience as they move from flat to house share, to live with their parents and back to renting again.

Some of those trying to build a space for the precariat within an anti-capitalist framework see the need to dispense with the politics of the past and develop a theory and practice fit for these new times. The Swedish autonomist group Prekariatet rejects the "previous Marxist and feministic frameworks" and declares "we allow ourselves to start from zero and experiment, make mistakes, and learn and progress as we go."[1]

Culture, Alienation, Boredom and Despair

In his book Precariat: The New and Dangerous Class, the academic Guy Standing describes the subjective experience of members of the precariat as one defined by "anger, anomie, anxiety and alienation"[2]. Anger emanates from living a life of relative deprivation, scraping by to make ends meet while being surrounded by consumer culture and the screaming excess of celebrity lifestyles. The actions of looters during last year's London riots, spilling out of retail outlets laden with expensive sportswear and flat screen televisions was an expression of frustration by those whose prospects of upward mobility and middle class prosperity are close to zero.

[1] prekariatet.se

[2] *Standing, Guy,* Precariat: The New and Dangerous Class, Bloomsbury Academic, 2011

"Anomie is a feeling of passivity born of despair."[3] The successive defeats of the labour movement internationally over the last few decades have left a whole generation of workers without any hope of improving their situation. They are faced with a lifetime moving from the dole queue to boring, short term contract jobs with low pay and back again. There is no prospect of career progression or job security.

Without job security there is no life security. Feelings of anxiety arise over bills, rent and providing for family. When unemployment is high and union representation is non-existent, one mistake can cost someone their job. Many employers now hire workers as contractors rather than as company employees. Because they are classed as self-employed, they can be fired easier and at the same time, their entitlement to state benefits is reduced.

The concept of alienation is not a new one for those familiar with left wing theory. It stems from workers having no control of the product of their labour, producing goods and services not for themselves or their communities but for others to sell and profit from. Standing maintains that the precariat experiences alienation in a magnified form, being also subject to "the cult of positive thinking". The modern worker is expected to be a happy member of the team, working with others towards a common purpose. They are not just alienated from the product of their labour but are also forced to sell their personality and sociability.

Nowhere is this heightened alienation more apparent than in the field of customer service. "Here the demand to 'just be yourself' (is) nothing but a cunning way of capturing the much needed sociality of the employee: affability on the phone, friendliness, and intuition"[4] Celine, a part-time worker in the service industry describes the process of selling this side of yourself: "One of the worst things you hear when you're going for a job interview is that line 'we're all a big family here', because then you know you're going to have to be this artificially bubbly character that gets on with the staff and can have a bit of banter with the customers and it creates that weird relationship with management where you're supposed to pretend you get along but you're really just working for them."[5]

Standing on Quicksand

The deterioration of the subjective experience of working people on its own however, doesn't constitute the birth of a new class. There would have to be a major change in objective circumstances and particularly a seismic shift in social relations. To prove this it would have to be demonstrated that the relationship between the precariat and capital was qualitatively different to that between the traditional working class and capital. When Guy Standing begins to outline the essential difference between the objective conditions of the precariat and the proletariat, his theory begins to sink into the quicksand upon which it is built.

"The precariat was not part of the 'working class' or the 'proletariat'. The latter term suggests a society consisting mostly of workers in long term, stable, fixed hour jobs with established routes of advancement, subject to unionisation and collective agreements, with job titles their fathers and mothers would have understood, facing local employers whose names and features

[3] *Ibid.*

[4] Cederstrom, Carl and Fleming, Peter, Dead Man Working, Zero Books, 2012

[5] Interview with the author, July 2012

they were familiar with."[6] In other words, the socio-economic situation of the working class is defined by Standing as the possession of job security, a living wage, the right to organise and a personal relationship with the boss.

The working class as described above however, only existed for a brief time and won those conditions through decades of organisation and strikes where many went to prison or were killed in the process. The factory or office worker who worked nine to five, Monday to Friday was largely confined to the white male of Western Europe, the Soviet bloc, and North America. Around the rest of the world, workers were subject to long hours, casual work, poverty and the threat of state repression if they tried to unionise.

Even within those areas where years of struggle had provided some sort of security for men, migrants and women found themselves taking insecure, part time employment as cleaners, hotel workers, and domestic servants. In Ireland, the idea of permanent employment was a product of the nineteen nineties, when the Celtic Tiger boom brought previously unknown levels of prosperity that are now receding as quickly as they emerged. Right up until the mid-nineties the standard Irish working class experience consisted of the dole queue, short term factory work or farm labouring, bounced paychecks and one way tickets to Holyhead or Boston.

Broadly speaking, the working class has always been defined by anarchists and Marxists alike as those who are bound to sell their labour to those who possess the means of production in the form of private property. This includes the Fordist factory worker, the office clerk, the farm labourer, the cleaner and even those classed as self employed who contract themselves to a large employer. It is the relationship between labour and capital that defines class, not the length of a contract or the number of days a week worked.

The Stainless Steel Claw of the Market

If the working conditions of the precariat are almost identical to the conditions of majority of the last century's working class, why is it being discussed as if it is something new? The answer may be that it is not what is happening that's important, it is who it's happening to. Now, people who were redefining themselves as middle class, who had attended university and saw the prospect of upward social mobility as a given, are feeling the pain. "The articulation of precarity in recent years is… due to 'its discovery among those who had not expected it'; those who might previously have been shielded by the relative stability of Fordism."[7]

Like all good movie victims, the precarious subject had let its guard down. It seemed as if the spectre of unemployment was a thing of the past. The confident, educated, post-industrial worker could leave one job on Friday and walk into a new one on Monday. Our generation's future was paved with gold or at least gold credit cards. When it was least expected, the villain that was assumed vanquished re-appeared in the form of the financial crisis and the economic shock doctrine that accompanied it.

By the end of the July 2012 in Ireland, there were over four hundred and sixty thousand people signing on the live register. Over eighty thousand of these were registered as casual workers (working three days or less). This figure doesn't account for people working more than three days who only work a few hours a day, those who don't know they are entitled to sign or those

[6] *Standing, Guy,* Precariat: The New and Dangerous Class, Bloomsbury Academic, 2011

[7] *Southwood, Ivor,* Non Stop Inertia, Zero Books, 2011

who have a partner with means from insurable employment. Fifty six percent of the total live register was made up of short term claimants. This suggests that there is a constant turnover of people moving from the dole to short term contract and insecure employment as the live register figure itself has stayed relatively static over the last year.[8]

The relatively sudden rise in unemployment and precarity had a knock on effect in housing. The tiger generation saw the biggest rise in home-ownership in the history of the Irish state. Of course "ownership" in the majority of cases meant mortgage holding. When the crisis hit and the toll on the labour market became apparent, this translated into a meteoric rise in negative equity mortgages, arrears and repossessions. At the end of March of this year, over seventy seven thousand mortgages (10.2% of total stock) were in arrears of over ninety days. Almost sixty thousand of these were in arrears of over one hundred and eighty days. Legal proceedings were issued to enforce the debt on two hundred and seventy eight mortgages and one hundred and seventy of these were repossessed.[9]

Homelessness is also on the rise. It is difficult to obtain precise statistics on this phenomenon but the 2011 census recorded three thousand eight hundred homeless people, with over three thousand seven hundred of these in accommodation for the homeless. Half of those aged fifteen or over were in employment, while four hundred and fifty seven were children under the age of fourteen. Nine hundred and five people comprised two hundred and ninety six family units.[10]

We Are Just Statistics

What is startling about these figures is that a large proportion of homeless people do not fit the stereotype of the person living rough, who is alone, unemployed and perhaps unemployable. The picture they actually paint is of the sharp end of precarity in the Irish state. Government statistics however, tell a limited story. The numbers classified as homeless by the CSO only represents people on the streets or in designated accommodation for the homeless. It does not account for the thousands of others whose housing situation is precarious, who have been forced to couch surf at friends houses, adults who have had to move in with their parents or those who are constantly under threat of losing their homes due to low wages, unemployment or underemployment.

The Roman poet Horace wrote that "we are just statistics, born to consume resources." Horace was the favourite poet of the Emperor Octavian and a mouthpiece for the new imperial order. The language of the state's statistical data presentation replicates this attitude. The terms casual worker, unemployed, underemployed and jobseeker mask the fact that the problem is not necessarily whether one is unemployed or underemployed but whether one possesses the income necessary to live comfortably. They also hide the subjective experience of the precarious individual, the emotional and psychological effects of precarity and the restrictions it places upon life outside of work.

Paradoxically, it seems the more time the modern worker spends out of work the less freedom they posses. The next offer of work may be only hours away, so constant availability is a must. Celine's leisure time is regularly disturbed by a phone call from the job. "I find it very difficult to plan ahead. I'm supposed to be given three days notice before I'm working but that rarely

[8] Figures from the Central Statistics Office. (CSO)
[9] Figures from the Central Bank.
[10] CSO

happens. A lot of the time it can be less than two days notice and it's often less than twelve hours notice."[11] Constant availability places huge strains on the individual and their ability to lead a normal life. It is common to hear people talking of not being allowed time off work for funerals or family emergencies at short notice. One individual had been refused time off to attend his own graduation.[12]

With the labour market firmly favouring employers, scenarios like this are hard to avoid. Long commutes are no longer a reason to refuse a job. Neither is low pay or the knowledge that the job may only last a couple of weeks. Moving from one neighbourhood to another because the only job available is on the other side of the city makes it difficult to settle anywhere. Friendships and other personal relationships become precarious and the people around you come to resemble a rotating cast of extras in a television soap opera.

The Troika is Coming, Look Busy

One particular feature of the present age is the move towards the institutionalisation of precarity. If the institutionalisation of Fordism and Taylorism in the last century could be described as the militarisation of labour, then the current trend represents its militia-isation. The demand of constant availability is no longer the preserve of the small employer; it also extends to the corporation and the state. The corporation demands we take our work home, that we are contactable via email and smart phones. The distinction between work time and free time is evaporating. The state however demands that even when we are not linked to a particular employer, we are constantly job seeking, constantly training, always available for welfare reviews and FÁS interviews.

Since the tightening of the grip of the troika over the economic policy of the Irish state with the ratification of the fiscal compact there have been moves towards increased assessment, inspection and regulation of welfare recipients. To speed this up, compulsory personal interviews to assess job prospects or the need for further training with FÁS have been replaced with group sessions that were described by one individual as something like AA meetings for the unemployed. "There were twelve of us at the meeting, mainly lads in their twenties. They sat us down and did a couple of powerpoint presentations, showing us options like Job Bridge or self-employment schemes. The overall message was 'get the fuck off the dole'. No one asked any questions, everyone just wanted to get out as quickly as possible."[13]

Job Bridge is an internship scheme whereby welfare recipients work for six or nine months and are paid their regular social welfare rate plus an extra fifty euro allowance. For anyone working more than twenty seven and a half hours a week, that works out below the minimum wage. It is not yet compulsory, but refusal to attend FÁS interviews or comply with the TÚS community work placement scheme can result in benefits being withdrawn. It would not be a major departure in policy if Job Bridge went the same way. With new profiling measures in place it will become easier to centrally direct labour under the pretence of getting people out of "unemployment traps".

[11] Interview with the author, July 2012

[12] Conversation with the author, September 2012

[13] Interview with the author, September 2012

The experience of other EU countries suggests a move in this direction. Workfare, a similar scheme to Job Bridge in the UK is compulsory in some cases and in cases where it is not strictly mandatory, the threat of sanctions is still used. George Osborne MP stated that "young people who do not engage with this offer will be considered for mandatory work activity and those that drop out without good reason will lose their benefits"[14] There is also evidence that Workfare is replacing paid jobs, with "ASDA sending paid staff home early over the Christmas period and using Workfare to fill the gaps."[15]

Work Less, Live More

Since the beginning of the economic crisis, sections of the left in Ireland and the UK have made the right to work a central demand. While it is important that those who wish to work for a living are given the opportunity, there is a danger of fetishising work for its own sake. The right to work under capitalism means the right to sell one's labour, the right to be exploited by the owners of private property. More often than not it means the right to participate in the production of goods and services that the individual worker has no interest in other than the wage they receive at the end of the week.

In many cases the full time worker finds themselves in a position that is the polar opposite of the precarious worker but is not necessarily more desirable. In the best case scenario, they have a regular income which provides the financial means to live the way they want to, but they don't have the time or energy to do the things they want. Work that takes over the majority of one's life, that is not geared towards one's own abilities and interests can be asphyxiating and dehumanising. The call for the right to work should be accompanied by the adverb "less" and the phrase "for more".

The valorisation of the Fordist worker only became central to the labour movement upon the ascendency of social democratic and Leninist hegemony. The Russian "Communists" wanted rapid industrialisation and believed that one-man management and bureaucratically centralised production were the best ways to achieve this. The social democrats were in favour of incremental improvements in workers' conditions under capitalism. In both cases Fordism and Taylorism made ideological sense.

The fight for the eight hour day and union recognition in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries however, were not seen as ends in themselves but as a means to an end. The International Workingmen's Association saw it as "a preliminary condition without which all further attempts at improvements and emancipation of the working class must prove abortive".[16] After the eight hour day was won, the expectation was that unions would fight for further improvements and some did. The IWW has been calling for a four hour day for over seventy years and when they adopted that demand, even "the American Federation of Labor was officially committed to the six hour day."[17]

[14] www.boycottworkfare.org
[15] ibid
[16] IWA convention, Geneva 1866
[17] www.iww.org

Communism through the Looking Glass

If the goal anarchists are trying to achieve is a libertarian communist society, then the way we think about campaigns for reforms must take that into account. In The German Ideology, Marx wrote that "In communist society, where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming a hunter, fisherman, herdsman or critic."[18]

The condition of the precarity under capitalism in the twenty first century is a perverse mirror image of Marx's vision of work under communism. The precarious worker has no exclusive sphere of activity but becomes accomplished in none either. It is possible for one to be a barista in January, an office clerk in April, a tour guide in July, a shop assistant in Decem*** **ber and a job seeker for the rest of the year, without ever becoming a barista, office clerk, tour guide or shop assistant.** *** **Rather than calling for the return of Fordism and specialisation, there is a need to seriously rethink how we get from the current state of things to the society we desire.**

"A think-tank, the New Economics Foundation (NEF)… argues that if everyone worked fewer hours – say, 20 or so a week – there would be more jobs to go round, employees could spend more time with their families and energy-hungry excess consumption would be curbed."[19] Sharing work is important, but the NEF clearly do not advocate a twenty hour week with the same remuneration that is currently applicable for a forty hour week. The implication is that to curb "energy-hungry excess consumption" people would have to earn less and adjust their lifestyles accordingly. Guy Standing on the other hand argues that the state should guarantee a minimum income that would cover life's necessities while any further income would be accumulated through "work for labour".[20] This would be funded via taxation and states investing in "emerging economies" I.E. the exploitation of labour in other countries.

Both of these solutions are based on utopian capitalist visions. They rely on legislators that are bought and sold by large corporations to act in the best interests of working people and in both cases they fall way short of those interests. The interests of the majority of the population can only be served by their self-organisation to campaign for improvements in their own living conditions. Our demands however must develop tangentially to forms of exploitation and oppression into an expression of the needs and desires of the broad working class.

The Praxis of Everyday Life

Demands however are nothing without a movement capable of carrying them out. Despite precarious workers being the most exploited sections of the working class, organising them can be problematic. Traditional trade union structures make it difficult to organise workers whose employment is often short term. The effort of joining a union might not seem worth it if you know

[18] *Marx, Karl*, The German Ideology, www.marxists.org

[19] *Cut the working week to a maximum of 20 hours, urge top economists*, Heather Stewart, The Observer, 8th of January 2012

[20] *Standing, Guy,* Precariat: The New and Dangerous Class, Bloomsbury Academic, 2011

you're going to be leaving that job in a matter of weeks or months at which point you're unemployed or in another job where a different union organises the workforce. Union organisers may not see the point in recruiting members who won't be there for the long haul, especially where a union is service-orientated.

The early history of the Industrial Workers of the World in the United States holds some lessons for organising today. "They found that membership tended to swell dramatically with struggles, and then ebb away. It's been said that "many a worker who did not carry the red membership card or had kept up dues payments was still to be counted a Wobbly." The IWW was opposed on principle to the kind of incentives for member retention pursued by more mainstream unions, such as health or insurance benefits, and instead opted to deploy a job delegate system. This entailed travelling organisers authorised to collect dues and form union locals amongst the highly mobile, casual workforce of the early 20th century United States. Consequently, 'a local could exist in the hat or satchel of a mobile delegate.'"[21]

What is necessary is an organisation whose structures do not require permanent active membership, where a member can move from job to job and link in with the local section wherever they go. The battles it should take on should come directly from the needs and desires of its members. All too often activists on the left neglect to reflect on their everyday lived experience, preferring to campaign on whatever the big issue of the day is, believing this will encourage people to get involved.

While it may not be necessary to "start from zero" in terms of theory as the Swedish group Prekariatet have suggested, it is a useful approach when tackling demands. Rather than assuming what people's issues are, organisers should engage in workshops with work colleagues, friends and neighbours to see what common problems people face and come up with ideas for solving them and ways of organising around them.[22]

Beyond the grandiose claims of academics like Guy Standing of the precariat being a new class, there are a growing number of people drowning in a sea of uncertainty. Their passivity can be mistaken for an unwillingness to organise and fight back but it is more likely that they just don't see the point. Many see the unions as lobby groups for a select group of "privileged" workers with secure, fixed wage jobs and benefits such as pension schemes. The challenge for activists of the left over the coming period is to find ways of organising that are fit for purpose, that are extensions of working and unemployed people's lived experience and that can also point the way towards a radical transformation of society. The world isn't static so it is important to keep re-interpreting it, but the point is still to change it.

[21] Fighting for ourselves – preview, libcom.org

[22] For info on "activist research" see provisionaluniversity.wordpress.com

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