

Responding to the Challenges of Precarity
Peter Evans Closings Comments
CGWR Symposium
Global Workers' Rights: Patterns of Exclusion, Possibilities for Change
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First, my congratulations to Mark and everyone here at the Center for Global Workers Rights [Jill, Dan, & Lisa], for having put together this terrific conference.

More than just celebrating the conference, I think, that I speak for everyone, in saying that in these tough times the emergence of this dynamic center here at Penn State is an energizing development providing a new positive reference point both for those of who study global labor and for those who are mobilizing and organizing to contest the irrational and destructive domination of our current neoliberal version of capitalism.

Penn State in general and the Labor Studies and Employment Relations Department in particular deserve congratulations for having recognized and supported this endeavor.

I'm going to keep this very brief, first of all I think that as this point in time for collective reflections digesting the incredibly rich set of analyses that we have enjoyed and sharing takeaways. Let me focus first on three quick points on where we are and how we might get to somewhere better and raise again some of the very general issues that we started with.

1. Anyone whose livelihood depends on their labor is in a precarious position in this economy.

Whether you are: an entry-level worker in Detroit making McDonald's wages; a recent PhD-graduated teacher, working part-time at the University of Michigan, or any other well-reputed US university; a Chinese student intern working as what could only be described as a modern-day indentured laborer at Foxconn, or even closer to home, an intern at Hershey Pennsylvania; a domestic worker almost anywhere in the world; or an uprooted rural peasant working in the outskirts of Bogota as a pawn in the global flower supply chain; your lack of access to a secure future and your profound uncertainty as to how you will provide for yourself and your family tomorrow are biting harsh realities.

Obviously, there is huge variation in terms of living and working conditions within the broad paradigm of collective precarity. Nonetheless, the image of a substantial number of workers who enjoy an enforceable and tangible bargain with capital as a means of attaining the resources to provide a secure future for their families has become a myth.

The Marikana platinum mine rock drillers of the British-owned mining giant, Lonmin, perhaps epitomize this evaporation of a secure bargain with capital: Highly skilled, unionized workers, in the most financially and politically important sector of the economy, in an industry that accounts for three-quarters of the global supply of platinum, and in a country in which trade unions are a key member of

the ruling alliance. They should be part of the so-called aristocracy of labor, but instead, they are being gunned down.

While this is bad news for ordinary people around the world, North or South, women or men, citizens or migrants, it is good news for the global labor movement in one respect. It would be a fatal mistake for us to naturalize precarity. Precariousness is not the result of some kind of inexorable economic logic, some kind of “natural evolution” of our system of production. Precarity is the result of the political and economic ability of global capital to realize its own perverse interests at the expense of the rest of us.

I would like to emphasize just two aspects of this power: **Capital is succeeding in turning the political clock back 150 years as far as the institutional rules governing the employment relation are concerned.** Important to remember that precariousness, lack of legal protections and turning workers into subjects without the right to have rights, is not a new invention. These are precisely the conditions of work that defined the proletariat when Marx was writing 150 years ago.

We increasingly live in a world in which crucial needs are not being met and in effect capital is subverting the creation to the jobs that would be those needs and people are unable to claim the incomes that would flow from satisfying those needs. The lack of jobs that force potential workers to remain unemployed or to engage economically marginal kinds of economic activities is not the result of some kind of inexorable economic logic; it is the result of the political power of capital.

We all know that there are huge amounts of socially valuable work that is not being done – more obviously in the provision of what should be considered essential services like health, education, child care and elder care, but these jobs are simultaneously unpaid and undersupplied because the social value of these activities exceed private returns, and capital has no interest in allowing society to allocate investment. And this brings us to our fourth point.

The fight against our precarious existence is a fight with capital, and for those who are fortunate enough to be employed, it is a fight directly with capital over wages and conditions of work. But it is even more fundamentally a fight against capital’s ability to determine both the allocation of social resources and the institutionalized rules of the game that define work and allocate social returns, which is to say that it is a fight against capital’s control of the State.

Perhaps ironically the ability of capital to dominate the social allocation of resources has become even more dramatic in the global North than in the global South. Finance capital’s campaign to preserve the value of financial assets relative to real assets by imposing economically destructive programs (“austerity”) is currently most dramatic in the Global North. And of course, the ability of capital to rewrite the rules of the economy obviously operates through the State.

One of the central questions in figuring out “where do we go from here” is how do we connect the direct contestation of capital’s power to exploit and oppress workers to contestation of capital’s control of the State.

The first obvious premise of our discussions over the last two days: Even if you organized all workers who actually have durable employment relations working for identifiable employers, you would not have sufficient power to challenge the ability of capital to control the State. Enabling informal, non-

standard, precarious workers to collectively pursue their interests is the *sine qua* of challenging capital's death grip on the state.

But what I think has been tremendously energizing in this conference is how many creative, transformative collective projects are going on among even the most threatened and supposedly powerless working women and men around the world. What is even more exciting is the extent to which, rather than being victims of globalization have learned to use globalization to their advantage.

Valerie's description of the Philippine Diaspora, building power in different ways in different parts of the globe and using global organizations to connect those efforts back to confrontations with the Philippine State is a great example. Indeed, one of the encouraging aspects of the stories we have heard is the extent to which global connections have paid a positive role, as in the case of international NGOs and the Colombian flower workers.

At the same time, we have seen great local examples of how workers who are on the margins in conventional economic terms are developing broader models of organization that go beyond improving wages and working conditions --what Jennifer calls "felt and embodied transformations"-- generate new subjectivities.

Of course, it goes without saying that creative among the most precarious requires complementary efforts from organizations of workers who do have the privilege of employment you can't really challenge the power of capital.

The kind of political decay that Devan describes in South African union movement is obviously toxic to the possibility of a broader agenda of mobilization and collective action. But while some union leaderships may still be plagued by a tendency to retreat to defensive agendas and prone to conventional thinking that cripples their ability to take advantage of the creative energies of informal workers as in Dan's case of the CUT in Colombia.

There has, there has been some good news at this conference on this front as well. We have some creative examples of conventional unions taking on capital's efforts to marginalize workers. One of the most fascinating of these is Adrienne's case of the Tunisian unions that took advantage of the Tunisian version of the Arab spring to re-establish the labor rights of thousands of Tunisia's public sector workers.

I would hope that if we re-do this symposium in two we would see a host of other examples of creative alliances between precarious but employed workers and those who don't have the privilege of regular employment.

Indeed, the starting point for really challenging the current power of capital, is the creation of new hybrid organizational forms and new hybrid campaign strategies that bridge different kinds of precarity and take advantage of the power of the commonality of shared interests that span varieties of precarity