

The 'Pre-Invention' of Precarious Employment: The Changing World of Work in Context

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Abstract

The term 'precarious employment' is widely used to describe irregular and insecure work arrangements that have grown substantially in both rich and poor countries since the late 1970s. Like the term 'contingent work', precarious employment has been adopted and increasingly used by academic researchers and later policy-makers since the 1980s. However, the term has deeper historical roots and its recent use can be more accurately seen as a revival as labour markets have taken on some features characteristic of an earlier period. This article examines the use of the term 'precarious employment' in political and public debate in the century or more prior to the 1930s, finding that in key respects, this use mirrors contemporary debates. Recognising that precarious employment was a pervasive feature of labour markets in developed countries prior to World War Two has a number of major benefits for contemporary debates. These include a better understanding of the policies that shape the extent of precarious employment. Historical evidence also provides a guide for and reinforcement of a growing body of contemporary research, pointing to both the immediate and broader social effects of precarious employment.

JEL Codes: J21, J41

Keywords

Casual employment; contingent work; day labour; employment insecurity; labour contractors; precariat; precarious employment; subcontractors; temporary work; transient workers.

Introduction

'Contingent work' (coined by Aubrey Freeman in 1985) and 'precarious employment' (apparently coined around the same time) are omnibus terms used to describe similar sets of work arrangements. Nevertheless, while the former is most widely used in North America, precarious employment is gaining global ascendancy with regard to usage (Polivka and Nardone 1989; Hipple 2001). Central to

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both concepts is uncertainty or irregularity with regard to ongoing employment which may include questions of hours of work and income (Quinlan and Bohle 2004). The term 'contingent' indicates the work is only performed and workers engaged when immediately required, while the term 'precarious' captures the job and income insecurity characteristic of particular work arrangements.

Typically included under both labels are casual, fixed-term contract or temporary workers (including those supplied by temporary employment agencies), own-account self-employed subcontractors, teleworkers and home-based workers, including those doing homecare. Precarious employment has been viewed as somewhat broader in terms of coverage, although there is ongoing debate as to what types of work arrangements should be labelled as precarious, and whether employment status is of itself sufficient to designate particular workers as being precariously employed (Vosko 2006; Lewchuk et al. 2008). For example, Lewchuk et al. (2011) argue factors such as job search time/costs and social support (including household income) need to be considered in terms of determining precariousness. Other studies argue for a more differentiated approach to broad categories such as temporary employment (Saloniemi et al. 2004). The situation is further complicated by emerging evidence that the presence of precarious workers can have spill-over effects on those with ongoing employment contracts, in terms of task-loads and working conditions, and that the latter may also feel insecure — hardly surprising in the context of repeated rounds of downsizing/organisational restructuring (Quinlan and Bohle 2009). More recently, it has been argued that 'precarious work' is a more accurate term, since some workers under some arrangements included under the label precarious employment are not 'employed' in the legal sense of an employment relationship (with an employer) but are self-employed (Johnstone et al. 2012).

Attempts to better understand and define precarious employment reflect a broad recognition that changes to the labour market are having profound effects on society. Since the late 1980s, a growing body of international research has found an association between precarious employment and a deterioration in wages and working conditions, including worse occupational health and safety outcomes (see for example Barling et al. 2001; Virtanen et al. 2005). Contracting out and temporary employment presented a challenge to an organised labour movement already on the defensive (Sverke 2003; Stone 2004), as well as undermining the coverage and effectiveness of regulatory regimes designed to set minimum labour standards and safeguard the safety and health of workers (Aronsson 1999; Johnstone et al. 2001; Lippel 2006). Other studies point to broader effects on families, budgeting/poverty, education and public health (Barling and Mendelson 1999; Aronsson et al. 2005). They include research linking reduced staffing levels in hospitals to an increased incidence of errors and exposure to hazardous agents (Anderson et al. 2002; Stegenga et al. 2002). Similarly, a recent United States (US) study found workers lacking sick leave — that is, most temporary workers — were significantly less likely to participate in basic cancer screening programs like mammograms (Peipens et al. 2012).

Others have pointed to the potentially social dislocating effects of the growth of precarious employment. Notable here is Guy Standing's (2011) book *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*. Standing argues the growing body of persons locked into precarious employment constitutes an exploited class that is increasingly the norm within globalised labour markets. The growth of the 'precariat' has gone hand in hand with a rising level of socio-economic inequality and alienation from the realms of participative citizenship.

While acknowledging the importance of these issues and debates, the central purpose of this article is to explore another question. Namely, was the term 'precarious employment' used to describe particular work or labour market arrangements during an earlier period and, if so, are there meaningful parallels with, or lessons to be drawn from, this earlier period that could inform contemporary debates?

With regard to research methods, two primary sources were examined in order to trace the earlier usage of the term precarious employment. First, a digital search was made of British House of Commons debates (hereafter cited as *HC Hansard*) between 1800 and 1940. This provided evidence of the use of the term in formal political debate in the country that was the hub of the industrial revolution. Second, a similar search for the term was made of Australian newspapers published between 1804 and 1940. The National Library of Australia has digitalised (in searchable format) a significant proportion of the extant newspapers, covering all colonies/states. This provided evidence as to the use of the term in a broader community context and a smaller country. Since these papers often covered British as well as Australian news, the search provided evidence as to whether the term was used to describe labour market conditions in both countries, giving some indication of the breadth of the application of the concept. The search term in both cases was confined to 'precarious employment' or closely related 'employment that is precarious', and excluded similar terms like 'irregular work', 'irregular employment' or 'precarious subsistence' which were also used. While including the latter terms would have resulted in many more 'hits', the narrower focus provided a clearer indication as to whether the precise term 'precarious employment' was both used and widely understood.

In addition to the two sources just mentioned, reference will also be made to nineteenth century and early twentieth government inquiries into labour conditions undertaken in Britain and Australia which referred to precarious employment. While not the product of a systematic survey of inquiries/royal commissions, the material cited does demonstrate that there was recognition that precarious employment affected working and living conditions and that the social consequences of this warranted the attention of governments.

The article is divided into three sections. The first examines evidence on the use of the term 'precarious employment' and its context. The next section indicates why precarious employment was seen as a pressing issue. The final section indicates why an understanding of the earlier phase of precarious employment has relevance for contemporary policy debates and research.

Armies of Insecure, Temporary and Transient Workers

The review of House of Commons' debates indicates that the term 'precarious employment' or closely related phrases like 'employment that is precarious' was used on a fairly regular basis from the early nineteenth century until the 1930s. Searching through House of Commons debates (*HC Hansard*) indicated the term was used in 37 separate debates between 1812 and 1935. To avoid double-counting, multiple uses of the term during the same debate were excluded. Virtually all the references pertain to workers in Britain and Ireland. Similarly, the search of Australian newspapers yielded 125 uses of the term 'precarious employment' between 1834 and 1935, again excluding multiple references in the same article. The vast majority of these references pertain to workers and labour market conditions in Australia although a substantial minority (especially in the nineteenth century) are in reports pertaining to Britain. These latter were usually reproduced from British newspapers. There are also occasional references to other countries, like the US.

While evidence of printed material cannot confirm whether the term precarious employment was in everyday conversation, its use was regular and calculated — not 'accidental'. This point is reinforced when the context in which the term was used is examined.

In the period under review, the term was mostly used in two distinct but often overlapping contexts. They were either used to describe particular categories of labour (and this use predominated), or to describe labour market conditions in a particular region or more widely. With regard to the first usage, reference is made to types of work which were casual, temporary or seasonal in nature, where pay was low and where hours of work were irregular (compounding low earnings and budgeting issues). Typically included in this group were temporary/casual workers such as dockworkers, construction labourers (often referred to as navvies), agricultural labourers and 'temporary' government labourers. Also included were those engaged under fixed term employment (like seamen) and self-employed subcontract workers, including fishermen and home-based women workers and children/family groups in the clothing trades.

One group repeatedly referred to as precariously employed were dockworkers. They were engaged on a daily basis — a situation only altered after World War Two (before a renewed shift to casual employment over the past two decades). In an 1857 debate over an income tax proposal, one member (W. Williams) referred to the iniquitous effects this would have on those who cobbled several jobs together including 'precarious employment as a dock labourer' (*HC Hansard* 10 March 1857 vol. 144: c2143). In a similar vein, TP O'Connor, Member for Liverpool, decried the burden of school taxes on the population he represented which was 'the poorest in any part of the country, consisting mainly of "dockers", who were not only insufficiently paid, but whose employment was precarious' (*HC Hansard* 16 December 1902 vol. 116: c1436).

Low pay and insecure work also applied to dockyard labourers engaged by contractors working for the Navy. In 1893, the Labour Member for Battersea (John Burns) urged the Navy to abolish day labour, arguing that many temporary labourers supplied by contractors had been working in Government establish-

ments for over a decade, and 'frequently had the most dirty and unpleasant, and always the most precarious, conditions of employment' (*HC Hansard* 26 June 1893 vol. 14: c82). His call landed on deaf ears and 14 years later, the Member for Portsmouth (Bramsdon) asked the Civil Lord of the Admiralty whether he was aware that contractors were paying their labourers 4 1/2d per hour when the standard rate was 6d and that 'such employment is precarious' (*HC Hansard* 2 May 1907 vol. 173: c1036).

Comments about the precarious character of casual work were not confined to dockworkers or naval dock labourers but were applied more generally. The term was also applied to large numbers of Irish labourers trying to subsist on casual work as a result of the potato famine and depressed conditions for agricultural labour. In 1846, Daniel O'Connell, citing the findings of the 1845 Commission headed by the Earl of Devon, stated:

the agricultural labourers of Ireland suffer the greatest privations and hardships; that they depend upon precarious and casual employment for subsistence; that they are badly housed, badly fed, badly clothed, and badly paid for their labour; that it would be impossible to describe adequately the sufferings and privations which the cottiers and labourers and their families in most parts of the country endure. (*HC Hansard* 17 February 1846 vol 83: c1052)

Two years later, another member (Sharman Crawford) stated that the report of the Landlord and Tenant Commission made it 'evident that the people of Ireland were badly fed, badly clothed, badly housed, dependent upon precarious employment, and uncertain supplies of food' (*HC Hansard* 28 July 1848 vol. 100: c927). Thirty years later, speaking to a call for a royal commission into the depressed conditions of agricultural labour, another member pointed to the acute situation in Ireland 'where our population is thin, abundant food will come in aid of miserable wages and precarious employment' (*HC Hansard* 4 July 1879 vol. 247: cc1474). Jumping a further 30 years ahead to a debate about poor working class housing and the implications of this for communicable diseases like tuberculosis, similar connections were made by Thomas O'Donnell, the Member for Kerry, who argued that the 'labourer, by the precarious nature of his employment, could not afford the luxury of living in these country places, and they wanted him to be able to get proper housing accommodation in the city of Dublin' (*HC Hansard* 20 March 1908 vol. 186: c962).

The application, in the House of Commons, of the term 'precarious employment' to irregular and poorly paid work like casual labour mirrored how the term was used in the press. In December 1862, for example, *The Times* (reproduced in the *Sydney Morning Herald* [SMH] 20 March 1863: 2) reported the Anglican Bishop of London as charging that the poorer metropolitan parishes were 'full of a shifting and precariously employed population of dock labourers, weavers, or costermongers' (costermongers were street sellers).

As in the United Kingdom (UK), press reports in Australia indicate that the precariousness of casual labour influenced administrators and politicians. In 1839, for example, the Colonial Immigration Agent reported to the Governor

of New South Wales (NSW), warning him that selection officers in England were sending out workers without occupational skills who 'earned a precarious subsistence by casual and irregular labour' (*Sydney Gazette* 27 June 1839: 3). Ironically perhaps, emigration from the UK to Australia was promoted as a means of escaping low wages and precarious employment (see *SMH* 22 May 1841: 2; *South Australian Register* 6 April 1852: 3).

Even in years of prosperity, the precariousness of casual work drew attention, especially in industries like wool growing where work was seasonal. During the summer shearing season, shearers and labourers (called rouseabouts) were engaged for a period of weeks at each station's shearing shed. In April 1890, Thomas Glassey, Labor Member for Bundamba in the Queensland Legislative Assembly, told a public meeting that (excluding wharf labourers, navvies and agricultural labour), there were over 10,000 casual labourers (including carriers, fencers, shepherds and rouseabouts) in the colony, including 6,000 shearers and general labourers who 'follow most precarious occupations, and are very properly classed as 'casual' labourers' (*Brisbane Courier* 12 April 1890: 5). Four years later, in the midst of the Queensland bush workers' strike, another Labor Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) claimed casual rouseabouts earned an annual income of 'not over' 15 pounds to cover their living expenses (*Brisbane Courier* 1 September 1894: 6).

Day labour was used in other tasks and industries including agricultural harvest work, construction and transport. In Australia and the UK, the term 'day labour' was commonly used at that time to refer to workers engaged on a casual basis by government or its agencies often through the intermediary of private contractors — an early form of outsourcing (see Sheldon 1989, 1993). In the US, it is currently used to describe workers (often immigrants) hired on a daily basis for jobs in construction and the like. In the earlier period, in industries like building and construction, those seeking work would congregate, similarly to dockworkers, at a particular location on a daily basis hoping to be engaged by a labour agent or supervisor. Much of this labour was employed via subcontracting arrangements, even in agriculture. In Britain, widespread use was made of the contractor/gangmaster system to replace permanent farm labourers with temporary workers. Brass notes that while recent research tends to present a more idealised view of this practice, earlier accounts

emphasise both the coerciveness and the harshness, together with the exploitation inherent in the gangmaster labour regime, an aspect depicted graphically not just in mid-nineteenth century Government Commissions (and in particular the Sixth Report of the 1862 Children's Employment Commission, published in 1867) but also outlined in the classic analyses — Marx, Hasbach and Green. (Brass 2004: 316)

References to the precarious position of farm workers can be found well into the twentieth century. In 1927, Noel Buxton told the Commons that most farm workers 'are poorly paid, precariously employed and poorly housed. Among all poverty is chronic; and though destitution is certainly rare, dread of it is seldom absent' (*HC Hansard* 30 March 1927 vol. 204: c1381).

The nineteenth century reference to children in agricultural gangs indirectly raises a parallel with contemporary experience. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, women and children were concentrated in a number of areas of precarious employment, including outwork in the clothing trades. Children were also to be found in other activities like street trading where the precarious nature of the work, late hours and exposure to inclement weather were seen to interfere with education and future employment prospects (see for example *HC Hansard* 11 June 1918 vol. 106: cc2165). There were also concentrations of foreign-born workers in particular areas of casual and subcontract work (such as railway construction and garment making in the UK and Australia). While child labour is no longer a major source of labour in developed countries (though growing in areas like home-based work), women and young workers still make up a disproportionate share of those holding temporary jobs. The same applies to foreign-born workers, including immigrants, illegal immigrants and temporary guestworkers whom Standing (2011) sees as a critical component of the precariat.

Another group labelled as precariously employed was merchant seamen. Merchant seamen were engaged on a contract (signing articles) for a specific voyage on a ship. The length of the voyage might last a matter of days in coastal shipping, ranging up to several years in the case of an international voyage. Hence seamen were engaged under a succession of contracts until age, illness or family needs obliged them to retire or seek other work. In fact, short-term engagement remains pervasive in the industry. The precariousness of seamen's employment was a prominent issue in periodic debates over the establishment of a pension scheme, which would both maintain the maritime workforce and obviate the burden of poor relief arising from aged and infirm seamen. For example, speaking to a proposal for mercantile marine pensions for seamen in 1876, Sir Charles Adderley pointed to difficulties because actuaries 'failed to find the average life of seamen, or to make safe calculations on their wandering and precarious employment; and he believed it to be an unsolvable problem' (*HC Hansard* 10 March 1876 vol. 227: c1834). It is worth noting in passing that merchant seamen were subject to another practice with contemporary overtones, namely the reduction of crew numbers on ships (effectively downsizing). The short-term engagement of seamen and deliberate over-insuring of ageing vessels facilitated the practice which was repeatedly condemned in House of Commons debates and was a central concern of a Royal Commission on unseaworthy vessels in 1873. Notwithstanding additional regulation, the problem continued (see *HC Hansard* 13 February 1894 vol. 21: c437).

Other occupations labelled as precariously employed included fishermen (*HC Hansard* 29 April 1925 vol. 183: c263) and whalers (*South Australian Register* 20 April 1869: 3). The term was also sometimes used with regard to factory workers. Speaking to the Factories Regulation Bill in 1832, Sadler noted that far from improving the condition of manufacturing operatives, the mechanisation of factories was associated with both greater work intensity and insecurity that damaged their health:

The condition of the operative manufacturer has been rendered more and more dependent and precarious: the labour of those of them that are employed is, in many cases, so increased, as to be utterly irreconcilable with the preservation of either health or life: infancy itself is forced into the market of labour, where it becomes the unresisting victim of cruelty and oppression. (*HC Hansard* 16 March 1832 vol 11: cc344–5)

Twelve years later, in a debate over regulating maximum working hours in factories, another speaker repeated the point that the intensity of factory work ensured male labourers were ‘superannuated’ at an early age, forcing them into an even more ‘wretched and precarious existence’ (*HC Hansard* 22 March 1844 vol 73: c1392).

In many if not most cases, the occupations labelled as precariously employed in the UK, such as casual labourers (including navvies, agricultural labourers and dockworkers), needle-women/garment workers, and seamen, were also those to whom the same appellation was applied in Australia (see *Argus* 23 November 1854: 5–6 & 2 October 1855: 6; *South Australian Register* 23 July 1861: 3; *Clarence and Richmond Examiner* 28 March 1912: 3; *The Register* 18 December 1919: 13; *Adelaide Advertiser* 22 January 1929: 13). In Australia, the term was frequently applied to miners, perhaps reflecting the more extensive and speculative nature of mining activities, especially with regard to metals like gold (see *Argus* 9 April 1858: 6; *Australian Town and Country Journal* 5 December 1874: 20; *Bathurst Free Press* 6 June 1889: 3; *West Australian* 18 August 1894: 4). It was also used with regard to servants (*The Australian, Windsor, Richmond, and Hawkesbury Advertiser* 4 November 1882: 2), female shop assistants (*SMH* 17 January 1931: 12) and for seasonal/casual occupations linked to major local industries like wool (*Brisbane Courier* 11 November 1872: 2). In 1917 the *Queanbeyan Age* (30 January 1917: 4) published an article entitled ‘Precarious employment’ describing various occupations subject to this, including those with more predictable seasonal peaks of work like agriculture, livestock and wool. Nonetheless, as a correspondent to the *Rockhampton Morning Bulletin* (29 February 1892: 6) had noted 25 years earlier, even where work was available, wage rates were also more volatile in export-orientated rural/agricultural industries

The term precarious employment was also applied more generally to the labouring classes including during periods of economic distress in industrial towns as in Birmingham in 1812 (*HC Hansard* 17 April 1812 vol. 22: c427) or more generally as in 1895 (*HC Hansard* 7 February 1895 vol. 30: c246). This broader use in no way invalidates that essentially the same meaning was being imparted to the term. Terms are shaped by their historical-social context. For many if not most manual workers in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, insecure work and erratic earnings were the norm epitomised by statements such as that of CAV Conybeare, Member for Cornwall, in 1889. Drawing on research undertaken by Arthur Foxwell, a Cambridge University professor of economics, Conybeare pointed out that irregular work meant that average earnings fell well below nominal wages for workers in a range of occupations (including corporation labourers, joiners and stone-masons). Pointing to the consequences

of this for malnutrition amongst families and poor unhealthy accommodation, Conybeare concluded that the 'precarious nature of employment is a social evil of the first magnitude, which we can and must in some degree remove' (*HC Hansard* 6 March 1889 vol. 333: c1076).

In 1894 another member decried agricultural labourers' being pushed to the town 'to join the crowd of those who struggled for a precarious existence in our manufacturing centres' (*HC Hansard* 17 July 1894 vol. 27: c228). The following year, Labour Member for West Ham, Keir Hardie, argued that wages and conditions for miners and other industrial workers had deteriorated since the 1870s:

Employment to-day was more precarious and intermittent. A man over middle age found it almost impossible to find employment when from any cause he happened to be dismissed. The conditions under which industries were conducted compelled production to be carried on quickly and cheaply, which led to the displacement of men no longer in the flush of youth. (*HC Hansard* 7 February 1895 vol. 30: c244)

The Australian press also referred to precarious employment when describing the consequences of periodic downturns in the labour market or when calling for protection of local manufacturers (for examples of the latter, see *SMH* 3 November 1863: 8; and 25 August 1877: 3; *Queanbeyan Age* 10 August 1887: 2). In 1841 the *South Australian Register* (25 September 1841: 2) lamented that government mismanagement had contributed to an increasingly discontented group of workers in precarious employment. In the midst of the 1890s depression, the *SMH* (12 January 1894: 4–5) noted that of 15,000 workers belonging to three building trades in the city, 5,000 had quit the trade in search of other employment, 6,000 were unemployed and 4,000 were in 'precarious employment'. Skilled tradesmen were not only rendered precarious by recession. As the press regularly noted, a substantial number moved from job to job, especially in industries like building where work was seasonal and there was extensive subcontracting (see for example *South Australian Register* 4 April 1855: 3). Paralleling the UK experience, the growth of both unemployment and precarious employment during recessions sparked calls for government action or protests that were the subject of press reports and commentary (see *Hobart Town Courier* 14 March 1834: 2; *Argus* 14 August 1855: 5).

The more general usage of the term 'precarious employment' must be understood in the context of a period where there was no social protection legislation (redundancy payments, unemployment insurance, workers' compensation, age-pensions and the like) to mitigate the effects of precariousness. Indeed reference to precarious employment was used to support the need for such laws as well as oppose self-support options, like a national insurance scheme plan in the UK in 1911, that disadvantaged such workers (*HC Hansard* 20 November 1911 vol. 31: c835). T. P. O'Connor, the Member for Liverpool, made a similar point in 1899 about the impracticality of a voluntary scheme to provide for the maintenance of school buildings (*HC Hansard* 16 December 1902 vol. 116: c1436). By the 1920s, members were pointing to a raft of legislation regulating the labour market

both directly and indirectly to combat the ill-health, unemployment, old age, accidents and child labour 'that arose out of precariousness of labour conditions' (*HC Hansard* 16 July 1923 vol. 166: c1944).

In sum, the term 'precarious employment' was used widely throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It was used in two overlapping senses. First, it was used to describe the intermittent and insecure employment of particular occupations like dockworkers, outworkers, miners and general labourers. Second, it was used to describe the insecure employment that accompanied economic recessions or was a feature of particular locations such as inner-city areas where there was an over-supply of labour. The latter reminds us that recessions or flooded labour markets don't just lead to a loss of work but also to more people in irregular employment. Prior to the Great Depression, insecure work was the norm in developed countries as unions had limited success in bargaining for steady work and governments did little to moderate the labour market effects of recessions and depressions. Recognising these differences, use of the term 'precarious employment' in the contemporary context is still consistent with historical use of the term — and for good reasons, as it is essentially describing the same sets of problems.

Why Precarious Employment Drew the Attention of Unions, Policy-Makers and Others

As can be seen from the last section, a growing recognition of the consequences of precarious employment for workers, their families and the community more generally was a primary reason why it attracted the attention of politicians, the press and other agencies. From the late 1880s, the nature and consequences of poorly paid and insecure work — for health, education, poverty and social dislocation — were addressed in a succession of government inquiries in the UK and Australia. For example, there were repeated references to precarious employment, as well as to irregular work, and its effects in evidence given to the multi-volume and wide-ranging (in terms of industry and occupation) UK government reports on sweating (1889–1890) and the Royal Commission on Labour (1892–1894). Evidence before the former pointed to large numbers of workers, including many immigrants and displaced agricultural workers, trying to secure overwhelmingly casual jobs from subcontractors. There were an estimated 100,000 of such workers on the London docks alone.

Indeed, the subcontracting system had been introduced to evade injury claims following the introduction of the *Employer Liability Act* (House of Lords 1890). The fierce scramble for a work ticket from a contractor (resulting in injuries on occasion) and the combination of pyramid subcontracting, through the letting and subletting of contracts, and piecework drove down earnings to as little as 3d an hour (reported in *Brisbane Courier* 4 January 1889: 7). Dockers' Union secretary Benjamin Tillet pointed to the degraded living conditions (including doss houses) that resulted from low and erratic pay. Tom Mann, another Dockers' official told the subsequent Royal Commission on Labour (1892: 22–24) that regular work was a critical issue for the union, while James Sexton, a Liverpool member told the same inquiry that irregular hours had been a significant impe-

tus for the 1889 dockers' strike — a pivotal struggle which attracted widespread international interest (including substantial public donations from Australia). The situation was not transitory. In 1912, Williams demonstrated that the number of dock labourers in Liverpool was almost double that which could be engaged efficiently even during peak periods (cited in Hobsbawm 1968: 208–209).

The same problems were identified in Australia. Evidence tendered to the New South Wales Royal Commission on Strikes in 1890 (Parliament of New South Wales 1891) by representatives of coal lumpers' and wharf labourers' unions referred to many hundreds of men congregating at the docks in search of work and the unpredictability of continuous work. As well, they spoke of long shifts when they did get work — 30 hours straight to complete an operation in extreme cases, low earnings and fatigue. There was also the sweating by middlemen, the stevedores who would cut gang sizes to make more money. Queensland MLA, Thomas Glassey, told a public meeting that there were 2,000 wharf labourers in Queensland, 'many of whom at the various ports are not employed more than half time. At Maryborough, for example, where there are seventy wharf labourers, their average wages over a term of one year amounted to only 15s. per week' (*Brisbane Courier* 12 April 1890: 5).

Widespread use of casual and transient forms of labour in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries together with the absence of state social protection created a welter of social casualties including children forced to work or to support themselves (Humphreys 2010). This in turn placed a significant financial burden on the state — notwithstanding heavy reliance on voluntary or charitable bodies — and the use of poor laws, work houses and imprisonment to minimise costs and the threat of vagrants and social unrest. In a recent study, Green (2010) shows that the infamous *Poor Law Amendment Act* of 1834 was an attempt to mitigate the cost to London rate-payers of a large and expanding casual labour market, including newly arrived immigrants. Contemporary observers were also cognisant of the connection. In Balmain, an industrial suburb of Sydney, a meeting of the Benevolent Society recorded that the chief cause of distress amongst the labouring classes continued to be 'want of work and precarious employment', not sickness or accidents (*SMH* 22 August 1905: 4).

In addition to government inquiries, the emerging public health movement and leading journals pointed to the serious community health consequences of the combination of poorly paid and insecure work. Journals like *The Lancet*, *British Medical Journal* and the *American Journal of Public Health* pointed to the connection between the irregular work of groups like dockworkers, sweated garment makers and navvies, and over-crowded and unhygienic housing that undermined health and contributed to the rapid spread of communicable diseases like anthrax, typhoid, tuberculosis and even the plague (see for example *British Medical Journal* 24 September 1887: 677; *The Lancet* 2 October 1909: 1013–1014; Creel 1916: 191–196; Dublin 1932: 281–291). Drawing on the work of Charles Booth, in 1887 *The Lancet* noted the link between the congregation of casual workers and poverty in the Tower hamlets of London, and the inability of these workers to meet the costs of educating their children (*The Lancet* 1 October 1887, 130(3344): 668–669). In 1888, *The Lancet* initiated its own commission

of inquiry into the sweating system, producing a series of vivid and disturbing reports on the conjunction of appalling working and living conditions based on observations in industrial towns from London to the Midlands, the North and Scotland.

Thomas Arlidge, a leading figure in occupational medicine in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw the amount of work, as measured both by its duration and intensity, as one of the key general conditions of labour affecting work-related disease. Arlidge (1892: 14) argued that in industries where demand for work was constant, labour was more likely to be treated conservatively (that is, sustainably), but asserted that where there was a fluctuation between deficient work and overwork, 'the health of workers must suffer from fluctuations in one or the other direction, directly and indirectly, needs no demonstration.'

Low and irregular earnings were a recipe for poverty which through poor diet or malnutrition, over-crowded unhygienic accommodation and disrupted sleep had wide-ranging effects on public health, children's education and the numbers depending on community support or begging. Reproducing a report in *The Times* on the difficulty of extending formal education in Britain, the *Hobart Town Courier* (24 March 1847: 4) pointed to the connection between 'penury, precarious employment, and numerous other disadvantages, with habitations that preclude habits of decency and cleanliness.' The effects of irregular pay and poverty were compounded by the hazardous nature of many precarious jobs (Quinlan 2011). A report on the Free Medical Dispensary in Collingwood, an industrial working class hub of inner Melbourne, noted that a large 'number of patients consisted of widows, deserted women and children, and infirm persons, who, because of scanty earnings or precarious employment, could not pay for medical attendance' (*Argus* 6 February 1871: 5). From the late nineteenth century, the implications of poverty of the precariously employed for their children was being used in debates on establishing state welfare measures like free education, school lunches and child endowment (see for example, *Brisbane Courier* 18 October 1934: 19).

In both the UK and Australia, the financial vicissitudes and social isolation of precarious employment were seen as conducive to petty crime. In 1848, the *Perth Inquirer* (7 June 1848: 2) stated that,

in Great Britain and Ireland millions of the labouring classes were either in a state of actual starvation, or dependent on a very precarious employment for earning a bare subsistence; that in consequence of this deplorable condition, to which so many were reduced, the gaols and hulks were crowded (see too *Adelaide Advertiser* 23 June 1904: 4).

Apart from these fears, there were also concerns about social dislocation, riots, the spread of radical political ideas and unrest. The Member for Dumfries (R. T. Reid) warned the House of Commons that it could not be presumed that the large numbers of poor congregated in towns dependent on irregular work 'will continue indefinitely to submit to a system which condemns them, their wives, and families, to a precarious existence in a wretched lodging, without much

decency or hope of improvement' (*HC Hansard* 02 April 1889 vol. 334: c1454). A year earlier, precarious employment was raised in a discussion of socialism at a conference of Anglican Bishops and Archbishops at Lambeth (*South Australian Register* 29 December 1888: 7). Similar points were being made in Australia. EW O'Sullivan, then a NSW MLA for the Protectionist Party and later for Labor, warned that 'when men have but precarious employment with wives and children dependent upon them, they naturally grow savage and discontented with their lot, and they are in a mood for conflicts with capitalism' (*SMH* 1 June 1891: 9).

For its part, organised labour saw insecure work as both a threat and a mobilising issue. The 1901 federal conference of the Society of Locomotive Engineers noted its members did not suffer the precarious employment which had blighted the development of other unions (*Adelaide Advertiser* 20 September 1901: 8). Both British and Australian unions campaigned against the sweating system — that combination of very low and irregular earnings with long hours often organised under subcontracting arrangements — that was dominant in areas like garment making. Casual labour and subcontracting, including what would now be termed outsourcing of work by government in areas like civil construction, attracted similar criticism from unions and sympathetic parliamentarians (see *South Australian Advertiser* 28 March 1859: 3; *West Australian* 11 August 1898: 2). By the last quarter of the nineteenth century, unions were mounting concerted campaigns against the tendering out of work, and calling for minimum wage provisions covering those engaged by contractors as well as lien laws to recover wages when contractors went bankrupt (see *West Australian* 27 February 1894: 7, and 11 March 1898: 3; *Brisbane Courier* 30 July 1895: 6). Efforts were also made to prevent subletting of tasks as a means of evading legislative protections such as the employer liability laws by, for example, inserting clauses making the principal contractor responsible for injuries incurred by workmen of subcontractors (see *Brisbane Courier* 18 August 1886: 4; *West Australian* 16 August 1894: 6, and 20 March 1897: 2).

From the late nineteenth century, de-casualisation and the removal of middlemen was a central policy objective of those unions representing unskilled labour and, over the course of the twentieth century, a number of more strategically placed unions were able to achieve permanent employment after decades of bitter struggle. Following inquiries in the immediate postwar era, both British and Australian governments intervened to regulate the dock work industry with devices including the registration of workers, hiring halls to allocate jobs on a non-discriminatory basis and government agencies to oversee employment relations (Turnbull and Sapsford 1991: 237–257; Sheridan 2006: 136–144). Permanency and restrictive labour practices redistributed available work and overcame the health-damaging effects of irregular hours. While this outcome was often ascribed to the mechanisation of dock work and especially containerisation, in the UK and Australia permanency actually preceded this. In fact, the progressive global re-casualisation of the industry after 1980 has given the lie to such technologically-deterministic and social agency-denying contentions.

The Value and Relevance of a Contextualised Debate

It is clear now that the notion of precarious employment has deep historical roots. However, while this is of obvious interest to labour and economic historians, others might contend that it adds little if anything to contemporary labour market analysis and debates. There are, however, good grounds for challenging such an interpretation.

First, the historical context reinforces our understanding of how prioritising private markets over social policy shapes work arrangements as well as the interventions needed to reverse this. As a number of contemporary observations cited in this article highlight, precarious employment flourished in a context where unemployment was widespread. It was no accident that disappearance of the term 'precarious employment' coincided with the growth of organised labour and collective bargaining, as well as the emergence of welfare states providing minimum labour standards laws, unemployment insurance, age pensions, state-funded education and the like. More especially, there were the impacts on employment of the introduction of Keynesian full-employment and income-redistributive policies (see Kaufman 2012 for US wages policy during the Great Depression). Following the upheaval of the Great Depression and World War Two, developed countries adopted Keynesian full-employment and redistributive policies. In combination with the other factors mentioned, these strengthened the bargaining power of workers, the role and influence of unions, and influenced the industrial relation strategies of both employers and the state. It is not coincidental that references to precarious employment all but disappeared from public debate during the long postwar boom.

Precarious employment did not disappear, remaining common in industries like construction and seasonal activities like agriculture. However, it was no longer a pervasive issue. For example, Paolo Sylos-Labini (1964) used the term to describe irregular employment amongst agricultural workers in Sicily. Nor is it coincidental that the term re-emerged following the abandonment of Keynesianism in favour of neoliberalism. This either brought or encouraged progressive erosion of the welfare state, a weakening of organised labour and renewed offensives by capital, including widespread use of outsourcing and supply chains to evade regulatory protections (see Bennett 1999). As in earlier periods, while precarious employment grew in periods of relative prosperity these trends are accentuated by recession or depressions. For example, a recent International Labour Office (ILO) report (2012: 8–11) found that following the global financial crisis, involuntary part-time and temporary work had increased in the vast majority of European Union (EU) member states. That report (ILO 2012: 12–15) also found temporary jobs tended to entail below average wage rates, and that both poverty and inequality had risen in 12 EU member states.

There are differences in work arrangements between the earlier period and today. For example, there is no historical equivalent to today's franchising or global supply chains and temporary agency work is more formalised than its nineteenth and early twentieth century precursors. Nonetheless, the parallels are striking. There is the growing use of subcontracted self-employment, temporary or casual labour and of home-based and remote work. Other parallels include the

concentration of vulnerable groups, like foreign workers, in precarious employment. In the nineteenth century, precarious employment was associated with exploitative forms of home-based work, indentured and child labour. Today these same patterns can be found within many so-called developing countries together with a large informal sector that is 'regulation-free', though often still linked to the formal sector through global supply chains (Benach et al. 2007, 2010). The informal sector, also known as the black economy or undeclared work, has grown in tandem with precarious employment in developed countries. Evidence from the EU (Williams and Nadin 2012: 196) suggests it is most prevalent in industries and activities also marked by a significant level of precarious employment, like household services, construction, personal services, hotel and restaurants, repair services and agriculture.

Second, there are lessons to be drawn with regard to social mobilisation. As noted earlier, Standing (2011) argues the growth of precarious employment has led to the emergence of a new and 'dangerous' under-class he calls the precariat. In identifying this group Standing (2011: 118) draws some parallels with social structures and attitudes to work in ancient Greece. Leaving aside a number of complexities, there may be value in seeing precarious workers as a distinct and identifiable social grouping. Those complexities include that the same business practices and policies expanding precarious work are also weakening the job security and working conditions of large numbers of those who continue to hold nominally ongoing employment.

However, this group is not so much new as renewed or re-emerged, and its role in social mobilisation and political agitation is liable to prove complex. During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, large numbers of the precariously employed, including children, were a conspicuous sight in the major cities of Europe, North America or Australia (Clopper 1912). The term precariously employed, and others describing the same group such as irregularly employed and the working poor, were well-recognised and the subject of considerable public debate. The working poor encapsulated a large group of workers whose low earnings, intermittent employment and lack of social support — unable to afford even the modest subscriptions of friendly or benefit societies — resulted in a precarious subsistence for them and their families. Neither accommodation nor food was assured, budgeting was impossible (given the unpredictability of their income) and injury or illness could threaten even survival. This group was both a source of social dislocation and threats to community health that aroused concern amongst some policy-makers. They were also the target of mobilising efforts by organised labour and social reformers with significant effects. For example, these efforts generated anti-sweating movements and the establishment of factory legislation and minimum labour standards. In short, mobilisation and agitation amongst this group was not insular but based on a wider alliance of organised labour and other groups — something which parallels recent experience (Quinlan and Sokas 2009).

Third, the reasons that precarious employment was viewed as a social problem, including its wider consequences for families and the community, have parallels with contemporary debates, including growing recognition of the cascading

social effects of poorly paid and irregular work. While precarious employment existed prior to the late eighteenth century (see Vitali 1983), the reorganisation of industry and work associated with the first industrial revolution made it a pervasive feature of the labour market, bringing with it social misery on a grand scale, including hazardous working and living conditions as well as poverty and substantial spill-over effects on the health, education and well-being of entire communities (Quinlan 2011). The level of absolute deprivation today is different thanks in part to the welfare state. There are, nonetheless, parallels with — for example — a growing body of international research into the health effects of downsizing and restructuring, job insecurity, long or irregular working hours (including unpaid overtime and ‘presenteeism’) that are a consequence of the new era of labour market ‘flexibility’ (Aronsson et al. 2000; Dew et al. 2005; Virtanen et al. 2005; Hughes and Parkes 2007; Boivin et al. 2007; Buxton et al. 2009).

For temporary workers, the pressures are stark: non-attendance means no pay as well as the risk of being down-shifted in ranking for future work or preferred shifts or losing their job altogether. Further, like their counterparts a century earlier, the experience of ‘flexibility’ in the engagement of temporary workers often translates into erratic streams of work and earnings. As Aronsson et al. (2005) observe however, workers have largely fixed living expenses and so cannot just adjust their consumption, or that of their dependents, to match these shifts in employer preference. Further, echoing the findings of government inquiries and medical journals like *The Lancet* a century ago (Quinlan 2011) recent research points to the health damaging effects not only of inequality at the workplace, but the location and quality of housing that flow from that inequality (see Muntaner et al. 2011). In other words, historical evidence reinforces recent research suggesting precarious employment needs to be understood not only in terms of its immediate workplace effects but also its broader social connections.

These connections were well understood a century ago, but the lessons have been ‘unlearned’ by policy makers still overwhelmingly wedded to neoliberal discourse. Indeed, notwithstanding evidence of the connection between the growth of precarious employment and poverty and social inequality (ILO 2012), the predominant response to the current ‘financial crisis’ (including that in the Eurozone) has been further cuts to state infrastructure and welfare, compounding the social effects on communities where both unemployment and insecure work is increasing. Kim et al. (2012) provide discussion of how differences in welfare state regimes are linked to differences in the health effects of precarious employment.

The connections or socially dislocating effects of precariousness mentioned above are also slowly being rediscovered and charted by a growing number of health researchers and other social scientists. Historical evidence provides not only a context and template for current research it also reinforces the need to respond to these findings and to avoid repeated cycles of learning and unlearning. In sum, there is much to be gained by placing both capital strategies for extracting surplus value and their implications for working and living conditions into a broader, historically informed context.

Conclusion

Far from being a product of labour market changes over the past four decades, precarious employment has been a pervasive feature of labour markets in developed countries since the first industrial revolution, apart from a brief interregnum in the 30 years after World War Two. Indeed, from the early nineteenth century until the 1930s, the term precarious employment was not only in regular use, but its use by policy makers and the press was similar — if not identical — to current understandings of the term, taking into account changes in the regulatory and social context. Putting precarious employment into this broader context provides additional insights into the policies and practices that give rise to precarious employment. The same point can be made in terms of the interventions required to restrict it, notably full-employment and redistributive policies, although more recent developments in global supply chains and international labour transfer mechanisms provide additional and serious challenges in this regard. There are also valuable if disturbing parallels between the wealth of historical evidence on the health and other social dislocating effects of precarious employment, and a growing body of international research into the effects of the renewed growth of precarious employment since the 1980s. Taken together, it reinforces the point that while the growth of 'flexible' work arrangements may entail efficiency or cost benefits for particular fragments of capital, it also entails shifting significant and additional costs (externalities or macroeconomic inefficiencies) onto workers and the broader community.

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