

Global Issues

The Future and Praxis of Decent Work

David Spooner, Global Labour Institute, United Kingdom
Peter Waterman, Erasmus University, The Netherlands

The two contributions to this Global Issues piece are based on keynote addresses to the 'Future and Praxis of Decent Work' Conference held at the University of Kassel, Germany, on 14 February 2013.

Part I: David Spooner *The Future of Decent Work*

The Global Labour Institute (GLI) in the UK is a not-for-profit organisation, established in 2010 in cooperation with the Global Labour Institute in Geneva and the Global Labor Institute at Cornell University, New York. GLI works closely with a range of global union federations, national trade unions, development agencies, research institutions and workers' education organisations. The GLI has specialist international experience in political education, organisation and trade union policy with informal economy workers, union capacity building, and the design and management of international workers' education programmes.

Decent Work has been the centrepiece of policy for the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and many of the institutions of the international trade union movement since 1999, when the ILO Secretary General proposed a primary goal for the ILO in the period of globalisation:

...securing decent work for women and men everywhere. It is the most widespread need, shared by people, families and communities in every society, and at all levels of development. Decent work is a global demand today, confronting political and business leadership worldwide. Much of our common future depends on how we meet this challenge (ILO, 1999).

The ILO determined four strategic pillars of the Decent Work Agenda: full and productive employment; rights at work; social protection; the promotion of social dialogue. Indicators of Decent Work were adopted that include:

- employment opportunities
- adequate earnings and productive work
- decent working time
- combining work, family and personal life
- work that should be abolished
- stability and security of work
- equal opportunity and treatment in employment

- safe work environment
- social security
- social dialogue, employers' and workers' representation (ILO, 2012).

Of course, these indicators are nothing new. The history of the trade union movement, since its earliest beginnings, has been dominated by the same basic demands, but they have only been achieved partially: in some countries, for some sections of the workforce, mostly for men, and only for a relatively short period – primarily in OECD countries during the second half of the twentieth century. The vast majority of workers have never experienced decent work. Today, the prospects for universal decent work are receding, critically undermined by financialisation of the corporations, and a neo-liberal consensus among governments, leading to the world-wide rise in *precarious work*.

In a recent survey of 51 transport unions in 38 countries undertaken by GLI for the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF), for example, 81% report precarious work in their transport workplace – the presence of temporary, fixed-term contracts, agency workers, subcontracted labour, and self-employed workers. In the least developed countries, the figure rose to 100%. A large 74% reported that informal work in their country's transport industry is on the rise – 100% in least-developed countries (GLI, 2013).

Evidence from other global union federations suggests that precarious work is on the rise across all sectors in every part of the world.

The ILO Workers' Activities Branch (ACTRAV) describes the key characteristics of precarious work to be the shift of risks and responsibilities from employer to worker, affecting workers in both formal and informal economies, and creating a working life of uncertainty and insecurity (ILO–ACTRAV, 2011).

ACTRAV identifies two key issues – the duration of the contract (fixed-term, short-term, temporary, seasonal, day-labour, casual labour) and changes in the employment relationship in the increasingly fragmented nature of the enterprise (sub-contractors, franchise-holders, agencies, disguised employment, bogus self-employment). This is particularly problematic in the context of legislation predominantly covering 'employees' rather than 'workers'.

There are now numerous examples of large companies operating with virtually no employees at all. A good example in the transport industry is the German-owned delivery company Hermes, now the UK's largest home delivery network, delivering 115 million parcels a year. The basis of the UK operation is 9 000 self-employed 'lifestyle couriers', mostly women, earning €0.60 per delivery, irrespective of location, from which they also have to cover the cost of transport in their own vehicles.

Trade unions, even in the OECD heartlands, and despite some isolated victories, are losing the battle against precarious work.

The growth of precarious work in all its forms is recognized today as one of the most important threats to the labour movement – perhaps the major threat to union organizing and bargaining... This massive violation of rights is sometimes described as a "challenge", the "challenge of flexibility" and similar formulations whose function is to conceal the truth. The denial of rights and degradation of work is accompanied by a purposeful degradation of language. But precarious work is not a challenge, it is a meticulously constructed assault (Oswald, 2011).

Some serious re-thinking is required if unions are to survive the battle. What are the implications?

Firstly, that in many cases, workers *are* organised, but not necessarily into trade unions. There are clear lessons to be gained from the experience of supporting organisation of workers in the informal economy (Bonner and Spooner, 2012). Vivid evidence can also be found in the

recent *Fast Food Forward* movement of fast-food workers in the USA, who organised major strikes and demonstrations in the summer of 2013, independently of trades unions, and inspired by the Occupy movement (*The Guardian*, 2013). If unions are to represent working people as a whole, such workers' organisations need to be embraced and encouraged within a broadened understanding of the nature of the modern 'labour movement'.

Secondly, many unions still resist a definition of worker beyond increasingly outmoded models of employee–employer relationships ('standard employment', as defined by the ILO). Unions need to be constitutionally inclusive of precarious and informal workers, and adopt new flexible structures and procedures that take them into account. At best, unions could consider a new 'union for life' membership, whereby any worker can hold the same union card as they progress through their working life, irrespective of sectors of employment, periods of unemployment, temporary contracts, self-employment, etc. In the UK, Unite the Union provides a good example, through its Community Membership scheme (see <http://www.uniteunion.org/growing-our-union/communitymembership>).

Thirdly, we need to redefine the meaning of collective bargaining when there is no direct employment relationship, or no employment relationship at all. Just because a worker is self-employed, it does not mean that there is no need to bargain collectively with a wide range of bargaining counterparts. In the case of bogus self-employment, this counterpart is obviously the 'real', perhaps hidden, employer. For genuinely self-employed workers, especially those in the informal economy, there is a wide range of counterparts – government agencies, regulators, suppliers, banks, law enforcement agencies, and so on.

Finally, there may be signs of a rediscovery of class politics and, in Europe, a rejection of social partnership unionism, belief in corporate social responsibility and hollow demands for a *Social Europe*. Even the normally cautious International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) is showing signs of frustration. Recent statements from General Secretary Sharan Burrow suggest a hardening of trade union politics:

If during the crisis workers' organisations could have anticipated that a new era of dialogue had begun, the moment has clearly passed. Our social "partners" have left the restaurant and presented us with the bill: austerity, tax increases, wage concessions, increased precariousness, public sector retrenchment, cuts in public pensions, and so on (Burrow, 2011a).

We are now in a labour war effectively across Europe, the U.S., emerging democracies. Why? Because the old stakeholders who drove the neo-liberal economic policies that would seem to be foul policies, the Washington consensus if you'd like, are back in control. We thought the global financial crisis showed them this was a failed economic model. We were wrong. We have now a situation where we are largely engaged in what I can only describe as a labour war (Burrow, 2011b).

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Part II: Peter Waterman

Beyond Labourism, Development and Decent Work

For any discussion of working conditions today, we need to go beyond development, decent work and labour(ism). For various reasons largely to do with conceptualisation, as these terms assume, we have to naturalise and normalise – or put a positive value on – exactly that which needs to be questioned.

On its own, the term *labour* does not differentiate between work ‘for and under capitalism’ (that is, alienated labour; wage slavery; commodified, socially and ecologically destructive labour), and work for self- or collectively-determined ends that are creative, cooperative, humane, solidaristic and ecologically friendly. This underlies ‘labourism’.

Labourism emphasises paid work – but narrowly defines the notion of work – and ‘achievement of economic security and the rights of citizenship through paid work’ (Pasma, 2014). *Development* assumes that the core capitalist countries are ‘developed’, that the peripheral

ones are ‘undeveloped’, ‘underdeveloped’ or ‘developing’, and that the future of Nigeria, Turkmenistan or Peru is to mimic that of the USA, Greece, The Netherlands or Spain. All these countries are now becoming accustomed to ‘Brazilianisation’.

Decent, when applied to work, is surely a traditional Christian or Social-Christian notion, reminding us that the labourer is worthy of his hire, or a fair day’s wage for a fair day’s work.

Particularly when combined, these terms constrain discussion and action within the ideological and social framework of capitalism. The notion of decent work as a labour movement strategy, whether in so-called developing countries or globally, does not consider production nor what is being produced, control over or the nature of the production process, nor, obviously, what Marxists call alienated work, or socialists ‘the exploitation of man by man. Therefore, decent work makes capitalism invisible – at a moment in which there has never been so much in contention, not simply from those talking about ‘a crisis of [capitalist] civilisation’, but even when the BBC World Service was promoting its coverage of the World Economic Forum 2013!

Further, there is the problematic source of the very concept of decent work. The ILO is a supposedly ‘tripartite’ structure (implying or evoking three equal parts), but it is one in which for a hundred years, and without ‘labour’ criticism or complaint, the unions (25%) have accepted being subordinated to the state (50%) and corporations (25%). This is surely to accept a subaltern (in the military, if not the Gramscian, sense) position and identity.

And ‘labour’ at ILO conferences actually means *unions*, paid by ‘their’ states, representing no more than maximally 15–20% of the world’s wage force. (Most recently South Africa’s Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU, 2014) has said it is 7%!)

For these reasons, decent work is in danger of appearing as a social-liberal adjustment and an uncritical response to neo-liberal globalisation. It seems as likely to make work decent as the ILO’s World Employment Programme reduced unemployment. It did not. Failed ILO strategies are customarily buried, without obituaries, flowers or even funerals. Most trade unions, national and international, have accepted and endorsed decent work, without question or membership discussion, thus reducing themselves to ideological/political agents of an inter-state body, promoting policies outwards and downwards (rather than developing them from below and beyond).

Where is or was the utopia of decent work to be found? Some might claim that it happened in Scandinavia around 1975. But even if this existed, exists or could exist, the nature of *work* is usually not critiqued. Nor do those we might call decent workers ask why the Decent Work/Welfare State/Keynesian compromise broke down even in the highly unionised Scandinavian utopia, nor whether one can simply promote a national Welfare Stateism or Keynesianism to a global level. I would argue that we cannot promote this effectively, nor can we gain traction in resurrecting a hoped-for utopia. Did not the passive acceptance in Scandinavia and elsewhere of such ideas as decent work actively *disarm* the labour movement when confronted with less decent and indecent work?

What are the strategy implications of decent work? The notion assumes benevolent hegemony (capital and state, national and international), which are in reality universally demonstrating continuing or *increasing* hostility to labour and unions. Thus decent work can provide standards which the unionised or un-unionised might fight for, but it simultaneously diverts attention from the economic, social and political conditions which actually determine work-under-capitalism – and the recognition that ‘capitalism is not working’, that ‘capitalism is not *in* crisis, that capitalism *is* the crisis’. Decent work is, therefore, analogous to liberal, parliamentary or capitalist democracy, certainly preferable to other forms of capitalist hegemony (meaning it provides space for class and other social struggles), but which is *decreasingly* democratic.

Critics of decent work come from a rather wide range of left positions. My own earlier take (Waterman, 2005) allows for the possibility of the concept being *exploited* by the labour

movement. But that would require that labour *critique it* and *use it*, not identify with and celebrate it. Guy Standing (2008, 2009) dismisses decent work and the ILO, and castigates the ‘labourist’ assumptions underlying both. Felix Hauf (2010) challenges decent work in feminist cultural-political-economic terms: ‘Decent Work ... neglects the fact that capitalism is a very dynamic mode of production that reproduces itself precisely through its constant remodelling, driven by small and big crises necessarily produced by its own accumulation model.’

Franco Barchiesi (2012) and the Tribe of Moles (2011) in South Africa extend a critique of decent work to ‘work creation’ projects and, indeed, ‘work for capitalism’ in general. Andre Gorz (1999), argues for the possibility and necessity of a labour movement strategy oriented toward the ‘liberation of life from work’. Euromayday (2004) poses the *precarariat* as a potentially emancipatory force. While many have taken issue with the concept, it has not only subverted labourist assumptions but given rise to a lively debate on the concept and the consequences for labour movement strategy (Munck, 2013; Seymour, 2012).

The Tribe of Moles (2011) say: ‘At stake [is] a shift from “welfare” to “commonfare” as a horizon of contestation to reopen across the social fabric the battle deferred (when not lost) at the point of production.’

Marisa Serrano and Edlira Xhafa (2011) argue for collective self-activity among working people, favouring emancipatory elements that are critical to the development of a transformative consciousness, that increase self-organisation among workers and the poor, sustain their political activism and enhance direct participation and decision making among them. Chris Carlson (2009) gives examples of contemporary work defying capitalist logic. He says that just as capitalism began with the enclosure of the pre-existing commons, the emancipatory project is one of re-establishing these under contemporary conditions – which include a cyberspatial commons.

The Basic Income Earth Network (BIEN) favours an income unconditionally granted to all on an individual basis, without means test or work requirement. It is a form of minimum income guarantee that is paid without requiring the performance of any work or the willingness to accept a job if offered. It favours liberty and equality, efficiency and community, common ownership of the Earth and equal sharing in the benefits of technical progress, the viability of cooperatives, autonomy from bosses, husbands and bureaucrats (<http://www.basicincome.org/bien/aboutbasicincome.html>).

A radical reduction of the workday to four hours or the working week to 30 hours is being increasingly argued for, both South and North. It would seem to not only dramatically reduce un- and under-employment, but be a step toward ‘the liberation of time from work’ (Gorz, 1999).

In conclusion, there are reforms that make, at best, a quantitative improvement in life within work and others that raise profound questions about work-for-capitalism, that increase worker power, that open a path to a post-capitalist future. Decent work, while blessed by the ILO and the ITUC, seems likely to have a limited shelf life. There is not, however, one magical alternative to decent work. My own alternative to both decent work and other single-shot, magic-bullet alternatives (including a ‘revolution’ that is eventually ‘betrayed’, or repeatedly ‘postponed’) is contained in my [Global Labour Charter Project](#). This includes the principle of worldwide dialogue and repeated renewal.

The point, surely, is to develop through an open global (worldwide, holistic) dialogue a series of strategies ‘beyond the capitalist canon’ that can not only be discussed by all working people globally, but that can also articulate labour struggles with those of the presently much broader, more active more attractive [Global Justice and Solidarity Movement](#).

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

DAVID SPOONER is an active international trade unionist and Co-Director of the Global Labour Institute. [Email: dave.spooner@global-labour.net]

PETER WATERMAN (London, 1936), worked for the World Federation of Trade Unions in Communist Prague in the 1960s, did his PhD on Lagos port and dockworkers, taught on Third World unions and social movements at the Institute of Social Studies, The Hague (1972-98), edited the *Newsletter of International Labour Studies* in the 1980s, has published widely, and in several languages, on labour and social movement internationalisms, and on (computerised) communication in relation to such. He has recently published (online and free) his autobiography, *Itinerary of a Long-Distance Internationalist*. He has had visiting positions at universities in South Africa, the USA, the UK and Spain. [Email: peterwaterman1936@gmail.com]