

Precarity North and South: A Southern Critique of Guy Standing

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ABSTRACT

Guy Standing is among the most provocative and influential analysts of the rise of precarious work around the world. His writing is part of a wave of global labour studies that has documented the spread of precarious work throughout the Global North and South. However, this article argues that by treating precarity around the world as a single phenomenon, produced by globalisation, the work of Standing and others obscures the different and much longer history of precarious work in the Global South. This article shows how many of the features that Standing associates with the contemporary “precariat” have long been widespread among Southern workers. This longer history of precarity has important implications for contemporary debates about a new politics of labour, which is a central focus of Standing’s recent work.

KEY WORDS

precariat; precarious work; precarity; South Africa; Global Labour Studies

Introduction: Precarious Work North and South

The past decade has witnessed the flowering of globally oriented labour studies (Burawoy, 2009; Munck, 2010; Waterman, 2012). This new wave of scholarship is not unprecedented in its focus on workers in the Global South. Indeed, some prominent voices in today’s global labour studies were previously key participants in what was called “new international labour studies” (NILS) in the 1980s (Munck, 1988). Yet while there are continuities between NILS and contemporary global labour studies, in a certain sense the intellectual projects underlying these two bodies of literature are the inverse of one another. The aim of NILS and much other earlier work on Southern workers was, as Ronaldo Munck (2009: 617) has put it, to “mainstream” fields of inquiry that were then compartmentalised as “third world studies”. NILS-oriented scholarship insisted that “the study of labour in India, Latin America or South Africa was ... as important as what [was] then called ‘metropolitan’ labour studies” (Munck, 2009: 617). In other words, NILS argued that scholars should treat Southern workers as similar to their Northern counterparts, recognising their agency and their importance to economic and political developments within their countries.

The global labour studies of today is much less likely to argue that the Southern working class resembles, or will come to resemble, the working class of the North. Scholars now increasingly recognise that “[t]he long-cherished idea that the nations of latecomers in the process of transformation will follow in the footsteps of the frontrunners, has not proven to be valid” (Breman and Van der Linden, 2014: 937). Instead, many scholars have reached the opposite conclusion. As

Jan Breman and Marcel van der Linden (2014: 937) put it, it increasingly seems that “the West is more likely to follow the Rest than the other way around”. This realisation has finally pushed labour scholarship beyond its traditional focus on organised, formally employed workers. Precarious work has become a central focus of the field as scholars attempt to both analyse the present and understand the seeming future of work across much of the world.

This global focus is a welcome antidote to the parochialism and Euro/US-centrism of mainstream labour studies, and indeed of much mainstream social science more broadly (Connell, 2007; Burawoy, Chang and Hsieh, 2010; Bhambra, 2014). However, as precarity has come to be analysed as a global phenomenon, there has been a tendency to employ a somewhat simplistic assumption of global convergence. While precarious work has been on the rise throughout the world, fundamental differences in the histories of work, and of workers, in the Global North and Global South should caution against viewing precarity as a universal phenomenon whose meanings and implications are cognate for workers everywhere.

This article presents a critique of the work of Guy Standing, who has written some of the most influential analyses of precarious work as a global phenomenon (Standing, 2011, 2014). His ideas and terminology have influenced debates about contemporary work around the world. However, his work also provides an example of the problematic tendency to universalise the causes and effects of precarious work. In his most recent book *A Precariat Charter: From Denizens to Citizens*, he explicitly turns to the question of formulating a new politics of labour for the precarious age which can replace what he sees as the increasingly obsolete politics of the “old” working class. Standing deserves praise for this model of politically engaged research. Unlike most critical scholarship that stops at diagnosing problems, he has the intellectual courage to advance clear positions about potential solutions to the crisis facing many of the worlds’ workers. However, in doing so he brings into relief many of the problems with simplistic assumptions of global convergence.

In part, Standing’s simplification of geographic and historical diversity is understandable. It is the natural inclination of someone making a call for a specific programme of political action. However, an understanding of the different histories of work in the North and South is not merely a matter of academic “correctness”. The central argument of this article is that, by ignoring the much longer history of precarious work in the Global South, Standing and others blind themselves to important lessons from and examples of anti-precariety labour politics among Southern workers.

The article begins by examining the Eurocentric historical narrative that lies behind Standing’s idea of precarity. It shows how he contrasts precarious work with a non-precarious past defined by stable employment, welfare provisions and other features of Northern countries’ histories which are virtually unknown in the history of Southern countries. The next section considers three of the ten “defining features” that Standing uses to describe contemporary precarious work, namely a “detachment from labour”, “distinctive relations of distribution”, and “distinctive relations to the state”. In Southern countries these are not recent products of contemporary precarity, but long-standing features of wage work; they have shaped workers’ politics from the colonial era, through the period of post-independent development, and into the neo-liberal present. The final section describes how this longer experience of precarity in the South has shaped a distinctive Southern labour politics. In particular, it highlights new forms of organising, labour’s use of social coalitions to push for the opening of democratic spaces, and demands for new forms of social protection, all of which have defined labour politics of the South in the neo-liberal era. It has become especially

important to understand this Southern politics, since Northern workers are now facing similar forms of precarity and looking for new political strategies to build labour movements of the present and future.

The Eurocentric Narrative: A Golden-age Past versus the Precarious Present

In contemporary labour studies, precarious work is generally associated with the globalisation era. Standing makes the association between globalisation and precarious work explicit. He argues that “globalization ... has generated a [new] class structure, superimposed on earlier structures” in which the precariat has emerged as the key class. While most of Standing’s examples of precarious work and the precariat class come from Europe, he does make some references to Southern countries, especially China and India. For example, Foxconn in China, with its “flexible manufacturing” model, is held up as an exemplar of how globalisation is remaking the global experience of work (Standing, 2014: 47).

Despite these references to contemporary Southern precarity, the historical narrative that Standing presents comes from a clear Northern perspective. Because he views precarious work as a product of the globalisation era, most of the story he tells takes place from the 1980s to the present. However, there is a longer history which is implicit in the contrast he frequently draws between contemporary precarity and an earlier era of secure wage work. He recognises that there has always been “insecure”, “uncertain” and “volatile” labour. However, he argues, in the past these forms of work were the exception, whereas today they are the norm (Standing, 2014: 17). In this more secure past the working class was defined by “proletarianisation” which signified a “reliance of mass labour, reliance on wage income, absence of control or ownership of the means of production, and habituation to stable labour” (Standing, 2014: 15).

For Standing, it is this bygone golden age of secure work which produced the specific form of labour politics which has now become obsolete:

From the nineteenth century up to the 1970s, the representatives of the proletariat – social democratic and labour parties, and trade unions – strove for labour de-commodification through making labour more ‘decent’ and raising incomes via a shift from money wages to enterprise and state benefits. ... All labour and communist parties, social democrats and unions subscribed to this agenda, calling for ‘more labour’ and ‘full employment’, by which was meant all men in full-time jobs (Standing, 2014: 15–16).

Of course, even in the Global North, this old labour politics was often a guiding vision rather than a widespread reality. Significant portions of the Northern working class were never incorporated into the kind of institutions Standing describes. But it is accurate to say that Northern labour politics was shaped by this vision, even where and when it wasn’t fully realised.

In the Global South, by contrast, it can be said that, despite significant variation, there were very few places where a golden age comparable to the one that Standing describes ever seemed like a possibility for more than a tiny portion of the working class. For workers in much of the former colonial world, precarity is not new, but has been a defining feature of work throughout the colonial past and into the present era of national independence. In the period that Standing identifies as the

pinnacle of “old” working class politics, the late nineteenth to the mid twentieth centuries, workers in much of the Global South were struggling against colonial occupation. Colonial work regimes were more likely to be violent, despotic and repressive than secure and stable. Yet this repression was not limited to the workplace. As a result, the politics of labour that emerged in the colonial world was always broader and less focused on the workplace than the “old” working class politics that Standing describes.

Because of this different history, the narrative that frames the precarious present as a decline from a golden age in the past is inadequate for understanding contemporary work and the contemporary politics of labour in the South.

The next section of this article turns to some of the key features that, for Standing, define contemporary precarious workers. I draw on both recent and historical scholarship on Southern labour, as well as my own research on precarious work in South Africa and elsewhere, to show that many of the features that Standing associates with today’s precarious workers were experienced by Southern workers long before the globalisation era. As a result, the politics of work in the Global South, which has emerged under these conditions of precarity, can provide a lesson to those like Standing who hope for a reformulation of traditional labour politics in the North.

Three Features of the Precarious Past of Southern Workers

In *A Precariat Charter*, Standing presents ten “defining features” that set the precariat apart as a distinct contemporary class. While a case could be made that all ten features were experienced by workers in the Global South before globalisation, this section focuses on three features: detachment from labour, distinctive relations of distribution, and distinctive relations to the state. These three features are used to show that the longer experience of precarity in the South has shaped a distinct politics of Southern labour, which holds important lessons for contemporary struggles against precarious work around the world.

By speaking about the experiences of “Southern workers” as a whole, there is a risk of reproducing the same over-simplification that this article criticises in Standing’s analysis. The following is not meant as an account of the experiences of all Southern workers, just as the generalised “decline from a golden age” narrative should not be assumed to apply to all workers in the North. The purpose here is to show how a generalised history of precarity from a Southern perspective points to forms of both historical and contemporary labour politics which are obscured by the Eurocentric narrative.

Detachment from labour

Standing argues that:

Those in the precariat are more likely to have a psychological detachment from labour, being only intermittently or instrumentally involved in labour, and not having a single labour status – often being unsure what to put under ‘occupation’ on official forms.... They are therefore more likely to feel alienated from the dull, mentally narrowing jobs they are forced to endure and to reject them as a satisfying way of working and living (Standing, 2014: 23–24).

For Standing this detachment from labour sets precarious workers apart from members of the “old” working class, whose identities were firmly and unambiguously built around their roles as workers. However, this sort of “attachment” to labour was never universal. It was limited to a very specific period of history, and primarily in Northern countries. Detachment from labour, far from being a recent phenomenon, has been the norm for most workers throughout the history of capitalism. Even within Europe, peasants and early industrial workers exhibited a fierce resistance to dispossession and proletarianisation. As Michael Burawoy (1982: s9–s10) has argued “popular class struggles of the 19th century [in Europe arose] not where proletarianization and deskilling had advanced the most, but where they were being resisted”. This resistance to proletarianisation suggests a strong detachment from, even a rejection of, the experience of wage labour. While such resistance was marginal in the North during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, it has remained central to the labour politics of workers in the Global South. Semi-proletarian Southern workers who fight to maintain access to non-wage income sources display exactly the kind of “intermittent” and “instrumental” approach to labour that Standing associates with the contemporary precariat. However, this detachment from labour of today’s Southern workers is part of a long legacy of distinct forms of labour struggle, and is not simply a product of globalisation or contemporary precarity.

Africa is the region where resistance to wage work has been most extensively analysed (Hyden, 1980; Cooper, 1987; Bundy, 1988). According to Bill Freund (1988: 30–31), “For African workers, total commitment to a proletarian life-style was rarely the most attractive of options. ... Wage labour was most desirable when it could be combined with systematic exploitation of subsistence production on a household basis at the same time”. But Southern workers’ resistance to full proletarianisation was not limited to Africa, nor to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Shaohua Zhan and Lingli Huang (2012) have shown how the labour shortage in China’s coastal industrial cities which has pushed up urban wages over the past decade is driven largely by rural workers choosing to remain in rural areas, relying on a mix of income from rural employment, their own agricultural production, and non-farm rural business activities. For Zhan and Huang this reliance on non-wage income represents an alternative source of bargaining power among Southern workers. Liliana Goldin finds a similar reluctance to abandon rural connections among *maquiladora* workers in Guatemala, who use the practice of “turning over”, or periodically quitting jobs to return to rural homes to “show that they are still in transition, not fully proletarianized, but keeping a foot in agricultural practices. As such, turnover can be construed as an expression of resistance to a version of capitalism that does not fit with expectations of a modern, better life, removed from agriculture (Goldin, 2011: 151).

Michael Levien’s (2012) work on peasant resistance to land dispossession in contemporary India provides another example of fights against full proletarianisation. Levien focuses on the widespread “land grabs” in India which appropriate rural land for uses – such as high-end housing estates, commercial property developments, and offices for IT support companies – which offer few benefits to the poor land owners who are dispossessed. These land grabs have become flash points of conflict and resistance because many “Indian farmers ... can see – quite rightly – that the types of development proposed for their farmland will create no place for them, or at least not a good enough place to warrant surrendering their land” (Levien, 2012: 965–966).

All of these examples of contemporary workers’ detachment from labour have very little in common with the underemployed urban youth who constitute a significant portion of the

precariat movements of Europe. For these Southern workers, the detachment from labour that modern precarious work creates is not a “problem” for existing forms of labour politics. These workers are able to draw on an alternative “old” politics of labour in the Global South, which has long seen wage labour as disempowering. There is a continuity between peasant resistance to proletarianisation and dispossession in nineteenth-century Africa and the contemporary practice of “turning over” among *maquiladora* workers in Central America.

These examples also show how, in the South, detachment from labour is intricately related to an attachment to land. Throughout the long history of precarious work in the South, workers have often seen access to land and other forms of non-wage income as a form of resistance and a basis for autonomy. One implication of this is that a significant portion of Southern workers have long histories of complex mixed-livelihood strategies. This fact is important to keep in mind when considering the Southern perspective on another of Standing’s defining features of the precariat, what he calls their “distinctive relations of distribution”.

Distinctive relations of distribution

By highlighting the contemporary precariat’s “distinctive relations of distribution, or remuneration”, Standing (2014: 18) is referring to what he sees as an increased commodification of precarious workers’ livelihoods, as they lose access to social income and come to rely increasingly on wages earned in the labour market. He contrasts this with the decommodification that marked the experience of workers in the twentieth century, when “the trend was away from [reliance on] money wages, with a rising share of social income coming from enterprise and state benefits” (Standing, 2014: 18).

However, this decommodification was a feature of Northern states and does not accurately capture the historical experience of Southern workers. As Kevin Harris and I (2015) have argued, although commodification of livelihoods is generally associated with the neo-liberal era, in many important respects the mid-twentieth-century developmental era was a period of widespread commodification for Southern workers. In the period of state-led development, Southern states aimed to foster capitalist growth by transferring labour from rural and agricultural settings to the urban and industrial sectors. Industrialisation and urbanisation were processes which diminished workers’ access to non-wage income on a grand scale in the middle of the twentieth century. So the picture was significantly different in the South in the era during which Standing argues the “trend” for workers was “away from money wages” and towards “social income”.

That is not to diminish the fact that Southern workers’ crisis of livelihoods was made worse by policies of the neo-liberal era. As Harris and I have put it, “Post-war development policies had already increased mass reliance on markets for income and social reproduction, but by removing market regulations and social protections, neoliberal policies turned these vulnerabilities into full-blown crises” (Harris and Scully, 2015: 424). However, because the starting point of Southern economies was not widespread security and stability, the effect of neo-liberal policies on the class structures in these countries is not the same as in the North.

Standing argues that the decline of access to social incomes has fragmented the class structure, separating the precariat from the more privileged old working class who retain some of the security and protection that was associated with stable twentieth-century labour. In most of the South, decommodified social protection was never widely available in the twentieth century. Therefore, even relatively secure wage workers have long had a tendency to rely on complex

livelihood strategies that combine wages with non-wage income sources such as subsistence production (of both food and other reproductive needs), petty commodity production for the market, small-scale trading, as well as solidarity and reciprocity in various forms. This is not meant to suggest that Southern workers have been naturally altruistic or inherently cooperative. Especially in the contemporary period, a great deal of research has shown how increasing precarity has fractured networks of support and mutuality (Mosoetsa, 2011; Bähre, 2014). However, it is a fact that, in the face of the precarious economic realities that Southern workers have faced for generations, pooling of household income has been a key economic strategy for survival.

In the South, the class structure cannot be easily divided into those who retain access to secure wages and social protections and those who are precarious. In order to understand how precarious forms of employment have affected the class structure, it is necessary to analyse how the complex livelihood strategies of Southern workers have changed as work has become less secure. Obviously, this question does not have a single answer that applies to the entire Global South. However, my own research and that of others looking at this question in South Africa point to a very different contemporary class structure than the “fragmented” model that Standing posits. As Claire Ceruti (2013: 104) has argued, summarising her analysis of the class structure in Johannesburg’s largest township, “understanding class in Soweto in an era of work restructuring requires primarily a consideration of how the worlds of work are mixed at the level of the household”. Furthermore, she argues, the instability of those who do have formal wage work means that individuals frequently “move between different worlds of work over the course of their lifetime” (Ceruti, 2013: 112). The combination of “mixed” households and work status instability mean the fragmented class structure that Standing identifies is not readily apparent in this part of Johannesburg.

[I]n the case of Soweto, many unemployed and informal workers rub shoulders with the employed in former council housing. Out of all the categories of waged employees, only teachers and nurses were completely absent from shack settlements. Trade union members were present in both squatter settlements and in areas dominated by people with steady jobs. Any of these individuals could form a node in a network to link one world of work with another (Ceruti, 2013: 122).

My own research on workers’ household livelihoods in South Africa suggests that Ceruti’s findings are applicable beyond Soweto as well. Using data from a nationally representative household survey, the National Income Dynamics Study (NIDS), I identified two sets of what could be considered relatively “secure” or “stable” workers, namely formal workers and unionised workers. Table 1 analyses the membership of these relatively better-off workers’ households. Specifically, it identifies the percentage of formal or unionised workers’ households which also contain an unemployed member, an informally employed member, or a member who receives a government social grant.

Table 1: Security and precarity within households

Household Type	% that also includes a member who...			
	...is unemployed	...is informally employed	...receives a grant	...is in any of these three categories
Formal Workers' Households	25%	22%	30%	52%
Union Members' Households	26%	27%	26%	54%

As the rightmost column indicates, the majority of “secure” workers live in households that contain at least one precarious member. Given the volatility of the South African labour market, it is likely that even more “secure” workers’ households would contain precarious members if we looked across time, rather than at the snapshot that the data used here provides.

The workers’ households described in Ceruti’s and my own research suggests a very different relationship between precarious and more secure workers than the one that Standing presents. Members of Standing’s precariat are a new and separate class because they have lost access to sources of non-wage income while a more privileged, but shrinking, section of the working class has retained the security provided by enterprise and state benefits. In South Africa, the rise of precarity does not seem to have driven sections of the working class apart to the same degree. Instead, precarious workers and the unemployed live their social and economic lives alongside many of the remaining formally employed workers. Their interdependence signals a material link between precarious workers and formal wage work. At the same time, formal workers’ ties to their precarious family members likely make their economic situations less stable and secure than they seem if we look only at the workplace.

Neither Soweto nor South Africa as a whole can tell us about the experiences of all Southern workers. But these examples do show how the transformation of work in the era of globalisation has not had the fragmenting effects on all of the working class that Standing suggests. This seems especially likely for Southern workers who have relied on livelihood strategies that mixed wage-income with various non-wage sources of income since long before the period of globalisation. To use Standing’s phrase, the “relations of distribution” for precarious and more secure workers have not necessarily become distinct from one another. This has important implications for the prospects of anti-precarious labour politics.

Distinctive relations to the state

For Standing, a third defining feature of the contemporary precariat is their “distinctive relations to the state”. Specifically, he argues that members of the precariat lack a range of basic rights which the state has historically provided to its citizens. Standing argues, therefore, that members of the precariat are modern-day *denizens*, or individuals who lack full citizenship rights. The implication is that strong and universal forms of citizenship were a feature of political life before the rise of precarious work. Again, while this narrative is partially applicable to the Global North, the history in the South is markedly different.

In the mid twentieth century, the citizenship rights enjoyed by Northern workers reached an

apex with the construction of Northern welfare states. As Standing notes through his discussion of T.H. Marshall, twentieth-century Northern welfare states clearly linked the rights of citizenship with citizens' roles as workers (Standing, 2014: 2–3). In contrast, for the first half of the twentieth century, the majority of Southern workers were denied almost all citizenship rights under various forms of colonial government. The wave of independence in the middle of the century did transform these workers from subjects into citizens. However, their relationships to their new states rarely included rights based on their identity as workers.

For Southern workers, the “social compact” of the mid twentieth century was not built around social protection, but around the promise of national development (McMichael, 2011). Security and stability were not entitlements of citizenship, but future goals which would be achieved through successful national development. This produced a very different type of politics, and a different relationship to the state, among Southern workers. Sakhela Buhlungu's argument about the emergence of the African labour movement could be applied to unions in many parts of the Global South:

The ubiquitous hand of the colonial system, including at the workplace, meant that the emergence of trade unions was more than merely a response to conditions of economic exploitation by employers. It was simultaneously a response to the conditions of political oppression created by colonialism.... African trade unions were therefore economic and political creatures from the early days of their existence (Buhlungu, 2010: 198).

Even after independence, the development imperative that animated the politics of new countries meant that Southern workers were more likely to be subject to government repression and control than to be beneficiaries of class-based rights like their Northern counterparts. The few examples of significant developmental social protection, such as the guaranteed employment of China's “iron rice bowl”, differed sharply from the democratic and citizenship-expanding welfare systems of the North. Anti-democratic labour relations were a standard feature of Southern states pursuing development. As Gay Seidman put it:

Where it has occurred, capitalist industrialization in the Third World has generally been marked by intensified inequalities: states seeking to attract or retain capital have often turned to political and labor repression, postponing both democracy and redistribution in the effort to promote growth (Seidman, 1994: 8).

Seidman's comparative study of labour movements in Brazil and South Africa provides one of the clearest analyses of the way in which this specific “relation to the state” produced a different class politics among Southern unions. Seidman shows how unions in these countries adopted strategies of social movement unionism (see also Webster, 1988), which linked workers' demands to broader social and political issues. Her comparison aims to uncover whether there is “something in the organization of newly industrializing societies that stimulates social movement unionism” (Seidman, 1994: 3). Based on her own work and subsequent research on Southern unions' politics, the answer seems to be yes.

Conclusion: Anti-precarity Politics of the Global South

Standing's writing on the rise of precarious forms of work constitutes one of the most thoroughgoing accounts of transformations that have taken place in the world of work over the past three decades. The Southern critique of his work that is presented here is not meant to deny the importance of the very real trends that he has identified. However, taking a Southern perspective on the history of precarious work does call into question some of the political implications of his findings in Southern countries. The heart of *A Precariat Charter* is a call for a new form of class politics, which can replace the outmoded politics of what Standing repeatedly calls the "old working class". The above discussion has tried to show that the old working class of the South is quite different from the one Standing has in mind.

The Southern old working class shared many of the characteristics of the precariat, which Standing identifies as the "emerging" class of the twenty-first century. This recognition is important for thinking about the possibilities of a potential anti-precarity labour politics in both the North and the South. As Standing notes, citing Przeworski (1985), "[old] working class politics were defined and shaped through struggles and not clearly perceived beforehand" (Standing, 2014: 133). Similarly, the politics of anti-precarity has already begun to emerge in the South in a number of important respects. Simplistic assumptions of convergence between the experience of work, class structure and labour politics in the North and South obscure important lessons that can be drawn from Southern workers' long history of struggles against precarity.

This article has argued that a narrative which frames precarious work in contrast to a secure past is inaccurate for most workers in the Global South. Yet despite the long-standing existence of precarious work in the Global South, the era of globalisation and neo-liberalism are important to any periodisation of Southern labour. In the North the period of the 1980s to the present has witnessed the steady erosion of work security and the subsequent undermining of what Standing calls the "old" politics of labour. The same period in the South has seen the emergence of new forms of labour politics through which workers confronted precarity in the workplace and beyond. The social movement unionism that Seidman identified in South Africa and Brazil was part of this new politics of Southern labour. Later research has shown that these new tactics and strategies were not limited to a few countries. In fact, the 1980s and 1990s were a period of innovation and militancy for workers in many parts of the Global South (Minns, 2001; Silver, 2003; Kraus, 2007; Ford, 2009). If one had to identify a golden age of unionism in the South, the 1980s and 1990s are much stronger candidates than the mid twentieth century. Some of these late twentieth-century developments faced challenges in the early part of the twenty-first century. Yet even in the current period, across the Global South, there continues to be a proliferation of both old-style labour politics in the form of industrial strikes and union organising (Butollo and Ten Brink, 2012; Chinguno, 2013; Anner and Liu, 2015) and innovative new forms of collective action among vulnerable workers (Chun, 2009; Agarwala, 2013; McCallum, 2013).

Because of the narrative of decline which frames most discussions of labour in the contemporary era, these developments are often characterised as relatively futile struggles of hyper-exploited precarious workers. Yet the struggles of Southern workers in the last thirty years have achieved a range of meaningful gains. Jon Kraus' and his colleagues' analysis of unions' role in the wave of democratisation that took place across Africa in the 1980s and 1990s provides a concrete example of workers winning historic victories during a period in which many scholarly narratives dismiss the political potential of labour (Kraus, 2007). The labour movements that

drove this political transformation were not simply a delayed version of mid twentieth century old working class politics of the North. They involved demands beyond wages and welfare, most notably for expanding democratic political space. They also involved broad social coalitions that, in many countries, linked relatively secure formal-sector workers with the precarious majority.

Another success of Southern workers in the era of their supposed irrelevance can be seen in the increased access to state provision of welfare that has taken place in the past twenty years. As Kevan Harris and I discuss extensively elsewhere (Harris and Scully, 2015), the period since 1990 has seen a massive expansion of various forms of social protection in countries across the Global South. In direct contrast to the narrative that Standing presents for Europe, which focuses on the erosion of social protection and citizenship rights, states across the Global South have expanded welfare entitlements on an unprecedented scale. Flagship programmes such as the *Bolsa Família* in Brazil, the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme in India, the *Di Bao* in China, and the Old Age Pension in South Africa have become models for other Southern countries to emulate. Such entitlements, which were virtually unknown for Southern workers in the mid twentieth century, are now on the books, or at least on the political agenda, in countries across the Global South (Barrientos, 2013). In most instances such welfare entitlements have been driven by demands from below, and their implementation has created new political alliances between parties and movements of both formal and precarious workers (Harris and Scully, 2015). These programmes are inadequate to provide the level of security associated with the Northern welfare states of the mid twentieth century. However, their growth from non-existence to ubiquity in the period that Standing associates with the hollowing out of citizenship rights illustrates the very different trajectories of labour politics and precarity in the North and South. As James Ferguson (2015: 207) speculates, it seems plausible that “we are now witnessing the beginnings of a new kind of politics – a distributive politics – that is potentially quite a radical one”.

These examples are not meant to diminish the reality of vulnerability and precarity which contemporary Southern workers face. They do, however, highlight the problematic tendency to analyse Southern workers through historical and political lenses derived from the Northern experience. Valuable insights can be gained from a comparison of workers across the world, and analyses such as Standing's, which thoroughly documents transformations in organisation of work, have an important role to play in that project. The precarious forms of work he describes are experienced by workers across the world. However, to better understand the possibilities for anti-precarity labour politics, this contemporary precarity must be situated within the distinctive historical struggles of Southern workers.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Ben Scully was invited to contribute to this Special Issue before he became an editor of the *Global Labour Journal*. Since becoming editor he has been recused from all editorial decisions relating to this Issue.