

# Precarization and Labor Resistance: Canada, the USA, India and China

Critical Sociology  
1–15  
© The Author(s) 2019  
Article reuse guidelines:  
sagepub.com/journals-permissions  
DOI: 10.1177/0896920519827634  
journals.sagepub.com/home/crs



**Jenny Chan**

The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong, China

**Manjusha Nair** 

George Mason University, USA

**Chris Rhomberg**

Fordham University, USA

## Abstract

Precarization, in its form and consequences, varies across workers, sectors and geographies. The five articles in this special issue examine ways that workers have struggled with and against precarious labor in different contexts, from low-wage retail and service workers in Canada and the USA, to manufacturing and construction workers in India and China. In particular, they show that the role of the state has been crucial in shaping the terrain of struggle at the workplace and in the wider community. They argue that against all odds protesting workers have repeatedly exercised some power to influence employer and government policies.

## Keywords

community organizing, gender, law, migrant labor, precarization, the state, unionization

## Introduction

In the past two decades, sociologists of work have turned their attention increasingly to the problem of precarious labor (Kalleberg, 2000; Standing, 2011; Vosko, 2000). Studies have examined questions regarding patterns of instability or insecurity in employment, the growth of precarious work in the economy, the impacts of precarious work on individuals, and the extent to which precarious workers may or may not form a distinct class in society (Campbell and Price, 2016). At the same time, research on labor movements has focused on emergent forms of mobilization among

---

### Corresponding authors:

Manjusha Nair, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, George Mason University, 4400 University Drive, 3A3  
Fairfax, VA 22030, USA.  
Email: mnair4@gmu.edu

marginalized groups, including migrants or immigrants, women, youths and racial or ethnic minorities, who often work in low-wage jobs with few protections (Fine et al., 2018; Milkman and Ott, 2014). The globalization of production and an upsurge of labor militancy in developing countries like China and India have also called attention to the effects of industrialization and urbanization on contemporary forms of work and workers' capacity for resistance (Atzeni and Ness, 2018; Bowles and Harriss, 2010; Hung and Selden, 2017; Lee, 2019). These strands of investigation have much to contribute to each other, and their findings have implications for multiple fields such as economic and political sociology, labor studies and development, and social movement research.

The rise of precarious labor reflects a dynamic process of interaction among several actors, including employers, workers and the state. Changes in the institutional regulation of labor markets have allowed firms to restructure their employment relations, and workers' power and strategies for mobilization have been transformed by the new conditions on the job. In this way, the problem of precarious labor reflects a contested process of *precarization* (Hewison and Kalleberg, 2012). Yet this process varies, in its form and consequences, in diverse locations throughout the world. It is important, then, to consider how precarization occurs in different countries and how workers can and do respond to it.

The articles in this special issue examine ways that workers have struggled with and against precarious labor in different contexts, from low-wage retail and service work in Canada and the USA to manufacturing and construction work in India and China. The forces driving precarity come together in various ways in different countries, regions and sectors, and each case represents a specific historic conjuncture of forces. In particular, the roles of the state and government policy have been crucial in facilitating the transformation of work and shaping the terrain of struggle.

The global scope of this phenomenon may make it seem as if the tide of precarization were nearly unstoppable. Conflicts between employers and workers remain, however, and are themselves a key motive for employers' efforts to dismantle regulatory institutions, redistribute the risks and rewards of employment, and reduce costs. Workers continue to resist and challenge these conditions, whether they succeed or not, and the forms and outcomes of their struggles shape the developing paths of labor regime formation. Our contributors provide insight into these interactions with a set of case studies that draw on rich ethnographic research. We are delighted to bring them here to a sociological audience and hope they will foster continued debate.

In placing these articles here side by side, we hope to highlight the differences between them as well as the advantages of comparison. In this introduction we sketch the dimensions of precarization as well as the institutional conditions and organizational actors that shape the context in different countries. We are sure this research will be far from the last word, but we hope to promote the continued close exploration of the contours of precarization around the world and the myriad ways in which workers encounter and challenge it.

## **Precarization as a Historical Process**

Kalleberg and Vallas (2018: 1) define precarious work as that which is "uncertain, unstable, and insecure and in which employees bear the risks of work (as opposed to business or the government) and receive limited social benefits and statutory protections." This summary definition captures not only the features of the workplace and labor market but also the broader context of state regulation and welfare policy. These concerns open up a range of questions including the forms and extent of precarious labor, the causal forces driving the transformation, and the impact on workers and their capacity for collective action. Within the labor process, precarization often takes the form of what Weil (2014) calls the "fissured" workplace. This includes various forms of outsourcing as means for transferring risk down through the labor market, such as the use of temporary help

agencies or subcontracting firms to hire and manage employees, the classification of workers as independent contractors, and ownership through the franchise system. As large firms outsource even core functions to smaller providers operating in highly competitive markets, the result is often “downward pressure on wages and benefits, murkiness about who bears responsibility for work conditions, and increased likelihood that basic labor standards will be violated” (Weil, 2014: 8).

In the USA, estimates of the size of the precarious workforce can range from less than 4 percent to perhaps a third of all employed workers, depending on widely varying measures of contingent work (BLS, 2018; Weil, 2014: 272). Precarious work is sometimes contrasted with the “standard employment relationship”, or stable, continuous employment by one firm with a range of institutional protections such as health insurance, pension benefits and sometimes union representation (Mosoetsa et al., 2016; Stone, 2013). The US Bureau of Labor Statistics found that in 2017 around 10 percent of American workers were in “alternate employment arrangements”, including independent contractors, on-call workers, temporary help agency workers, and workers provided by contract firms (BLS, 2018). Even large formal employers, however, have now adopted in-house practices of precarization, taking advantage of temporary hires, on-call or irregular, part-time scheduling, or other “flexible” employment practices. Nor is this limited to low-wage service or retail industries. Rothstein (2016) and Zhang (2015) have documented the use of temporary contract employment and two-tier wages in auto manufacturing in China and North America, respectively.

Of course, in many ways the problem of precarious work is all too familiar. Non-standard or informal employment is prevalent across the developing world; in India, more than 81 percent of those who work earn their livelihood in the informal sector, and most of them do so out of lack of choice (ILO, 2018). Scully (2016: 162–163) argues that “[F]or 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.” This suggests that processes of precarization follow different trajectories in the Global North and South. Yet there is no unifying condition of precarity in the Global South, but rather strong variations across nations, regions and sectors (Betti, 2018).

In the Global North, precarious work was historically typical of wide swaths of the economy, from manufacturing to construction to agricultural labor, while access to standard employment was often limited to select groups of whites and men (Higbie, 2003; Jacoby, 2004). Efforts to achieve or maintain formal conditions however are not limited to white male workers. In the USA, immigrant women garment workers in the early 20th century fought against sweatshop labor and for a time were able to formalize their employment through unionization and collective bargaining (Greenwald, 2005). Conversely, Rosenfeld and Kleykamp (2012) show that de-unionization since the 1970s has undercut wage gains, especially for black workers, exacerbating black–white wage inequality. In that sense, standard employment conditions should be seen neither as a statistical nor an evolutionary norm but as a historic, and contingent, achievement of workers’ struggle.

Kalleberg and Vallas (2018: 5) see the contemporary rise of precarious work as the outcome of a conjuncture of causes, including: 1) the displacement of former structures or institutions of workers’ power (giving employers greater freedom to impose conditions); 2) financialization as a motive for driving down labor costs; 3) globalization in the form of increased competition and capital mobility; and 4) technology, especially digital communications allowing the rise of more sophisticated global supply chains and the on-demand, gig economy. All of these factors are in some ways affected by state policy, whether through direct intervention on behalf of employers, de-regulation of traditional protections for workers, or inaction toward emerging sectors and occupations. The institutional organization of the state (e.g. the degree of centralization vs. dispersal to regional authority) also affects capacities for regulation and enforcement of employment laws. Beyond

economic policy, the state governs access to social protections and benefits determining workers' ability to sustain their livelihoods and manage the risks imposed by the market. The shift to more flexible or precarious work may involve wrenching changes in social welfare provision and reinforce entrenched forms of exclusion and inequality among groups in society.

## The State and the Making of Precarious Work

Schmitt and Mitukiewicz (2012) show that the decline of unionization within rich economies is not simply an outcome of globalization or technological change but is strongly related to national political traditions and policies. Both Canada and the USA fit the category of liberal market economies with decentralized, firm- or shop-level collective bargaining and low union density (Hall and Soskice, 2001). Yet union decline has been less drastic in Canada, and rates of private sector union membership and contract coverage remain more than twice as high as in the USA. With broadly similar economies and workforces, the difference is largely due to the legal regime of labor-management relations and the extent of employers actively resisting unions (Riddell, 1993).

In the USA, private sector unions are governed federally under the 1935 National Labor Relations Act, which defines workers' rights to organize and to strike. Decades of case law decisions by the federal courts and the National Labor Relations Board have now significantly undermined the statute, and the penalties for employer violations are weak (Rhomberg, 2012). The process of union certification allows for substantial delays and offers wide scope for employers to mount anti-union campaigns. Since the 1980s, an entire industry of anti-union lawyers, consultants and security firms has emerged, and estimates are that employers unlawfully fire workers for union activity in as many as one out of every three union election campaigns (Bronfenbrenner, 2009; Logan, 2006).

Other forms of worker protection likewise have eroded. The federally mandated minimum wage is established by Congress but has no automatic cost-of-living adjustment, its current rate of US\$7.25 per hour is below the federal poverty line for a full-time employed worker with a family of two (Cooper, 2017). States can set higher minimum wages but so far only California, Massachusetts and New York have passed laws to phase in a US\$15 minimum. Meanwhile, 21 states, mainly in the southern and central western regions and dominated by conservative state governments, remain at the federal rate (Rhomberg, 2018). Unemployment insurance coverage has also fallen due to outdated eligibility restrictions – despite the surge in joblessness during the 2007–2009 Great Recession in the US only one in three of those out of work received unemployment benefits (Mettler, 2018: 49). In many industries precarious workers are misclassified as independent contractors, therefore they are not covered by federal minimum wage and overtime standards, unemployment insurance, workers' compensation, social security or rights to unionize under the law.

In Canada, labor policy is largely governed by provincial or territorial law, with varying procedures for union certification. Four provinces (Manitoba, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island and Quebec), along with the federal jurisdiction, allow "card-check" authorization, in which a union may be certified after a majority of workers in a workplace sign authorization cards. The remaining six provinces (Alberta, British Columbia, Newfoundland, Nova Scotia, Ontario and Saskatchewan) require an election, but the time frame is much shorter than in the USA and elections must occur generally within five to ten days after a petition is filed (Thompson et al., 2003). Penalties for employer violations are also swifter and harsher, so that Canadian employers have less opportunity and less incentive to engage in illegal anti-union tactics. Canadian law also allows for first contract arbitration so that if employers continue to resist bargaining with the

union, the workers have access to an arbitration process that can impose a legally binding contract (Warner, 2012).

Canada's labor market remains more regulated than its US counterpart, but other state protections have declined. The country's employment insurance system was scaled back during the 1990s, so that by 1996 fewer than half of unemployed Canadian workers qualified for regular benefits, compared to an average of 75 percent during the 1980s (Stanford, 2005). In Ontario, the provincial Employment Standards Act governs terms like minimum wages, overtime pay and sick leave, but many low-wage, precarious jobs are exempt from specific requirements, while misclassification of workers as independent contractors is common in sectors such as cleaning, trucking, food delivery, construction, courier and other business services (Gellatly, 2015). For low-wage workers, all of these changes expose them to greater economic risks and tend to force them into unfavorable labor markets to obtain the means of their livelihood.

In India, the vast population in the informal workforce were historically left outside the domain of state-instituted welfare plans for citizen-workers (Nair, 2016), and less than 1 percent of the total workforce is currently covered by collective wage agreements (Bhowmik, 2012). While both central and state governments have fixed minimum wages under the Minimum Wages Act of 1948, employers usually disregard this legally non-binding act in the recruitment of workers whose names are not formally recorded in a payroll. When the Indian state dismantled the state-owned sector after 1991 it cushioned the citizen-workers from the impact: of the 2 million people estimated to be redundant in the state-owned sector because of the new industrial policies, 78,000 eventually lost their jobs and were compensated through a National Renewal Fund (Zagha, 1998). With the ascendance to power of the unapologetically pro-market National Democratic Alliance in 2012, however, both the central and regional states instituted amendments to the labor regulations of the post-independence era to provide a free command over the workplace for both foreign and Indian investors. To support Prime Minister Modi's 'Make in India' campaign, the central government has plans to bring together a uniform labor code merging the three significant federal laws on industrial relations, with an objective to formalize the neoliberal labor regime (Gopalan, 2016; Nair and Friedman, 2017).

At the other end, state poverty reduction measures such as expanding old age pensions in 2006 and the Unorganized Workers' Social Security Act 2008 (started by the previous United Progressive Alliance government and continued by the current National Democratic Alliance) have allowed for the expansion of claims outside the workplace (Vijayabaskar, 2011). How these competing forces are being played out deserves further examination. By sector, auto workers are better off than construction workers since they work in the formally instituted component supply and assembly plants and have relatively stable employment and salaries. The precarization of their work nevertheless happens through increasing contractualization, or replacing regular workers with those recruited through labor contractors (or *thekedars*), historically present from colonial times but on the rise after the neoliberal transformations in the economy in the 1990s (Nair, 2016). Even in Tier 1 and Tier 2 firms in the upper end of the supply chain, contract laborers form three-quarters of the workforce and receive the minimum wage without the job security or benefits enjoyed by permanent workers (Barnes, 2018). Comparatively, construction workers, as with most others in the overwhelmingly precarious workforce in India, work in informal workplace settings and have little access to rights of union representation or stability of work, wages, or urban life (Agarwala, 2013). Their work has been pivotal for the building of metropolises like New Delhi, but their identities and neighborhoods have been rendered almost invisible since the colonial times through various governance techniques of the Indian state (Baviskar, 2003).

In China, different state units such as the trade union, the police and the courts have responded to worker strikes and protests in diverse ways, contingent in part on the actions of local and

international labor organizations. Despite the strengthening of workers' individual rights during the 1990s and 2000s through to the present, the law enforcement gap has continued to grow (Gallagher, 2017; Hui, 2018; Lee, 2007). Labor disputes submitted for arbitration and litigation have spiraled since the mid-1990s, when officials encouraged protesters to channel their grievances through the legal system rather than taking them to the streets. In response to collective lawsuits, judges have insisted that cases are filed individually in order to fragment and isolate the plaintiffs (Chen and Xu, 2012). To maintain "industrial peace", the government seeks to break up organized worker actions at the door of arbitration committees and civil courts, while encouraging workers to adjudicate their grievances through mediation and other informal, non-institutional means. Very often government lawyers or mediators pressure employers to pay the aggrieved workers to disperse mass protests. In this way the state actively intervenes in high-profile labor conflicts onsite rather than going through the judicial path, resulting in the co-existence of instability and longevity of authoritarian rule (Chan and Selden, forthcoming).

The balance of power between managers and workers remains highly skewed in favor of management, even as worker activists accumulate experience in organizing and mobilization. Chinese workers, like their counterparts in other countries, have repeatedly fought for collective rights and interests in the form of strikes and protests. In China, the right to strike was written into the 1975 and 1978 constitutions but was later revoked in the 1982 constitution. In confrontations with management, and on occasion with government officials, striking workers risk being sentenced to prison. Major protests, defined as those involving more than 1000 participants, frequently prompt police intervention and the arrest or detention of protest leaders. Labor insurgency has been largely contained through a wide array of "social management" strategies, such as redefining workers' "realistic" expectation of compensations (which are below the legal standards) and fast tracking the cases of wage arrears (Chen, 2012). Nevertheless, while confining strike activities to single workshops or divisions of a company, the state sometimes compromises with strikers in the interest of maintaining social stability (He et al., 2013; Su and He, 2010). In "buying stability" by "dishing out cash payments or other material benefits in exchange for compliance", the government tries to undercut wider reform and the growth of labor mobilization seeking to influence government policy (Lee and Zhang, 2013: 1486).

## **Precarious Workers and Labor Movements**

Understanding precarization as a process calls for a focus not just on the conditions of work but also on workers, their life experiences, views of work and prospects for social and economic mobility (Alberti et al., 2018; Huang, 2017). People enter into employment relations from complex social worlds of the households, kin networks and communities in which they are embedded, and their work lives intersect with identities like race, gender, sexual orientation and citizenship, among others. Their situation in their life course conditions how they respond, whether they are migrant workers without legal status, members of minority groups facing unequal treatment, single mothers supporting families, or graduate students seeking elusive careers.

In the USA, nonprofessional contingent workers are disproportionately composed of the young, the elderly, minorities and women (Fullerton and Robertson, 2011). Female workers make up less than half of the US labor force but account for 55 percent of those making less than \$15 per hour, while African Americans comprise around 12 percent of the total workforce but are 15 percent of sub-\$15-per-hour earners, and the proportions for Latino workers are 16.5 percent and 23 percent respectively (Tung et al., 2015). Many precarious jobs also rely heavily on immigrant and undocumented labor. Undocumented workers represent 5.4 percent of the national civilian

workforce but by some estimates form one-quarter of all workers in food processing, one-third of those in construction, and up to 80 percent of all farm labor in the USA (Gleeson, 2016: 6–7).

Some of these patterns are also evident in Canada. A study of metropolitan Toronto found that routine service occupations, including retail staff, food service workers, cleaners, taxi drivers, secretaries and others, account for 45 percent of Toronto's workforce. Women, young people and immigrants are disproportionately employed in routine-service jobs, and particularly in low-wage, part-time and/or temporary positions (Institute for Competitiveness and Prosperity, 2013). Another study in southern Ontario found that racialized minority workers (35 %) and non-citizens (42 %) were the most likely to have precarious employment. Workers in precarious jobs were more likely to report experiencing discrimination by race, age, gender and immigration status, while racialized workers and non-citizens were twice as likely as Canadian-born whites to report discrimination as a barrier to obtaining and keeping work and being offered opportunities for advancement. Ontario also allows employers to pay a lower minimum wage to part-time workers under 18 years of age, and the evidence suggests that they are not catching up as they move through their careers (Gellatly, 2015: 61).

Examples in India and China show further variations in the intersection of labor markets and workers' lives. India is the world's sixth largest producer of commercial and passenger cars, with annual production of 24 million vehicles and 19 million employees in 2016 (Department of Industrial Policy and Promotion, 2016). Auto workers in India have a comparatively privileged position because they work in formal factory settings that assemble cars or make vehicle components. They are vocationally educated, skilled migrants, mostly young men in their 20s and 30s with urban consumption standards and aspirations for upward mobility (Nair and Friedman, 2017). More than 75 percent of the jobs in the auto sector, nevertheless, are temporary contractual jobs. Low wages, often just the minimum wage, and lack of benefits or job security make their futures precarious by making it difficult to maintain their aspirational subsistence standards in the urban settings.

The auto industry in India was liberalized in 1993, and production is organized around 25 global corporate players and a few Indian businesses that have geographically clustered in four large manufacturing hubs. It is vertically organized into a multi-tier system of assembly and component supply plants organized into multiplex networks (Gereffi et al., 2005). At the lowest ends of the supply chain there are home-based workshops employing household labor (Posthuma and Nathan, 2010). The uptick in production after the global recession in 2008, and a stringent labor control regime with no union representation, led to the massive wave of unrest in the auto sector, which still continues. Workers have made some gains in the form of union representation, but there has not been a decline in contractualization of the workforce, and there has been violent state suppression of workers' rights.

Construction workers in India are unskilled men and women pushed to work in the urban sector due to a rural crisis (Breman, 1996). They settle temporarily in the metropolises and live in inhumane conditions in slums (Harriss-White, 2012). They are recruited through labor brokers and often are in a state of debt bondage with the latter (Picherit, 2018). Their seasonality of employment further reinforces their exploitation (Deshingkar and Farrington, 2009). Their claims over urban space are often violently contested by other residents (Baviskar, 2003). They have little ability to mobilize like the auto workers and not surprisingly seek redress through the legal system, often falling through its cracks. Construction workers in some parts of India have nevertheless organized, and instead of targeting their employers, who are either invisible or too dominant, have demanded that the state guarantees them rights such as housing (Agarwala, 2013).

China has the largest number of internal migrants of any country in the world. As of December 2017, by official reckoning some 286 million rural migrants had been drawn into manufacturing,

service and construction sectors in towns and cities all across the country, an increase of more than 61 million since 2008 following the economic recovery. They account for one-fifth of the total 1.4 billion Chinese population and the largest number of industrial workers (Chan, 2018). As rural migrants, in contrast to those who have household registration in the city, they continue to struggle for access to public housing and other subsidized government services. They are both second-class citizens and lowly laborers within the political economy.

By sector, Chinese rural migrant construction workers are largely excluded by the government union and are invariably placed on the bottom rung of long subcontracting chains. These manual laborers are recruited through localistic networks and labor agencies, not by the lead company. Without a written labor contract, they are often denied statutory minimum wages, overtime payment, social security, rest days and holidays. They risk not receiving full pay, or any pay at all, upon the completion of the project, not to mention payment in cash on a monthly basis in accordance with the law.

For labor movements, the fragmentation of the workforce, the abandonment of employers' responsibilities, and the attenuation of workers' rights have all made traditional strategies for building solidarity more difficult. Faced with decline, some unions in the Global North have reached out to non-standard workers and supported innovative strategies and forms of organization (Doellgast et al., 2018). In the USA, the national American Federation of Labor – Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) reversed its longstanding opposition to immigration in 2000 and called for undocumented immigrants to be granted citizenship. The move recognized the growing importance of immigrant workers in a range of American industries and their leading role in new organizing within several unions (Adler et al., 2014). The last 20 years have also seen an upsurge of non-profit worker centers and advocacy groups for workers without access to formal collective bargaining (Fine et al., 2018). Unions themselves have expanded their strategic repertoire to include labor–community alliances in support of employer neutrality or voluntary recognition of union organizing drives and local ordinances for living-wage or increased minimum wages as in the Service Employees International Union's "Fight for \$15" campaign (Rhombert, 2018).

Indian trade unions, though a militant force in the late colonial era, were considerably weakened by the state and business class post-independence (Chibber, 2005). The industrial-relations framework was tilted coercively against labor (Bhowmik, 2012) and trade unions often gave their consent to this state of affairs to support socialist nation-building (Nair, 2016). Their organizing capacities were further crippled by the fact that they were affiliated with political parties at opposing spectrums of ideology, making a unified effort at representing the working class difficult (Candland, 2007). Much of the contentious labor movement in postcolonial India was led by unions unrecognized by employers, whether in the public or private sector (Nair, 2016). With the market reforms, workers' bargaining power has declined and unions are forced to strike for longer periods to win demands, often using violence and disruption to gather attention (Teitelbaum, 2011). To fight this decline, unions have increased their membership by covering precariously employed workers and staged unified strikes nationally in 2013 and 2015. Yet, they have been unable to resist or formulate counterstrategies to the labor law amendments or the precarization process. Alternative trade unions such as the New Trade Union Initiative have been supporting the efforts of workers in the informal sector (Hensman, 2011). Many were making claims directly to the state for citizenship rather than challenging their employers (Agarwala, 2013; Agarwala and Saha, 2018), and the success of labor mobilizations often depended on their willingness to align with broader concerns around displacement and dispossession (Nair and Friedman, 2017).

Unlike in most other countries, China's centralized trade union organization, the All-China Federation of Trade Unions, is a component of the state apparatus and monopolizes representation

while independent unions are illegal. Its socio-political mission is to assure smooth governance and maintain labor stability. Under the Chinese Trade Union Law, all enterprises with 25 or more employees were required to contain “basic-level trade union committees” on the shop floor. After successive, top-down unionization drives, by December 2009 “unions had been set up in 92 percent of the Fortune 500 companies operating in China”, including such giants as Foxconn and Wal-Mart (Liu, 2011: 157). By the end of 2016, 2.8 million enterprise trade unions with more than 302 million registered union members were reported in the country. In sheer number, China had by far the world’s largest unionized workforce. Unions nevertheless remained subject to managerial domination and state oversight (for a rare example of effective workplace trade unionism, see Pringle and Meng, 2018).

When union representatives are appointed by and responsive to management rather than elected by their members, workers are frequently unaware of their union membership and many who are aware have little confidence in the union. Ironically, in July 2018, when a group of workers from the Jasic welding-equipment factory in Shenzhen attempted to set up a trade union according to the current legal framework in China, they were accused of trying to form an illegal trade union and were placed under criminal detention on suspicion of “picking quarrels and provoking trouble”. Global civil society organizations and concerned academics expressed their support for the right of workers to organize unions and the right of their allies to express solidarity, and called for their immediate release. The Jasic assault is the most severe repression against workers and labor activists in China since a crackdown on labor rights organizations in 2015 (Au, 2018; Chan, 2019).

## **Worker Resistance in Canada, the USA, India and China**

These diverse contexts highlight some of the themes brought out in the contributions to this issue. In Canada and the USA, even college-educated younger workers are increasingly trapped in low-paying jobs while shouldering the burden of college debt. The young Halifax baristas in Rachel Brickner and Meaghan Dalton’s article sought unionization to address the precarious conditions in their work. For LGBTQ workers, their prior experience of discrimination in hiring (which often led them into coffee house employment as one of few options) and their unequal treatment on the job motivated them to become leaders in the union organizing drive. Their intersectional, gendered analysis of their situation allowed them to identify and mobilize overlapping networks of allied groups and media organizations in support of their campaign.

In search of a counter-movement to precarity, Peter Ikeler returns to the workplace to see how bad jobs are created and how they elicit workers’ consent. His study of big retail stores contrasts traditional department stores like Macy’s with the newer discount store model represented by Target. In the latter, he finds a new management strategy of “contingent control” that relies on irregular scheduling, deskilled work, “team-building” supervision (combined with vigorous anti-unionism), and a high-turnover workforce with little identification or attachment to the job. At Target the jobs were lousy but the managers were nice, and stores deliberately recruited younger or more transient employees so that workers developed a less oppositional culture. Nonetheless, Ikeler argues that the standardization and collectivization of the labor process at Target creates a form of solidarity that could become the basis for a community-based unionism encompassing multiple workplaces across the industry.

Lucas Franco’s contribution likewise looks to the community as a field for developing workers’ power. In his view, the fissured workplace in fast food alters the strategic repertoire available to workers and makes unionization in the workplace much more difficult. He argues that the Service Employees International Union initially adopted a “mobilizing” strategy in the Minneapolis Fight for \$15 campaign, aimed at symbolic protests and media framing to generate public support for

government regulation. Local activists, however, gradually shifted to an “organizing” model focused on coalition building and leadership development in the neighborhoods where workers lived; they leveraged their power to win a June 2017 city council vote for a US\$15 minimum wage. As Franco acknowledges, however, without access to the workplace and collective bargaining the challenge for this model is its sustainability.

Sara Duvisac’s article points to how precarization of auto workers in India is shaped by the state through non-enforcement of laws, abstaining from negotiating during industrial disputes and violent suppression. Duvisac dissects four cases of auto workers’ unrest in three regional states and shows how mobilizing capacity across regular and irregular work, existing union strength and ability to build associations in the broader political spectrum in each case determined the variation in outcomes in the broader context of casualization or contractualization of work. Opposition from the state, which materializes particularly through the judiciary, labor inspectorates and the police, has played an active role in disciplining labor on behalf of firms.

Irene Pang’s article examines how the state constructs precarity by excluding construction workers from its legal definitions by too much generalizing in India and too much specification in China. The construction workers attempt to address their grievances through legal dispute systems in China and India, and their cases fall through the cracks of the elaborate legal mechanisms and bureaucratization. In India, workers have increasingly turned towards the state rather than to capital as the target of their claim-making, engaging in contentious politics rather than the traditional organized trade union movement. In China, legal activism remains burdensome, with desperate construction workers threatening to escalate their protests as far as committing suicide, as a means to claim unpaid wages and compensations. Without effective leadership by trade unions, workers are impelled to rely overwhelmingly on their own efforts to fight for economic compensation and benefits, many of them stipulated in law.

## **Conclusion**

The process of precarization has deepened social inequalities as employers have aggressively re-structured employment relations to take advantage of subcontracted workers, migrant and other transient employees, minority and vulnerable populations, and other low-wage workers lacking leverage or protection. The structural location of these processes in the global economy, however, and the particular conjuncture of actors and institutional conditions, varies across countries, regions and sectors, and hence so do the conditions affecting workers’ resistance. In each case, the state has played a vital role in enabling both the transformation and channeling or suppressing workers’ resistance.

In the Global South, as in China and India, the encroachment of cities on village land, and growing pressure from global corporations and entrepreneurial local authorities to profit from land sales have uprooted tens of millions of rural residents, leaving many bereft of the ability to return home to till the land and so increasing the pressure for labor migration. In China the number of internal migrants has continued to grow year-on-year, although the growth has decelerated somewhat along with the decline of natural births. In India, rural to urban migration has shown a consecutive decline in the last three Censuses, perhaps signaling the hesitance to migrate among rural residents due to urban land conflict and the worsening slum conditions (Sen, 2017). By contrast, in Canada and the USA less than 20 percent of the population still resides in rural areas, compared to 66 percent in India and 42 percent in China (World Bank, 2018). Yet Canada and the USA are far more reliant on labor flows from the Global South in the form of international migration. In 2017, immigrants comprised 21.5 percent of the population in Canada and 13.5 percent in the USA, compared with 0.4 percent in India and 0.1 percent in China (Migration Policy Institute,

2018). Labor migration, be it rural to urban, or Global South to Global North, underlines the importance of state policy not only in governing workers' rights at work but also in regulating access to citizenship and benefits that sustain their livelihoods.

As there is no one form of precarity, so there is no one form of resistance. The articles in this issue show that workers have repeatedly organized to challenge precarization and influence employer and government policies. In some cases, marginalized groups and their supporters have urgently called to combat dual crises of precarious work and social reproduction (such as housing shortages, delayed marriages, child-rearing problems, insufficient healthcare and the deprivation of care for the elderly) through a variety of struggles ranging from unions and community-based activism to legal redress. In addition to reclaiming the fundamental rights to decent work and fair labor market standards, their struggles also attempt to persuade the state to take responsibility for providing public goods to workers and their families. Elsewhere, the workplace remains a crucial arena for shaping the conditions for solidarity and gaining leverage through strikes, efforts to achieve representative unions and collective bargaining, and effective governance of the relations of employment.

Such struggles are not always in opposition to each other, but they do present strategic dilemmas to workers and labor movements depending on the context or terrain of struggle. What does seem clear is that the conflicts around precarization are not likely to disappear, and that despite the barriers they face, workers continue to search for ways to contest their economic exploitation and social exclusion. These case studies give us a glimpse of the diverse ways in which they do so, and offer much to consider about the consequences of their efforts, now and in the future.

## Acknowledgements

The guest editors are very grateful to David Fasenfest and his colleagues at *Critical Sociology* in preparing this special issue. The papers were originally presented at a conference entitled "Precarious Work: Domination and Resistance in the US, China, and the World", held in Seattle, Washington, in August 2016. The conference was co-sponsored by the American Sociological Association's Labor and Labor Movements Section, the International Sociological Association's Research Committee on Labor Movements (RC44), and the Chinese Sociological Association's China Association of Work and Labor.

## Funding

Jenny Chan gratefully acknowledges the Early Career Scheme of the Research Grants Council of Hong Kong (RGC/Gov No.: PolyU256025/17H).

## ORCID iD

Manjusha Nair  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9715-4812>

## References

- Adler LH, Tapia M and Turner L (eds) (2014) *Mobilizing Against Inequality: Unions, Immigrant Workers, and the Crisis of Capitalism*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Agarwala R (2013) *Informal Labor, Formal Politics, and Dignified Discontent in India*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Agarwala R and Saha S (2018) The employment relationship and movement strategies among domestic workers in India. *Critical Sociology* 44(7–8): 1207–1223.
- Alberti G, Bessa I, Hardy K, Trappmann V and Umney C (2018) In, against and beyond precarity: Work in insecure times. *Work, Employment and Society* 32(3): 447–457.
- Atzeni M and Ness I (eds) (2018) *Global Perspectives on Workers' and Labour Organisations*. Singapore: Springer.

- Au LY (2018) The Jasic mobilisation: A high tide for the Chinese labour movement? *Made in China* 3(4): 12–16.
- Barnes T (2018) *Making Cars in the New India: Industry, Precarity and Informality*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Baviskar A (2003) Between violence and desire: Space, power, and identity in the making of metropolitan Delhi. *International Social Science Journal* 55(175): 89–98.
- Betti E (2018) Historicizing precarious work: Forty years of research in the social sciences and humanities. *International Review of Social History* 63(2): 273–319.
- Bhowmik SK (2012) *Industry, Labour and Society*. New Delhi: Orient Blackswan.
- BLS (Bureau of Labor Statistics) (2018) Contingent and Alternative Employment Arrangements – May 2017. Washington, DC: US Department of Labor. Available (accessed 6 January 2019) at: <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/conemp.pdf>
- Bowles P and Harriss J (eds) (2010) *Globalization and Labour in China and India: Impacts and Responses*. Houndmills, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Breman J (1996) *Footloose Labour: Working in India's Informal Economy*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Brickner RK and Dalton M (2019) Organizing baristas in Halifax cafes: Precarious work and gender and class identities in the Millennial Generation. *Critical Sociology*; ePub ahead of print. DOI: 10.1177/0896920517730671.
- Bronfenbrenner K (2009) No holds barred: The intensification of employer opposition to organizing. Washington, DC: Economic Policy Institute and American Rights at Work Education Fund. Available (accessed 17 November 2018) at: <https://www.epi.org/publication/bp235/>
- Campbell I and Price R (2016) Precarious work and precarious workers: Towards an improved conceptualisation. *The Economic and Labour Relations Review* 27(3): 314–332.
- Candland C (2007) *Labor, Democratization and Development in India and Pakistan*. London: Routledge.
- Chan J (2018) Economic growth and labor security. In: Wu W and Frazier M (eds) *The SAGE Handbook on Contemporary China*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 166–188.
- Chan J (2019) Chinese Jasic workers fight for union rights. *New Politics* Vol. XVII No. 2, Whole Number 66, Winter, 84–89.
- Chan J and Selden M (forthcoming) Labor legislation, workers, and the Chinese state. In: Wright T (ed.) *Handbook of Resistance and Protest in China*. Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Chen F and Xu X (2012) ‘Active judiciary’: Judicial dismantling of workers’ collective action in China. *The China Journal* 67: 87–107.
- Chen X (2012) *Social Protest and Contentious Authoritarianism in China*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Chibber V (2005) From class compromise to class accommodation: Labor’s incorporation into the Indian political economy. In: Ray R and Katzenstein MF (eds) *Social Movements in India: Poverty, Power and Politics*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 32–61.
- Cooper D (2017) Raising the minimum wage to \$15 by 2024 would lift wages for 41 million American workers. Washington, DC: Economic Policy Institute. Available (accessed 14 December 2018) at: <https://www.epi.org/publication/15-by-2024-would-lift-wages-for-41-million/>
- Department of Industrial Policy and Promotion (2016) Automotive sector achievement report. Available (accessed 6 February 2017) at: <http://pibphoto.nic.in/documents/rlink/2016/nov/p2016112502.pdf>
- Deshingkar P and Farrington J (eds) (2009) *Circular Migration and Multilocational Livelihood Strategies in Rural India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Doellgast V, Lillie N and Pulignano V (eds) (2018) *Reconstructing Solidarity: Labour Unions, Precarious Work, and the Politics of Institutional Change in Europe*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Devisac S (2019) Reconstituting the industrial worker: Precarity in the Indian auto sector. *Critical Sociology*.
- Fine J, Burnham L, Griffith K, Ji M, Narro V and Pitts S (eds) (2018) *No One Size Fits All: Worker Organization, Policy and Movement in a New Economic Age*. Champaign, IL: Labor and Employment Relations Association.

- Franco LA (2019) Organizing the precariat: The fight to build and sustain fast food worker power. *Critical Sociology*; ePub ahead of print. DOI: 10.1177/0896920517745685.
- Fullerton A and Robertson D (2011) Labor rights after the flexible turn: The rise of contingent employment and the implications for worker rights in the United States. In: Armaline W, Glasberg DS and Purkayastha B (eds) *Human Rights in Our Own Backyard: Injustice and Resistance in the United States*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 22–33.
- Gallagher ME (2017) *Authoritarian Legality in China: Law, Workers, and the State*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Gellatly M (2015) Still working on the edge: Building decent jobs from the ground up. Toronto: Workers Action Centre. Available (accessed 14 December 2018) at: <http://workersactioncentre.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/StillWorkingOnTheEdge-WorkersActionCentre.pdf>
- Gereffi G, Humphrey J and Sturgeon T (2005) The governance of global value chains. *Review of International Political Economy* 12(1): 78–104.
- Gleeson S (2016) *Precarious Claims: The Promise and Failure of Workplace Protections in the United States*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Gopalan ST (2016) Withering regulation? An interim review of Modi government's labour reforms. *Journal of Asian Public Policy* 9(2): 170–84.
- Greenwald R (2005) *The Triangle Fire, the Protocols of Peace, and Industrial Democracy in Progressive Era New York*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Hall PA and Soskice D (2001) *Varieties of Capitalism: The Institutional Foundations of Comparative Advantage*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Harriss-White B (2002) *India Working: Essays on Society and Economy*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- He X, Wang L and Su Y (2013) Above the roof, beneath the law: Perceived justice behind disruptive tactics of migrant wage claimants in China. *Law & Society Review* 47(4): 703–738.
- Hensman R (2011) *Workers, Unions, and Global Capitalism: Lessons from India*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Hewison K and Kalleberg AL (2012) Precarious work and flexibilization in South and Southeast Asia. *American Behavioral Scientist* 57(4): 395–402.
- Higbie FT (2003) *Indispensable Outcasts: Hobo Workers and Community in the American Midwest, 1880–1930*. Champaign: University of Illinois Press.
- Huang PCC (2017) China's informal economy, reconsidered: An introduction in light of socio-economic and legal history. *Rural China: An International Journal of History and Social Science* 14(1): 1–17.
- Hui ESI (2018) *Hegemonic Transformation: The State, Laws, and Labour Relations in Post-Socialist China*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hung HF and Selden M (2017) China's postsocialist transformation and global resurgence: Political economy and geopolitics. In: Fürst J, Pons S and Selden M (eds) *The Cambridge History of Communism, Volume III, Endgames? Late Communism in Global Perspective, 1968 to the Present*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 502–528.
- Ikeler P (2019) Precarity's prospect: Contingent control and union renewal in the retail sector. *Critical Sociology*; ePub ahead of print. DOI: 10.1177/0896920517749706.
- ILO (International Labor Organization) (2018) Women and Men in the Informal Economy: A Statistical Perspective. Geneva: International Labor Office. Available (accessed 17 December 2018) at: [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/-dgreports/-dcomm/documents/publication/wcms\\_626831.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/-dgreports/-dcomm/documents/publication/wcms_626831.pdf)
- Institute for Competitiveness and Prosperity (2013) Untapped potential: Creating a better future for service workers. Toronto: Martin Prosperity Institute. Available (accessed 15 December 2018) at: [https://www.competeprosper.ca/blog/precarius\\_employment](https://www.competeprosper.ca/blog/precarius_employment)
- Jacoby SM (2004) *Employing Bureaucracy: Managers, Unions, and the Transformation of Work in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Kalleberg AL (2000) Nonstandard employment relations: Part-time, temporary, and contract work. *Annual Review of Sociology* 26: 341–365.

- Kalleberg AL and Vallas SP (2018) Precarious work: Theory, research, and politics. In: Kalleberg AL and Vallas SP (eds) *Precarious Work: Causes, Characteristics, Consequences. Research in the Sociology of Work* 31: 1–30.
- Lee CK (2007) *Against the Law: Labor Protests in China's Rustbelt and Sunbelt*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Lee CK (2019) China's precariats. *Globalizations* 16(2): 137–54.
- Lee CK and Zhang Y (2013) The power of instability: Unraveling the microfoundations of bargained authoritarianism in China. *American Journal of Sociology* 118(6): 1475–1508.
- Liu M (2011) 'Where there are workers, there should be trade unions': Union organizing in the era of growing informal employment. In: Kuruvilla S, Lee CK and Gallagher ME (eds) *From Iron Rice Bowl to Informalization: Markets, Workers, and the State in a Changing China*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 157–172.
- Logan J (2006) The union avoidance industry in the United States. *British Journal of Industrial Relations* 44(4): 651–675.
- Mettler S (2018) *The Government-Citizen Disconnect*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Migration Policy Institute (2018) International Migrants by Country of Destination, 1960–2017. Washington, D.C.: Migration Policy Institute. Available (accessed 6 January 2019) at: <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/programs/data-hub/charts/international-migrants-country-destination-1960-2017?width=1000&height=850&iframe=true>
- Milkman R and Ott E (eds) (2014) *New Labor in New York: Precarious Workers and the Future of the Labor Movement*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Mosoetsa S, Stillerman J and Tilly C (2016) Precarious labor, south and north: An introduction. *International Labor and Working-Class History* 89: 5–19.
- Nair M (2016) *Undervalued Dissent: Informal Workers' Politics in India*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Nair M and Friedman E (2017) Neither reform nor regime change: Labor politics in China's and India's automobile industries. No. 195, Department of Sociology, National University of Singapore Working Paper Series.
- Pang I (2019) The legal construction of precarity: Lessons from the construction sectors in Beijing and Delhi. *Critical Sociology*.
- Picherit D (2018) Rural youth and circulating labour in South India: The tortuous paths towards respect for Madagas. *Journal of Agrarian Change* 18(1): 178–195.
- Posthuma A and Nathan D (eds) (2010) *Labour in Global Production Networks in India*. New Delhi, India: Oxford University Press.
- Pringle T and Meng Q (2018) Taming labor: Workers' struggles, workplace unionism, and collective bargaining on a Chinese waterfront. *ILR Review* 71(5): 1053–1077.
- Rhomberg C (2012) The return of judicial repression: What has happened to the strike? *The Forum: A Journal of Applied Research in Contemporary Politics* 10(1): article 8. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1515/1540-8884.1492>.
- Rhomberg C (2018) \$15 and a union: Searching for workers' power in the fight for \$15 movement. In: Fine J, Burnham L, Griffith K, Ji M, Narro V and Pitts S (eds) *No One Size Fits All: Worker Organization, Policy and Movement in a New Economic Age*. Champaign, IL: Labor and Employment Relations Association, 251–270.
- Riddell WC (1993) Unionization in Canada and the United States: A tale of two countries. In: Card D and Freeman RB (eds) *Small Differences That Matter: Labor Markets and Income Maintenance in Canada and the United States*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 109–148.
- Rosenfeld J and Kleykamp M (2012) Organized labor and racial wage inequality in the United States. *American Journal of Sociology* 117(5): 1460–1502.
- Rothstein JS (2016) *When Good Jobs Go Bad: Globalization, De-unionization, and Declining Job Quality in the North American Auto Industry*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Schmitt J and Mitukiewicz A (2012) Politics matter: Changes in unionization rates in rich countries, 1960–2010. *Industrial Relations Journal* 43(3): 260–280.

- Scully B (2016) Precarity north and south: A southern critique of Guy Standing. *Global Labour Journal* 7(2): 160–73.
- Sen P (2017) The puzzle of Indian urbanisation. 8th B G Kumar Lecture, Centre for Development Studies, Thiruvananthapuram.
- Standing G (2011) *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Stanford J (2005) Revisiting the ‘flexibility hypothesis’. *Canadian Public Policy/Analyse de Politiques* 31(1): 109–116.
- Stone KVV (2013) The decline of the standard contract of employment in the United States: A socio-regulatory perspective. In: Stone KVV and Arthurs H (eds) *Rethinking Workplace Regulation: Beyond the Standard Contract of Employment*. New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation, 58–78.
- Su Y and He X (2010) Street as courtroom: State accommodation of labor protest in South China. *Law and Society Review* 44(1): 157–184.
- Teitelbaum E (2011) *Mobilizing Restraint: Democracy and Industrial Conflict in Postreform South Asia*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Thompson M, Rose JB and Smith AE (2003) *Beyond the National Divide: Regional Dimensions of Industrial Relations*. Montreal, QC: McGill-Queens University Press.
- Tung I, Lathrop Y and Sonn P (2015) The growing movement for \$15. New York, NY: National Employment Law Project. Available (accessed 17 December 2018) at: <http://bit.ly/2v1JbbY>
- Vijayabaskar M (2011) Global crises, welfare provision and coping strategies of labour in Tiruppur. *Economic and Political Weekly* 46 (22): 38–45.
- Vosko L (2000) *Temporary Work: The Gendered Rise of a Precarious Employment Relationship*. Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press.
- Warner K (2012) Protecting fundamental labor rights: Lessons from Canada for the United States. Washington, DC: Center for Economic and Policy Research. Available (accessed 15 November 2018) at: <http://cepr.net/publications/reports/protecting-fundamental-labor-rights>
- Weil D (2014) *The Fissured Workplace: Why Work Became So Bad for So Many and What Can Be Done to Improve It*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- World Bank (2018) Rural population (% of total population). Washington, DC: The World Bank Group. Available (accessed 6 January 2019) at: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.RUR.TOTL.ZS>
- Zagha R (1998) Labor and India’s economic reforms. *The Journal of Policy Reform* 2(4): 403–426.
- Zhang L (2015) *Inside China’s Automobile Factories: The Politics of Labor and Worker Resistance*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.