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Immigrant farmers in the Italian countryside.  
Photo: eunews.it

## Work Precarisation and New Inequalities: The Role of Migration

Fabio Perocco

*In the neoliberal era, precarity has become a general condition in the life of workers. The structural precarisation of labour is a global process, which has taken place heterogeneously according to national contexts, sectors, qualifications, and labour market stratifications. This essay looks at precarity from two angles: the impact of it on migrant workers and the role of migration in the exacerbation and extension of it.*

Turning precarity into a general condition in the life of workers is one of the most important social transformations of the neoliberal era. The structural precarisation of labour is a global process, which has taken place heterogeneously according to national contexts, sectors, qualifications, and labour market stratifications. Besides young people, low-skilled older workers, and women, it has mainly affected migrants, who have suffered from labour precarity combined with the weakness of their legal and social status. At the same time, immigration is also involuntarily an agent of spreading and widening precarisation—often a testing ground where new forms of precarity are trialled before being extended to other groups of workers.

In this essay, I look at precarity from two angles: the impact of it on migrant workers and the role of migration in the exacerbation and extension of it. I first analyse the process of structural precarisation of labour, highlighting how it has become even more extreme in recent years. I then examine the precarisation of migration in Europe over the past two decades and its role in paving the way for a wider enlargement of precarity. Finally, I consider the Italian context as a striking example of this two-fold process. This analysis is highly relevant if we wish to better understand what has been happening in China since the onset of the reform era. In fact, while the Chinese context has arisen from a specific set of conditions (economic, social, political, and cultural), it nevertheless presents many similarities with the Italian context regarding the social transformations, the new inequalities, and the conditions of migrant workers.

### Precarity 2.0

One of the cornerstones of the great social restructuring of the past three decades is the **widespread and intense transformation** of

the organisation of work and of the labour market—a *composite* yet *unitary* process. The features of these transformations may be summed up as follows: 1) organisational flexibility, i.e. the set of methods—from lean production to outsourcing, from just-in-time to new management—which have produced the fragmentation and acceleration of production processes; 2) the systematic application of informatics and robotics to the production process, which has increased the polarisation of work and the de-skilling of a number of workers; and 3) the structural precarisation of labour.

As one of the cores of neoliberal policies, the precarisation of labour is a *prerequisite* and a *carrier* of the intensification of labour exploitation required by the rules of the global economic order in response to the constant decrease of accumulation rates and recurring economic crisis. The fracture in the unity of the labour contract, the restructuring of labour law, the introduction of a plethora of contract types with different conditions and rights, are all part of a process which is broader and deeper than a mere reduction of guaranteed work spaces. Following a few decades in the wake of the Second World War, which saw the attainment of relatively stable and secure jobs, a radical and extreme commodification of labour has taken place.

The structural precarisation of labour has several consequences—including new stratifications, the growth in wage inequalities, the impoverishment of many groups of workers, the increase in the army of reserve workers (with the creation of a reserve of the reserve), the unconditional adaptation of workers' lives to the organisational needs of private companies and public bodies, the alteration of social rights which have been readjusted for the benefit of companies, and the deterioration of psychological and physical health as precarity gradually destroys people. Atypical contracts, at first applied among migrants, have fragmented and disconnected the labour

force, enabling the general devaluation of labour, denying the role of workers in the process of production. The consequences have been so dire that rather than describing this as simply *commodification of labour*, in extreme cases we can actually conceptualise it as the *nullification of labour* and of the worker, who does not have and does not need to have anything guaranteed, who—exactly as migrant workers in racist representations—have zero rights.

With the recent economic crisis and the consequent radicalisation of neoliberal policies, labour precarisation has further expanded and deepened, going beyond precarity as it was known in the recent past. Now, precarity 2.0—typified by vouchers, meal tickets instead of wages, serial internships, volunteering, unpaid work, zero-hour contracts, temporary work, posted workers, fake cooperatives—has transcended the original boundaries of precarious labour, replacing a segment of the 'first generation' precarious jobs and becoming the norm.

The precarisation of labour, both in its old and new versions, has been unleashed on workers unevenly. The first, most affected, were migrants, young people, low-skilled and low-educated female workers with children, older workers affected by company restructuring, and then other low-skilled workers more generally—i.e. those who constitute the most vulnerable segment of the European working class. These groups, which do not constitute an individual class of their own, have experienced increased impoverishment and marginalisation, and their foreign components have also been the subjects of racist campaigns.

## Precarisation of Migration in Europe

Across the majority of mainland Europe, the precarisation of labour has markedly affected migrants. There are at least three primary

reasons for this: the migration policies of many European countries; the role attached to migration in European capitalisms and in the operation of the labour market; and the rise of anti-migrant racism in the 2000s.

In several European countries, migrant workers are subject to a **double precarisation**, both in the work and legal sphere. With regard to the legal sphere in particular, the migration policies of many countries subordinate the migrants' right of abode to the existence of a work contract, and also tie their social rights to their migration status, thus stratifying social rights. These principles have contributed to the return of the 'guest worker', which has taken place in a context of flexible capitalism with all its fragmentation and polarisation. The generalisation of the bond between the residence permit and the work contract during a period of structural economic crisis and casualisation puts migrants in a perilous and blackmail position, forcing them to accept any work conditions. The interaction between these two dimensions has produced, compared to the previous decades, a larger and deeper precarisation of migrants' conditions. These migrants, torn between the *rigidity* determined by migration laws and the *flexibility* produced by labour laws, have found themselves as 'guest workers' attempting to navigate a context of economic stagnation, characterised by atypical contracts and the general weakening of the workers' movement. Thus, if for the 1960s and 1970s we may talk about a relatively stable work regime, in the following decades the reality is that of a precarisation of the very process of work insertion and, on the social part, the enhancement of exclusion or segregation factors.

Historically, migration has been allocated the role of a **reserve army and social buffer** against possible crises within European capitalisms. In the last decade, this has intensified, so that migrant workers have been the first group experimented on with regard to the shift to precarious work and to

the most extreme forms of precarity. In the meantime, the operating mechanisms of the labour market—selection, concentration, and specialisation—have continued to channel a good share of migrant workers into the most precarious and less paid sectors. This means that, in Europe, their working conditions—from access to work to unemployment, from tasks to wages, from classification to mobility—still present disparities compared to national workers. There are **large swaths** of unemployment, underemployment, 'over-education', and atypical contracts—all of which have become **higher in percentage** over time, and which have grown alongside crises.

The rise of institutional racism has increased precarisation and reduced social rights. The anti-migration offensive has supported migration policies characterised by a mix of identity and security elements—aimed at curbing social rooting, and at supporting temporary and fluctuating migration, following the requests for a just-in-time workforce. The return of assimilationism, both in policy and rhetoric, has required maximum social adaptation by migrants to the conditions to which they are subjected. Mass media, in creating a racialised depiction of society, has served to produce a differentiation in the public representations of migrants which is functional to the differentiated exploitation deriving from their stratified precarity. Slogans and discourses focussed on a necessarily temporary presence, preference for national workers, and on a subordinated integration of migrants in the name of social inferiority, have paved the way for the precarisation affecting a vast majority of migrants as a racialised class segment of the European working class.

At the same time, the role of migration as a carrier of precarisation must be highlighted. The labour market is segmented, but the spreading of precarity among migrant workers has been a factor of the multiplication and enlargement of precarity that has affected

a remarkable share of workers. In this framework, migration policies have played an **important general role** in paving the way and anticipating **comparable labour laws**.

The process of downward convergence of migration policies—starting slowly in the 1970s and 1980s, and gaining momentum in the 1990s and 2000s—has affected a fair share of European states and has seen the confluence of the different migration policies into **one single migration policy**, which is *selective*, *restrictive*, and *repressive*, and which balances new migrant arrivals according to the needs of the labour market. Such processes have been accompanied by unceasing denigration campaigns targeting different groups of migrants, which have ended up affecting migration as a whole and, subsequently, a large share of the world's labour, dividing it along distinct lines of differentiation.

In this context, where migration is encouraged by the market and discouraged by institutions—according to a role play aimed at the social and political exploitation of migrants—the real purpose of this downward migration policy is not a complete stop to immigration, but rather an unstable, vulnerable immigration, which serves as a general devaluation of labour. Historically, the use of a migrant labour force has been one of the main leverages for the devaluation of the labour force as a whole. By lowering the cost of labour and by offering an ultra-flexible workforce, migrants are forced into a subordinated position, and are **liable to blackmail** by migration policies and institutional discrimination. Today, this specific situation has turned migration into a laboratory where the manufacturing system has experimented with new forms of organising work—conceived of as a means of increasing profitability and productivity—which have led to replacing secure jobs with precarious ones.

Migration and labour policies increasingly aimed at precarity have gone hand-in-hand. The creation of an institutionally weak and

precarious proletariat, of an underclass of temporary workers replacing each other in constant rotation and circulation, has not only allowed the experimentation with new forms of labour exploitation to spread, but has also favoured a new global regulation of work relations and contracts in the name of stable precarity. The production of undocumented migrants, for instance, is an integral part of the structural precarisation of labour.

## The Italian Case

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The hectic pace of labour market reformation, which has taken place in Italy over the past two decades, has legalised all forms of precarisation, many of which were first trialled on migrant workers. From the **July 1993 agreement** between the Government and trade unions, which paved the way for fixed-term and temporary employment, to the **Jobs Act in 2014**, which has institutionalised precarity by turning it into the norm rather than the exception, the task of creating a precarious labour market has been carried out in a bipartisan fashion through the promulgation of a long list of laws and provisions that have affected both 'work flexibility' and 'employment flexibility'.

Simultaneously, immigration law has gradually established the connection between residence permits, work contracts, and housing—institutionalising a migrant work model based on forced illegality and social precarity. **Law 40/1998** has explicitly legitimised the existing social practices, confirming that undocumented migration is unavoidable for migrants and that regularisation can only happen afterwards (with amnesties or specific decrees) according to the will of the employers. **Law 189/2002**—which dictates that residence is strictly subordinated to employment—has redefined, restrictively, the prerequisites to right of abode with the introduction of a 'stay contract', thus creating a form of immigration

that is extremely susceptible to blackmail. This has placed the vast majority of migrants in a condition of structural, legal, and social precarity solidified by the labour law itself. The creation of an unbreakable bond between employment, residence permits, and housing guarantees means that migrants' destinies are, to a large extent, in the hands of the employer—the only person who may legitimately ask for a working permit for migrants and who has the subjective right to ask for a residence permit. **Law 94/2009** has further worsened migrant conditions by introducing a point-based residence permit, articulated in credits. As in a game of snakes and ladders, during the validity of the residence permit, migrants can obtain or lose points that will count towards the permit's renewal.

The fragmentation of residence permits types and the multiple durations of residence permits stipulated by immigration laws—combined with the different kinds of atypical contracts stipulated by labour laws—have determined a marked *stratification of the legal and social status* of migrants. In other words, different types of migrants are granted, with several categories with different rights and conditions, which trigger a *hierarchy of precarity* within the very same migrant populations.

## Pedagogy of Precarity and New Forms of Casualisation

Throughout the 1990s migrants have been channelled into the worst jobs, especially in labour-intensive sectors, with a high rate of irregular work. The shift to the industrial sector of the 2000s has entailed an improvement in the condition of migrant workers, yet they still take up proportionally more low-skilled and low-paid jobs. Migrant participation in the official labour market has increased, but the racial segmentation of the labour market has grown, and is matched by

labour segregation and ethnicisation in the manufacturing processes. The manufacturing system, characterised by small and medium units, drawing on the more unstable or marginal segments in the labour market, has had a permanent reserve of cheap workers with which it could support the new forms of organisation of work. The working experience of migrants—with regard to tasks, classification, wages, accidents, and social security—presents **severe disparities** in comparison with national workers. Among them, we encounter the **highest rates** of unemployment (16.2 percent for migrants versus 11.4 percent for national workers), underemployment (11.7 percent versus 4.2 percent), over-education (40.9 percent versus 21.6 percent), contract precarity, and intermittent work.

Within this situation, we find *mass socialisation to precarity*. As migrants enter the labour force, running the gauntlet of irregular work and undocumented migration before reaching a minimally stable situation, they often spend a long period experiencing the most exploitative labour practices in the country. In a sense, this can be considered a sort of 'warming-up' phase for permanent uncertainty and social inferiority. This stage, which affects migrants differently according to various factors, prepares them for a lifetime of precarious work. This is the cornerstone of Italy's labour migration regime. This *pedagogy of precarity* is a pillar of the subjugation of migrants that began in the 1980s and 1990s, and was institutionalised in the 2000s. In terms of socialisation, it has enlarged to create a sort of halo effect that has affected other groups of workers, who at first had witnessed the precarisation of migrants thinking it would only be limited to them.

In this context, migrants have been the 'guinea pigs' for new forms of precarisation. Work paid with vouchers—used in Italy until March 2017 and currently under reform—is just one example. This is a remuneration arrangement for accessory occasional work

that entails a remuneration of ten euros per hour before tax. Vouchers have no relation to a work contract, do not guarantee a day off, paid leave, sick leave, unemployment benefits, maternity or marriage leave, family benefits, nor loss-of-job indemnities. At first, in 2003, they were used for a few occasional activities carried out by specific categories (after-school tutoring, side jobs for students, and retired people), but later found wide application in sectors featuring a high rate of migrant labour—including domestic work, care work, and seasonal work in agriculture (harvesting). In 2015, **115 million vouchers** were sold, corresponding to 1.1 billion euros, a third of which were used in the construction sector, and half in trade, tourism, and services. Vouchers then became a ‘universal’ tool, across all sectors, used for several jobs and for activities that are not necessarily occasional, and has partly replaced fixed-term precarious contracts. From a remuneration arrangement, it transformed into an employment arrangement, but in such evolution cases, the work relation no longer exists, channelling workers into a situation of extreme precarity.

## Advocating a Global Social Citizenship

There is a close connection between work transformations and alteration of social rights, between labour precarisation and social rights stratification. The effects of organisation flexibility and of contract precarity are not only visible in the hyper segmentation of the labour market and the rapid growth of under-employed people, but can also be seen in the erosion of labour rights and the restriction of social citizenship. In the case of migrants, labour precarity entails a considerable exclusion or segregation factor, as the exercise of social rights is often subordinated to the work contract or the residence permit. The return of the

‘guest worker’ and the preference by states and markets for temporary migration, have favoured—in an era of structural precarity—a limited and conditional acquisition of social rights, generating new forms of inequality and a framework of stratified rights. All of this is supported by a **strong xenophobia** in the **name of the welfare state**. The attack on the social rights of the citizen has been going on for at least two decades as a fully-fledged state policy aimed at altering the very structure and functions of these rights. Even though it started in the migration sphere, it has not been confined there, and has expanded to other segments of the population. For this reason, it is high time to consider the idea of a global social citizenship that may curb this downward slide into a future defined by structural precarity.

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