

Precarious workers in London

New forms of organisation and the city

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This paper discusses precarious workers in London. The aim is to consider the particular challenges and possibilities for resistance in the context of London. It addresses the theoretical questions of precarity and its significance in post-Fordist capitalism. The innovations of the Operaismo—in terms of workers' inquiries, the concept of class composition and the strategy of refusal—provide the theoretical basis for the paper. The paper draws on two examples of recent struggles on university campuses, that of casual teaching staff and cleaners, which highlight different points. The first is that a method inspired by the tradition of the workers' inquiry can provide an important starting point for a campaign, combining knowledge production and a project of organisation. This is illustrated with the use of surveys as a starting point for a campaign at SOAS (School of Oriental and African Studies), University of London. The second example draws on the experience of the cleaners' campaigns at the University of London. The history of the dispute is considered along with the use of the London living wage and alternative forms of trade unionism. This paper argues that the particular pressures for precarious workers in London need to be considered, but could also be posed as potential demands from workers, drawing on Henri Lefebvre's notion of 'the right to the city'. The conclusion of the argument is a call for further research that is attentive to the new forms of organisation that are emerging from workers' struggles and to how a consideration of urban demands could provide important opportunities for developing this further.

Key words: precarious workers, London, Operaismo, workers' inquiry

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to discuss the challenges and possibilities for the resistance of precarious workers in London. The first part of the paper addresses the concept of precarity and considers the implications of the shift to post-Fordism. The innovations of the Operaismo (or the Italian Workerists), and in particular the concept of the workers' inquiry, class composition and the strategy of refusal, are used to shed some much needed light on the theoretical questions. The paper draws on two recent examples of struggles on university campuses, casual teaching staff and cleaners, to argue that there are new forms of organisation emerging that require attention. The paper then moves on to discuss the particular challenges of organising for precarious workers and identifies potential strategies for overcoming this. The final section considers the impact of London as a city on precarious workers, both in terms of the challenges it presents, but also as a possible demand to be developed outside of the workplace. The paper concludes by arguing for a consideration of the role that academic research can play in understanding and developing struggle.

Understanding precarious labour

The term precarity is broadly used to describe the conditions of insecure employment. The application of the term 'precariousness' is both more unwieldy and indeterminate than most. Angela Mitropoulos (2005, 12) continues to argue that if anything can be said 'for certain about precariousness, it is that it teeters', which points towards 'some of the tensions that shadow much of the discussion about precarious labour'. Pierre Bourdieu (1998, 95–99) described 'précarité' as a

'new mode of domination in public life . . . based on the creation of generalized and permanent state of insecurity aimed at forcing workers into submission, into the acceptance of exploitation. To characterize this mode of domination . . . a speaker here proposed the very expressive concept of flexploitation. The word evokes the rational management of insecurity . . . what is presented as an economic system . . . is

in reality a political system which can only be set up with the active or passive complicity of the official political powers.'

This definition provides an important starting point for the discussion of precarity. There is disagreement about the implications of precarious work and the conclusion of Guy Standing's (2011) argument has done much to muddy the waters. Standing (2011) argues that precarious workers now form a new emerging social class: the 'precariat'. Richard Seymour (2012) has argued that Standing's (2011) formulation 'remains at best a purely negative, critical concept', but this is not to say that the term should be completely rejected. The problem with the concept is that 'its advocates want it to do far more than it is capable of doing—that is naming, describing and explaining a developing social class' (Seymour 2012). Precarious employment is not new, as is evident from the description by a dockworker in 1882: 'dock labouring is at all times a precarious and uncertain mode of living' (quoted in Seymour 2012). If it is not a new phenomenon then it is necessary to consider how conditions of precarity have arisen or could be overcome. Seymour (2012) articulates how 'precarity is built into neoliberal capitalism, in which growth is predicated on financial risk and indebtedness'. Therefore, it needs to be understood in the context of attacks on workers' terms and conditions, the dismantling of the welfare state through the reduction of government spending and the opening up of public services to market forces that neo-liberalism entails (Harvey 2007, 12).

The experience of contemporary precarity has to be understood as part of the shift away from the patterns of production and consumption of Fordism. In terms of employment, Mitropoulos (2005, 13) argues that the 'flight from "standard hours" was not precipitated by employers but rather by workers seeking less time at work' and connects it to what 'the Italian Workerists dubbed the "refusal of work" in the late 1970s'. This escape from the discipline of the Fordist labour market potentially alters the content of the struggle. Anthony Iles (2005, 36) warns of the risks of considering the struggles only 'in terms of battles for better legislation'. This attempt to win only employment reform 'misses the opportunity to investigate the tendency for self-organised (or "disorganised") labour to develop a more generalised struggle'. It is in this way that the concept of precarity therefore takes on a political role in the autonomist tradition: it becomes a 'project to dismantle the mass worker as the central object for labour struggles and place it on the shoulders of the more encompassing but diffuse idea of the precarious worker' (McCarthy 2005, 55).

In practice, precarious employment has not led to a greater amount of leisure time for workers to enjoy. It may reduce—although 'not necessarily'—the 'actual amount of time spent doing paid work', but 'the post-Fordist worker' has to 'be continually available for such work' (Mitropoulos 2005, 13). The time spent not working becomes devoted to searching and preparing for work. This leads Mitropoulos (2005, 13) to argue that while Fordism which sought to 'sever the brains of workers from their bodies', post-Fordist capitalism is 'characterised—in Foucault's terms—as the imprisonment of the body by the soul'. This notion is different from the orthodox Marxist conception of alienation. The perspective put forward by Franco 'Bifo' Berardi (2009, 44) does not 'anticipate any restoration of humanity, does not proclaim any human universality, and bases its understanding of humanity on class conflict'. In an influential text by Mario Tronti (1972, 22–23), he argues:

'The working class confronts its own labor as capital, as a hostile force, as an enemy—this is the point of departure not only for the antagonism, but for the organization of the antagonism. If the alienation of the worker has any meaning, it is a highly revolutionary one. The organization of alienation: This is the only possible direction in which the party can lead the spontaneity of the class. The goal remains that of refusal, at a higher level: It becomes active and collective, a political refusal on a mass scale, organized and planned. Hence the immediate task of working-class organization is to overcome passivity.'

This understanding of alienation as estrangement is not based on the loss of some kind of human essence. Instead, it is a 'condition of estrangement from the mode of production and its rules, as refusal of work'. It is therefore, as Berardi (2009, 46) puts it, to be

'seen as the condition of those who rebel assuming their partial humanity as a point of strength, a premise of a higher social form, of a higher form of humanity, and not as the condition of those who are forced to renounce their essential humanity'.

Not all precarious workers are employed to do the same kinds of work however. Kidd McCarthy (2005, 57) suggests a distinction between 'BrainWorkers', those 'who are hired not for their general labour but

for specialised skills or their creativity', and 'ChainWorkers', employed to work at large chain stores like McDonalds. They are 'automatons and the only thing they have to sell is their labour'. The extension of rationalisation into the 'ChainWorkers' workplaces means that 'there is all the discipline of the factory with none of the interdependency and vulnerabilities which formerly allowed workers to fight back' (McCarthy 2005, 57). The 'ChainWorkers' therefore face the largest structural barriers for organising. As Pollert and Charlwood (2009, 344) have argued, the question of vulnerability is best understood with an emphasis on the conditions of 'low pay and non-unionism'. The changes that have taken place in the labour market over the last 30 years have involved an increasing polarisation of the types of jobs available (Kaplanis 2007), with a growth in the number of low-paid 'lousy jobs' at the bottom (Goos and Manning 2007).

This differential position of precarious workers is also uneven. Migrant workers, and in particular those without legal immigration status and therefore employment rights, are particularly at risk (Ryan 2005). There are also additional pressures on workers who attempt to balance paid work and unpaid work, for example, workers carrying out home and family responsibilities as well as employment. This remains primarily a demand on women in the workforce and increases the likelihood of employment in 'non-standard' jobs that are temporary or casualised (Fredman 2003). It is therefore possible to say that the most precarious and vulnerable are those in low-paid, 'nonstandard' jobs, without trade union organisation as they are not covered by either of the 'three regulatory regimes—collective bargaining, employment protection rights, and the national insurance system' (Fredman 2003, 308). Much academic literature is concerned with 'the unionized workforce', yet 'the non-unionized themselves, who comprise the majority of employees, have been marginalized', something that Pollert and Charlwood (2009, 357) argue demands renewed attention.

Workers in universities

There are 45 higher education institutions in London with over 100,000 students.¹ The scale of education provision is vast, involving large numbers of lecturers, administrative and support staff. The changes to higher education that have been introduced in recent years have led to a spiralling of pay at the top of universities with pay freezes and realterm reductions for the majority of staff. This section will examine two groups of workers in universities that have been engaged in recent workplace struggles: casual teaching staff and cleaners.

The beginning of an academic career in a university traditionally began with an apprentice phase during postgraduate study. Teaching was often given to students by supervisors in an opaque fashion, with the phase of the career being a stepping-stone onto subsequent stable roles. However, as Gigi Roggero (2011, 22) has argued in his co-research project into universities:

'unhitching itself from the traditional idea of working one's way up, or the passage toward tenure-track employment, precarity ceases in fact to designate a contingent phase in order to become a structural and permanent element of the corporatization of the university. This is not only a case of the expansion of the "academic periphery", precarization, or "adjunctification", invades the very core of research universities.'

The temporary periods of casual work that were accepted due to abstract offers of later stability have now become a generalised condition in higher education. The statistics for the 2010/11 academic year collected by the Higher Education Statistical Agency show very high levels of casualisation in UK higher education institutions. A total of 68.9% of research-only staff and 49.5% of teaching-only staff are employed on fixed term contracts, with little job security. This falls to 10.4% for more established staff with teaching-and-research positions.² Recent research carried out by UCU (University and College Union) found that 53% of UK universities reported hiring staff on zero-hours contracts.³ These figures put higher education second only to the hotel and catering sector for levels of casualisation in the UK.⁴

There have been a number of recent attempts to organise casual staff in universities. One of the starting points was a national survey of the pay and conditions of postgraduates that teach organised by the NUS (National Union of Students). The main findings of the survey were that a 'third of postgraduate students who teach earn less than the minimum wage' and that around a third of those surveyed received no contract of employment for their teaching.⁵ The use of surveys was later attempted at a number of different universities, broadening out the scope from only students that teach, with a recent

successful example at SOAS (School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London). The local survey at SOAS found that fractional teaching staff were employed on precarious fixed term contracts and did not receive pay for all the hours that they worked. The actual hourly wage worked out on average to be approximately £8.90 per hour, with 25% of tutors earning less than £6 per hour.⁶ This stands in sharp contrast to the £9000 tuition fees paid per year by the students that they teach.

The casual staff launched a campaign called 'Fractionals For Fair Play' to organise for better conditions. The survey allowed the collection of empirical evidence and also the building of networks and the development of organisations. There are similarities in the approach to that used by Roggero (2011) in his co-research project, drawing on the tradition of workers' inquiries. University workers, with training in various research methodologies, are well placed to undertake collective co-research projects in the workplace. For example, at SOAS, a postgraduate economics student was able to apply complex statistical techniques to the survey results in order to interrogate them further. The survey can therefore be an important starting point to a campaign, drawing together a disparate group of workers across departments who do not often meet collectively otherwise.

What is notable about the campaign at SOAS is that it moved beyond research to action. The workers organised a number of mass meetings and demonstrations on campus before moving on to take a form of work-to-rule action. The nature of the grievance around unpaid hours meant that the additional unpaid labour could be withdrawn without recourse to a union ballot for strike action. The workers refused to carry out the additional work, including marking essays at a decisive point of the academic year. The management at SOAS threatened to dock 100% pay from those taking part in the unofficial action, but the campaign continued. The most recent development has involved a negotiation between the union and management resulting in the offer of £150,000 compensation to fractional staff.

The self-organisation of the workers in this campaign stands in contrast to the national UCU pay campaign of 2014. It ended recently with the acceptance of a 2% offer—despite a pay cut in real terms of 13% since 2008.⁷ This campaign involved one-day strikes, two-hour strikes, followed by a marking boycott that crumbled under the threat of 100% pay deductions at a number of universities. The dispute at SOAS shows the possibility of building successful, democratic campaigns. Instead of a minority of specialists deciding on the strategy and tactics, the involvement of the majority of members at a rank-and-file level is not just an added bonus, it is key to the success.

The cleaners' living wage campaigns

The issues of low pay and casualisation are certainly not limited to academic staff at universities. There are a large number of administrative, cleaning, security and catering workers who face deteriorating conditions. The start of the current cleaners' campaign can be traced back to 1998 when the Trade Union Congress launched its 'organising academy', hoping to build on the success of the US AFL-CIO (American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations) 'organizing institute'. The project involved training '240 full-time organizers' over the following 10 years 'with a view to changing the culture within unions and reinjecting that "social movement feeling"'. Starting in 2001, there were attempts to launch a version of the 'Justice for Cleaners' campaign that had been successful in the USA. In London, this involved the demand for a living wage. The minimum wage in the UK is £6.31 per hour, but given the costs associated with living in London it is estimated that £8.80 per hour is the minimum required.⁸ An initiative called Citizens UK⁹ was involved in some of the initial organising, with attempts to build a community union type campaign, starting with the calculation of the living wage. There were a number of important local successes in winning the London living wage increase (Kirkpatrick 2014, 239).

The focus on the cleaners' campaigns in universities got fully underway in 2011. Jack Kirkpatrick (2014, 246) provides a detailed account of the inter-relation between the workers, London Citizens, the established unions and the IWW (Industrial Workers of the World) Cleaners Branch. He argues that in 2011:

'the migrant workers of the IWW Cleaners Branch took on neoliberal capitalism and won. Going from strength to strength, the scrappy little DIY union organized hundreds of workers into campaigns, saved

jobs, and won wage rises while protecting terms and conditions. In an age of austerity, across the secretive and frankly very strange world of the City of London, David was quite successfully kicking the crap out of Goliath . . . Or at least that's how it was painted from the outside. To some extent that was true; but inside the new movement tensions were brewing.'

The development of the cleaners' campaign has seen the establishment of the Independent Workers Union of Great Britain (IWGB).¹⁰ Kirkpatrick (2014, 252) discusses some of the controversy surrounding a break from the IWW to form this new group, but it is more useful to examine what the organisation has gone on to achieve. A workforce that is precarious, low paid and is comprised of a large numbers of migrant workers suffers from numerous structural challenges. As Helena Lundberg and Jan Ch. Karlsson (2011, 141) have pointed out, a 'common trait' of cleaning is that it 'combines bad working conditions and high scores on work-related injuries with very low pay'. Yet in their study of hotel cleaners, Lundberg and Karlsson (2011, 142) found that the conditions of workers were a continuing source of grievances, but that 'those conditions also rendered collective resistance difficult, which is why it took more individual forms'. This is what makes the cleaners' campaigns in universities stand out; not that they are an expression of resistance against exploitation, but that expression took a collective form. It is important to stress this because it is easy to assume that a lack of organisation or demands from workers means that they are not resisting.

The cleaners' campaign developed on University of London campuses with the launch of the '3 Cosas' campaign in 2012 (Figure 1). It involved outsourced workers fighting for three areas (the '3 Cosas' is from Spanish, widely spoken by the workforce) where there is greatest disparity between outsourced and university workers: sick pay, holidays and pensions. The vibrant campaign has had a number of successes (Figure 2). Following more than a year's worth of strikes, demos, occupations and general pressure, all outsourced workers at the University of London now not only are paid at least the London Living Wage, but also receive 25 (increased from 20) days holiday and six months' sick pay (dependent on length of service).¹¹

The campaign had workers' self-organisation at its heart, but was also able to build links of solidarity with other groups of workers and students. Kirkpatrick (2014, 257) argues that this is due to the 'IWW's focus on mass leadership development through education on the job and empowerment through collective direct action (as opposed to "one-step-removed" representation)—and "self-ownership" of that action'. This is certainly far removed from the general experience of Unison, a large trade union which represents cleaners on campuses across the country. The 3 Cosas campaign is still ongoing, with recent strikes against redundancies at student halls, and has the potential to go on to further successes that redefine what is possible with contemporary workplace organisation.

Precarious work outside of the campus

The proximity of researchers to the university means it is much easier to discuss struggles that take place on campus. The choice of the examples discussed so far is a result of that proximity, rather than attributing these struggles precedence over others that have taken place across London. For example, there has been a continuing dispute in construction over the past few years that deserves attention. It involved electricians on building sites being threatened with a 35% cut to pay as contractors in the BESNA (Building Engineering Services National Agreement) group tried to leave the Joint Industry Board. The electricians fought back successfully against this with a campaign built at a rank-and-file level, often in opposition to Unite the union, and always with the backdrop of blacklisting.¹² The dispute involved early morning demonstrations outside of building sites to build the campaign, particularly at the Crossrail project, with solidarity from students and activists.

There have been a number of successful campaigns in the service sector recently. The most notable has been a recent struggle for the living wage by workers at the Ritzy Cinema, in Brixton, South London. The art-house cinema is owned by Picturehouse Cinemas, which is in turn owned by one of the largest cinema chains in Europe, Cineworld. The workers have so far taken five days of strike action, with BECTU (Broadcasting, Entertainment, Cinematograph and Theatre Union) attempting to negotiate the living wage with management.¹³ The campaign has attracted solidarity from the local community, as

well as film director Ken Loach and the recent appearance of footballer- turned-actor Eric Cantona on a picket line. The various examples of struggles that have broken out are encouraging, but remain on the whole isolated. Part of the problem is that 'existing labor unions'—in the UK, as well as globally—'have proved incapable of mobilizing mass rank-and-file militancy to resist the ongoing deterioration in workplace conditions and the systematic erosion of workers' power'. Immanuel Ness (2014, 1) continues to point out that despite this, 'workers are developing new forms of anti-bureaucratic and anti-capitalist forms of syndicalist, council communist, and autonomist worker representation'. These experiments in new forms of organisation are important because they are 'rooted in the self-activity and democratic impulses of members and committed to developing egalitarian organizations in place of traditional union bureaucracies'.

These first steps towards new forms of organisation could offer the potential to break the deadlock of austerity currently facing down workers. However, the status of these as experiments limits them to potential rather than indicating something more substantial at this stage. It is important to remember, as Ralph Miliband (1982, 13) argued, that 'left activists, generally speaking, have been a crucially important element in the labour movement and in the working class', yet at the same time they are not the labour movement, nor are they working class. Therefore, while these emergent struggles are bursting forth at particular points, they are not generalising across large numbers of workplaces at this stage. The attempts by experienced, creative and already politicised workers to lead campaigns provide important inspiration, but can be particularly vulnerable to management strategies of victimisation. It is at this point that the conditions of precarity become particularly sharp. The attraction of the label of troublemaker, something which can happen quickly when a worker chooses to stick their head above the parapet, greatly intensifies the risk of being sacked. The longevity of these initial projects can be greatly reduced either by those at the core being forced out of the workplace or choosing to move on for other reasons.

The framework provided by the Operaismo can shed some conceptual light on the problems of precarious organisations. As Mario Tronti (1966, 89) put it in clear terms, 'we have to turn the problem on its head, reverse the polarity, and start again from the beginning: and the beginning is the class struggle of the working class'. The problem with this approach is that there are not a wide variety of open struggles from which to draw conclusions. A potential remedy is directing attention towards the composition of the working class. As Roggero (2011, 23) argues:

'Our challenge is to begin once again from the blockages experienced by the struggles of the precarious . . . to use operaismo's classic terms, the political composition of the class is crushed within the sociological mold of its technical composition.'

An important contribution of the Operaismo is this notion of class composition. It begins with a consideration of the technical composition—the organisation of the labour process, the use of technology and the conditions of the reproduction of labour power. The political composition, on the other hand, leads to the specific forms and relations of struggles, a complex factor continually subjected to processes of re-composition. These 'blockages' are therefore the result of the technical composition of the working class at a particular point, preventing sustained precarious struggles and giving the impression of calm in many workplaces. For example, the limitation of most trade union demands to the questions of wages can result in the abandonment of struggle over the labour process itself. By failing to contest control over the organisation of work by management, workers themselves are left in a difficult structural position. The drastic shift in the frontier of control in the workplace means that it no longer appears as something that can even be contested, leaving significant power in the hands of management.

The blockages that precarious workers face are not permanent or immovable. It is at this point that academic research can make a complementary intervention. The example of the survey at SOAS builds on the tradition of workers' inquiries¹⁴ that have been able to play an important role at different moments of class re-composition. This is not to give academic research precedence over the self-organisation of workers—in fact, the SOAS example shows how researchers are now increasingly subjected to precarious conditions and exploitation that need to be resisted. In seeking to shift the blockages it is first necessary to understand the conditions of the workplace and the class composition at particular

points. These projects of knowledge production and organisation can provide the first tentative steps towards doing so.

A particularly important point to consider with precarious work is the question of turnover. High levels of turnover are a characteristic of the service industry and are particularly acute in call centres, for example. This poses a significant obstacle to organisation as networks that are built rapidly fall away as existing people drop out. However, this can be re-conceptualised by considering Marcel van der Linden's (2008, 137) discussion of the forms of resistance used by workers and slaves. In particular, he highlights how 'a very important form of struggle used by all categories of subaltern workers is the strike'. The definition that Marcel van der Linden (2008, 179) deploys is useful, arguing that 'in a sense, a strike means a collective exit—not with the intention of leaving for good, but to exert pressure temporarily. The transition between "running away" and "fighting for better working conditions" is in reality rather fluid.' Therefore, rather than considering workplaces with high turnover as unorganisable, the problem can be turned on its head. As Mario Tronti (1972, 24–25) argues:

'The working class must cease to express the requirements of capital, even in the form of its own demands: It must force the bosses to put forward demands, so that the workers can actively, that is on an organized basis, reply "No!" This today is the only possible means of overcoming working-class passivity – overcoming the spontaneous form which the passivity presently takes – while furthering its political content of negation and revolt.'

The 'strategy of refusal' therefore begins from moments like calling in sick to work, leaving mid-shift or simply not turning up to the workplace again. Therefore, the challenge is to find the moments of resistance that are already taking place, attempt to frame them as a refusal and seek out the organisational forms that can develop this further.

The challenges of working in London

The large number of workers spread across London in precarious jobs often work in relative isolation. The cost of privately renting in London is extremely high, pushing the majority of workers out of central London and into the surrounding boroughs. The challenge of finding housing often involves exorbitant agency fees, unscrupulous landlords and the pressure of so many other prospective tenants. Yet even moving further out in London attracts increased travel costs. The spread of the London living wage as a demand for precarious work highlights these further instances of exploitation. However, the problem with posing these solely in terms of wage rises is that it does not address why these costs are so high in the first place. Of course, higher wages are worth fighting for, but if they signal to landlords that they can raise the price of rent, they would not necessarily result in a higher standard of living. In a manner analogous to the problems of control in the workplace, many of the interlinked questions relating to transport, rent and access to housing or public space are simply not being posed. The price of rent is treated as unavoidable, with the idea of rent controls almost appearing at this moment as a transitional demand—an agitational demand which cannot currently be met under capitalism.

The contemporary urban environment has been deformed by 'the free market economy' which Trangos[~] et al. (2014, 195) argue emphasises 'the protection of private property and interprets welfare as the sum of individuals' wealth'. A clear example of this can be found with the domination of the financial centres of the City and Canary Wharf, with vast sums of money traded from their glittering office blocks. By day the core of the city is inhabited by bankers and home to the international elite, while further out are some of the most diverse and multicultural neighbourhoods in the world. The city is geographically marked by inequality, with striking difference often in close proximity. However, it is also a site of struggle, as Trangos[~] et al. (2014, 191) have argued in a previous issue of *City*, since 2011 'London was a city strained by economic recession, unhinged by a wave of riots and occupied by demands for alternatives to austerity. The public presented a series of challenges to "business as usual".'

The moments of resistance in the urban environment can be conceived of in terms of Henri Lefebvre's (1996, 147) notion of 'the right to the city', which 'is like a cry and a demand'. The content of such demands as explained further by Lefebvre (quoted in Marcuse 2009, 189) as

'The right to information, the rights to use of multiple services, the right of users to make known their ideas on the space and time of their activities in urban areas; it would also cover the right to the use of the centre.'

These are all issues that the overwhelming majority of the population of London have little or no say in. As Peter Marcuse (2009, 195) argues, this spatial focus can be useful, but it must be remembered that 'most problems have a spatial aspect, but their origins lie in economic, social, political arenas, the spatial being a partial cause and an aggravation, but only partial'.

The translation of 'the right to city' into a demand in London could open up new possibilities. As Margit Mayer (2009, 367) has argued in *City* previously, the 'slogan has become a live wire material practice today'. The aggressive privatisation of previous years forms what Harvey (2003, 157) calls 'the cutting edge of accumulation by dispossession', something felt particularly sharply in a city like London. The accumulation by dispossession 'has accelerated on heretofore unseen levels, which entails enormous losses of rights—civil, social, political, as well as economic rights' (Mayer 2009, 367). Yet while London appears to be a site of huge inequalities and intense exploitation, it could also be a powerful field of struggle.

The geographic spread of workers means that there are not often collective points at which workers from a particular workplace meet outside of work. The pressure of high rents means that people will move regularly and are therefore not able to become meaningfully rooted in communities. Stuart Hodgkinson and Paul Chatterton (2006, 310) consider the tradition of social centres in the UK and note how different the tradition is from Europe, where they are much more common. Social centres are one possible form that could mobilise geographic demands. The defining feature of social centres is 'their simultaneous politicization of the very act of reclaiming private space and opening it up to the public as part of a conscious refusal and confrontation to neo-liberalism and the enclosure of urban space'. Certainly, the conditions in London are ripe for the establishment of such forms, 'as in Italy, a common theme of city or town-centre-based social centres is their opposition to gentrification'.

In Italy, there is a particular tradition of social centres and urban struggle. Alongside the innovative approach to workplace investigation and struggle, the 'operaismo took the form of direct action in the workplace and in the community through the refusal to pay rent, and bills for electricity, and other necessary services'. For many the idea of a rent strike is almost unthinkable, particularly if the demand for rent control seems outlandish at this point. At an individual level, these forms of struggle would result in harsh sanctions that would be difficult to resist. This stands in contrast to the 'autonomist workers and community associations' that 'were engaged in a tactic, rather than wantonly jeopardizing the lives of workers and their families' (Ness 2014, 8). In Italy, the composition and conditions of the working class were not the same and there are different traditions of struggle. It is not possible to transplant tactics from one set of conditions into another, but nevertheless they remain possibilities. Interconnected inquiries can be used in local communities as well as workplaces. Again, they can form the beginning of a project of organisation that starts with the co-production of knowledge: who lives in the area, where do people work, who do they rent from and what kinds of grievances do people have?

Conclusion

This paper has sought to discuss the challenges facing precarious workers in London. The two examples on university campuses, casual lecturers and cleaners, illustrate two important points. The example of casual lecturers highlights how methods of co-research can be used to produce knowledge of a situation and begin the process of organisation. The tradition of workers' inquiries can be a source of inspiration for understanding and being involved in new struggles. The second example of the cleaners' campaign indicates how new forms of trade unionism are being attempted that could break the current bureaucratic hold. What both provide are much needed examples of precarious workers self-organising, formulating demands and achieving victories. They signal the possibilities of new forms of organisation that emerge from the objective conditions that workers face. The task facing critical research is to find new ways of producing knowledge, breaking down the distinctions between object and subject and reconfiguring the relationship between theory and practice.

The geographical aspect of this argument focuses on the particular challenges of living in London. Instead of considering these as additional obstacles facing precarious workers, the task now is to find out how to develop urban campaigns alongside and in connection to workplace struggles. The struggle over questions of rent, cost of transport and the right to the city could provide the means to link together the disparate struggles of precarious workers. It could provide a common point to connect with other groups of workers and provide a focus for continuity for workers who change employer but face common conditions. The demand for the right to the city is an important starting point, yet on the surface it appears there is little organised resistance taking place in the neo-liberal city. There is a need for research on the city which takes the approach that the Operaismo developed for the workplace. New methods need to be developed to uncover resistance and consider how it could develop, rather than declaring there is no struggle and writing off the potential of the unorganised. The social centre cannot be transplanted from a different context and expect success, but inspiration and experimentation could find forms that are appropriate in the context of London. A crucial dimension to this is the reintroduction of a radical critique that points towards potential alternative futures. The task of research is not to provide answers but to start by posing the right questions. London may be the capital city, but is it inevitable that the city is dominated by capital? This question can only begin to be answered by organising the refusal from the workplace to the community.

Notes

- 1 See: <http://www.study london.ac.uk/>
- 2 See: http://www.ucu.org.uk/socc_hematerials
- 3 See: <http://www.ucu.org.uk/6749>
- 4 See: <http://www.ucu.org.uk/index.cfm?articleid=6738>
- 5 See the full report here: www.nus.org.uk/en/news/third-of-postgraduate-students-who-teach-earn-less-than-the-minimum-wage/
- 6 See: <http://fractionalsforfairplay.webs.com/about>
- 7 See: <http://www.ucu.org.uk/hepay13>
- 8 See: <http://www.livingwage.org.uk/>
- 9 See: <http://www.citizensuk.org/>
- 10 See: <http://iwgb.org.uk/about/>
- 11 See: <http://3cosascampaign.wordpress.com/about/>
- 12 See: <http://union-news.co.uk/2011/12/sparksthey-came-for-us-and-we-fought-back/>
- 13 See: <http://union-news.co.uk/2014/06/glitzyrity-bectu-members-back-strike-living-wage/>
- 14 See the special issue of Viewpoint Magazine for a number of examples:
<http://viewpointmag.com/2013/09/30/issue-3-workers-inquiry/>

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