

Work, Employment and Society

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In today's labour market, the employment relationship has become much more individualised, in some cases precarious. Can companies invest successfully to rebuild social links ?

Conflict has always been part of the industrial and commercial world. Ever since the development of mercantile and mechanised societies during the Enlightenment and Industrial revolution, there has been a tension between employers and those that were employed. Such tensions developed around issues of wages and working conditions. By the early 20th century, these tensions were negotiated between trade unions and the board of management within a company. Trade Unions were the platform through which the workers of a company could voice their concerns to management. Thus, it gave the workers collective bargaining power. By the mid-20th century, they were commonplace in Modern Western democracies. But by the late 20th century, in the wake of the oil crisis and rising economic hardship, Neo-liberal economic policies brought about by politicians such as Margaret Thatcher in the UK, sought to suppress the trade unions and limit their power. Neoliberalism rose in an era when major heavy industries within the Western world were being shut down. Exploring this issue within the American context in his book *Men without Work*¹, Scholar Nicholas Eberstadt notes that as a result of such industries and other major professions being shut down,

“These forces have, among other things, eliminated large numbers of American manufacturing jobs over a number of decades...leaving many people-mostly men-unable to find new ones.”²

Along with undermining traditional forms of industry and labour within Western economies like Britain, Ireland and the United States, the Neoliberal economic approach completely reshaped the dynamic between the employed and the employer.

This new form of Neo-liberal economics focused on **individualising the employment relationship**. This means that instead of the workers having collective bargaining power in

¹ Eberstadt, Nicholas, *Men without Work* (Templeton Press: West Conshohocken, 2016)

² Eberstadt, Nicholas, *Men without Work* (Templeton Press: West Conshohocken, 2016) p.99

the form of trade unions, workers would be reduced to being just individuals. As Nick Bacon and John Storey frame it:

“The state has dismantled support for collective bargaining via the closed shop, prevented broader collective support: by drawing the boundaries of legitimate industrial action, and empowered individual members”³

Negotiating their rights on their own rather than having the backing of a union is going to be more difficult as an individual has much less power in dealing with a coordinated power structure than does a collective entity. As a result, workers working within such a company would face greater risks than they did before. One such risk is framed by Norbert Ebert in his book “Individualisation at work: The Self Between Freedom and Social Pathologies” in that while on the one hand workers under an individualised society enjoy more affluence and freedom than ever before in human history, there is also the risk that such people can eventually get themselves trapped in what he frames as the

“all consuming processes of rationalisation and bureaucratic organisation”⁴

Another risk is that of **precarious employment**. Precarious employment is employment that isn't fixed or stable...it traps the employee in a world where they are likely to lose their job because of conditions outside their control (like economic crashes or cost increases). One of the dangers of this kind of environment is that it causes a crisis of identity within the worker. As Arne Kalleberg points out in his essay, work is central to the identity of humans as it links them to each other, creating strong rooted communities within the populace⁵. Kalleberg argues that the introduction of unstable precarious work disrupts that cohesion and in turn, the security that people feel. In undermining the security of the individual, they are much more at risk at being disoriented and alienated.⁶

³ Bacon, Nick, Storey, John, “Individualisation of the Employment Relationship and the implications for Trade Unions” in *Employee Relations* (London: City University London, 1993) p.3 Research gate, *Research gate*, <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/235304672> accessed on the 19/11/2020

⁴ Norbert, Ebert, “Individualisation at work: The Self Between Freedom and Social Pathologies” (Farnham: Ashgate publishing, 2012) p.11, Google E-book, Pro-Quest E-Book central

⁵ Kalleberg, L. Arne “Precarious Work, Insecure Workers: Employment Relations in Transition” in *American Sociological Review*, vol.49, No.1 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2009) p.3, JSTOR, *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27736045> accessed on the 15/10/2020

⁶ Kalleberg, L. Arne “Precarious Work, Insecure Workers: Employment Relations in Transition” in *American Sociological Review*, vol.49, No.1 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2009) p.3, JSTOR, *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27736045> accessed on the 15/10/2020

Another danger of precarious work and the individualisation of labour is that it can lead to an abuse of workers and their rights within an employment context. While there are many illustrations of this, let us focus on a company that is by now a household name: “Amazon”. The policy of Amazon is one focused on individual success. This description comes from the New York Times article “Amazon wrestling big ideas in a bruising workplace”.

“The guidelines conjure an empire of elite workers (principle No.5. “Hire and develop the best”) who hold one another to towering expectations and are liberated from the forces-red tape, office politics-that keep them from delivering their utmost.”⁷

On the surface level, this hyper individualism is framed as “liberating” for the workers. The reality is that the workers are expected to compete with each other as rigidly as possible.

As explored in case studies this policy takes its toll on the psyche of the workers. For example, the employee Bo Olson’s most firm memory of working at Amazon was seeing employees weep:

“You walk out of a conference room and you’ll see a grown man covering his face.”⁸

The emotional impact of this extreme competitiveness was only one of many consequences that the workers of Amazon were facing as a result of their employer’s individualist policy. What this case study shows is that the individualisation of the employment relationship means that even workers in high earning jobs are just as vulnerable as those employed in either precarious employment or being unemployed.

So, if outstanding business success such as that of Amazon seems to acquire destructive aspects in this form of modern capitalism structured by precarious employment and individualized labour, what sort of solutions are there? One form of solution that has been proposed is the improvement of the quality of life for the workers. Emerging in the 1960s and 1970s, the quality-of-life movement emerged as a call for companies to focus on improving the conditions of life for the worker, demanding concepts such as:

⁷ <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/16/technology/inside-amazon-wrestling-big-ideas-in-a-bruising-workplace.html>

⁸ <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/16/technology/inside-amazon-wrestling-big-ideas-in-a-bruising-workplace.html>

“Adequate and fair compensation; a safe and healthy working environment; development of human capacities; growth and security; social integration; constitutionalism, considering of the total life space; and social relevance (Walton, 1973, 1974).”⁹

David Guest and Gudela Grote call for research into the quality of working life so that it can allow for the state and for companies to invest in improving the working conditions for the workers. They argue that such research and reform is even more necessary in our modern age because of the increased risks of aspects such as precarious employment, work related stress and diseases associated with this.¹⁰

But finding and implementing solutions was not so straightforward. As Chris Arthur highlights in his text “Financial Literary Education”

“Once neoliberal reforms had been implemented, they proved difficult to reverse,”¹¹

One reason Arthur gives for this was that market and individual choice were linked to the very ideals of democracy. Any move that could be considered as a threat to such individualist policies (that includes unionisation) was framed as a threat to democracy¹². Yet that doesn’t stop some companies from trying. A good example of one such company is Ally Financial. As explored in a Forbes article, the company developed numerous tactics to help its employees cope with the crisis of Covid 19¹³. These techniques included access to free mental health professionals through the employee assistance program, well-being modules and challenges geared to staying physically and mentally healthy at home as well as immediate paid medical leave for any employee diagnosed with Covid-19¹⁴.

⁹ Grote, Gudela, Guest, David, “The case for reinvigorating quality of working life research” in *Human Relations*, Vol.70 (Thousand Oaks: Sage publishing, 2017) p.151, Research gate, [Research gate, Quality of Working Life Grote & Guest 2017.pdf](#) accessed on the 02/12/2020

¹⁰ Grote, Gudela, Guest, David, “The case for reinvigorating quality of working life research” in *Human Relations*, Vol.70 (Thousand Oaks: Sage publishing, 2017) p.153, Research gate, [Research gate, Quality of Working Life Grote & Guest 2017.pdf](#) accessed on the 02/12/2020

¹¹ Arthur, Chris, Arthur, Chris, “Financial Literary Education: Neoliberal the consumer and the citizen, vol.53 (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2012) p.46

¹² Arthur, Chris, Arthur, Chris, p.46

¹³ Alan Kohl, ‘How one Company is taking care of Employees during Covid-19,*Forbes*, 6th April, 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/alankohll/2020/04/06/how-one-company-is-taking-care-of-employees-during-covid-19/?sh=59486c3e488d>

¹⁴ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/alankohll/2020/04/06/how-one-company-is-taking-care-of-employees-during-covid-19/?sh=59486c3e488d>

In another example, the company Dalkia illustrates the fact that companies may need to invest in re-establishing a strong social link among all layers of the management hierarchy. In this case, a three-year program (from 2018 to 2022) called “Parcours Manager” has significantly improved business performance and employee loyalty¹⁵.

¹⁵ « Parcours Manager: de l’Epanouissement Individuel à la Réussite Collective » dans Énergies Le Mag, juin 2022

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