

Precarious Work: Lack of Human Rights Perspective on Labour Relations

1. Precarious work – a general trend in labour relations

Precarious work is not linked with a specific legal form of employment and/or with a specific aspect of employment relationship, rather, it is an overall description of the worker's situation.¹ Certain legal forms are more exposed (the so-called new forms of employment, atypical, non-standard, subcontracting etc.), but also the workers employed under the “regular” contract of employment can find themselves in a precarious situation and it is questionable nowadays, especially in some countries, what is standard and what non-standard. There are numerous studies dealing with special, “non-standard” forms of work or with certain aspects of precariousness of work.²

It is not the form itself, which makes the employment precarious; it is rather the content of this relationship that matters. The term ‘precarious work’ can be defined in a negative way as an employment which does not correspond to the concept of decent work, taking into account the international labour standards and human rights. Precarious work is therefore the opposite of a decent employment, decent work.

The ILO report on precarious employment stresses that there are some common characteristics and that “in the most general sense, precarious work is a means for

¹ »Precarious« can be described as being dependent on the will of another, being dependent on circumstances beyond one's control, uncertain, unstable, insecure, unpredictable, also risky, dangerous, subject to chance, substantially lacking in security and stability.

² ILO, Policies and regulations to combat precarious employment, Geneva 2011; Underhill, E., How Precarious Employment Affects Health and Safety at Work: The Case of Temporary Agency Workers, Relations industrielles/Industrial Relations, 2011, Vol. 66, No. 3, p. 397-421; Letourneux, V., Precarious employment and working conditions in Europe, Eurofound, Dublin, 2012; Benach, J., Benavides, F. G., Precarious employment and health-related outcomes in the European Union, Eurofound, Dublin, 2012; Končar, P., Tudi zaposlovanje na črno pomeni segmentacijo trga dela ['Undeclared work also represents labour market segmentation'], Delavci in delodajalci, 2013, Vol. 13, No. 2-3, p. 195-210; Matsaganis, M., Rabemiafara, N., Ward, T., Young people and temporary employment in Europe, Eurofound, Dublin, 2013; Riso, S., Very atypical work: Exploratory analysis of fourth European Working Conditions Survey - Background paper, Eurofound, Dublin, 2010; Leschke, J., Watt, A., Finn, M., Job quality in the crisis - an update of the Job Quality Index (JQI), ETUI, Brussels, 2012; ILO, Non-standard forms of employment, Geneva, 2015; Aleksynska, M., Muller, A., Nothing more permanent than temporary? Understanding fixed-term contracts, ILO, Geneva 2015; and many others.

employers to shift risks and responsibilities on to workers”³. It further emphasizes that “the forms of precarity seem to be ever expanding, as employers constantly uncover new ways to circumvent regulations or find loopholes in regulations”.⁴ Amanda Latinne points out to the fact that even cooperatives (where there should be no worker-employer conflict of interests) follow the general trend of neoliberalism resulting in the enormous flexibility of the workers-owners.⁵ Another important observation is that the precarious work is an instrument to influence social competition between precarious workers and workers in a standard employment relationship.⁶ Working conditions of the latter are becoming more and more precarious as well. It can be argued that precariousness is gradually becoming a general feature of employment relations.

Since 1970s’ and especially since 1980s’, the neoliberal ideology strengthened the pressure to lower labour costs, to make labour markets more “flexible”, i.e. to lower the level of workers’ rights.⁷ All that led to precarisation of labour, more inequalities, more dependency and insecurity of people. It resulted in a higher risk not to be able to live and work according to human dignity standards. An explicit as well as an indirect, silent gradual dissolution of labour and social law has been going on, by way of:

- *introducing different forms of flexible, but in fact precarious employment*: The so-called segmentation and dualism on the labour market created the distinction between the standard and non-standard workers (insiders and outsiders) and caused the inequalities as regards the level of labour law protection. This was used as an argument to introduce general labour law reforms, lowering the level of labour rights in general, also for regular workers; however, the problem of segmentation could also (or even better) be resolved by raising the level of rights and strengthening the protection for precarious workers.⁸

³ ILO 2011, p. 5.

⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵ Latinne, A., *The Mondragon Cooperatives*, Intersentia, Cambridge-Antwerp-Portland 2014, p. 124-125.

⁶ Buelens, J., Pearson, J. (eds.), *Standard Work: An Anachronism?*, Intersentia, Cambridge-Antwerp-Portland 2012, p. 3-5.

⁷ Bronstein, A., *International and comparative labour law*, ILO and Palgrave 2009, p. 11-22; and many others.

⁸ This would be more reasonable, considering the fact that the precarious work has been found problematic. Why gradually pushing also regular workers in such (precarious) situations lacking adequate level of rights, security, predictability, decent working conditions?

- *non-observance of workers' rights in practice*: Many workers do not claim their rights before courts, due to lack of knowledge, fear, costs, ineffective sanctions, etc. Besides, labour inspection is not effective enough. That represents silent lowering, sometimes even abolishing of certain workers' rights.
- *contractualisation of labour, where more and more people work outside the scope of labour law protection*: This is another way of gradual indirect, silent dissolution of labour law, since a growing number of people work in precarious conditions without any labour law protection, as formally self-employed, under different civil law contracts, etc. There are many disguised employment relationships in practice.⁹
- *structural downwards labour law reforms*: Lowering of labour law protection by way of legislative reforms, by way of concluding new, less favourable collective agreements etc.

All that represents a strong pressure on the regular workers and the general level of their rights and it seems that there is the conflict of interests between regular and non-standard, precarious workers. Besides, the precarious workers are not well-organised and their interests are not always well-represented within the trade-unions and the collective bargaining. However, this conflict is not a real one, but it is apparent, nevertheless the existing one.¹⁰ On top of all that, there is a persistent unemployment which acts as an additional pressure for regular as well as non-standard workers. Activation policies and social welfare reforms, reducing social benefits and, consequently, lowering income security for those not working, make this pressure even stronger.¹¹ People are willing/forced to work under more and more precarious

⁹ See Senčur Peček, D., *Delavci – zunanji izvajalci? ['Workers – Outsourced?']*, *Delavci in delodajalci*, 2012, Vol. 12, No. 2-3, p. 223-244; Tičar, L., *Nove oblike dela, ['New forms of work']*, PF, Ljubljana 2012, p. 125-142; and others.

¹⁰ Kresal, B., *Mutating or dissolving labour law? The fundamental right to dignity of working people questioned (once again)*, In: Rigaux, M., Buelens, J., Latinne, A. (eds.), *From Labour Law to Social Competition Law?*, Intersentia, Cambridge-Antwerp-Portland 2014, p. 149-160.

¹¹ See Leskošek, V., *Vpliv socialne države na (ne)odvisnost delavcev od tržnih pogojev zaposlovanja ['The role of social state for the (non)dependance of workers on labour market conditions']*, *Časopis za kritiko znanosti*, 2012, Vol. 39, No. 247, p. 103-112. On activation policies see also Van Aerschot, P., *Activation Policies and the Protection of Individual Rights*, Ashgate 2011.

conditions as long as they have at least some kind of work and some earnings, it does not matter whether with decent working conditions or not.¹²

2. Precariat – nothing new

A phenomenon of precarious work and the “precariat”¹³ are not new; the very emergence and development of labour law was an answer to inhumane, precarious conditions of work and life in general. From the historical point of view, labour law was a reaction to an (excessive) exploitation of workers,¹⁴ a reaction to inhumane and insecure conditions of work, resulting in the lack of decent working conditions for many people. Labour law can be regarded as a means of achieving quality employment.

Formal freedom and equality of the contracting parties in the law of contract, which in reality meant an absolute power of the employer to determine working conditions, was gradually substituted by a model which seems to be able to balance the imbalanced power of labour and capital (at least to some extent), by recognising the minimum rights of the employees, thus setting the playing ground field, preventing destructive social competition between the workers which would result in the “race to the bottom”, by prohibiting unacceptable practices such as child labour, forced labour, discrimination in employment etc., by recognizing the importance of social partners and collective bargaining, as well as the right to strike, and by developing the social security systems which complemented labour law; all these aim at securing to people a decent living (preferably by a productive, freely chosen and decent work, however, if that was not possible, also by different social benefits). The concepts of decent work, equal opportunities, social inclusion etc. have been developed. This could well be fitted into the human rights and human dignity framework.

The emergence of precarious work and the rise of precariousness in working and living conditions in general is actually the result of the turn in the above described

¹² Kresal 2014, p. 154, 156. The role of social security in case of precarious work and in the context of the crisis have been critically discussed as well (see, for example, Strban, G., Pravnica do socialne varnosti in njen pomen v času gospodarske recesije, *Delavci in delodajalci*, 2012, Vol. 12, No. 4, p. 507-532). Social insurance systems do not take into account all different non-standard forms of work and their characteristics.

¹³ See Standing, Guy, *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*, Bloomsbury Academic 2011.

¹⁴ Every exploitation is excessive.

development of labour and social law/rights.¹⁵ Precarious work and precarious working conditions actually reflect (today and in the past) the lack of adequate level of labour law protection and/or the lack of effective implementation of labour law in practice as well as the lack of adequate social protection against unemployment and pauperisation of social security systems in general. Precarious work reflects the lack of human rights perspective in regulating working conditions.

The trend has its roots in the (neo)liberal ideology. Precarisation of labour relations, the rise of precarious work can be seen as a part of a general neoliberal trend within the context of globalisation.¹⁶ Human dignity, human rights are overlooked, set aside, workers are not treated as human beings, they are treated as if they were commodities. Under the pressure of the economic (neo)liberalism, everything is gradually becoming (or, to be more exact, is treated as if it were) a commodity. The process is often described as a commodification of everything. The entire society is transforming into the (“free”) market society.¹⁷

Formal freedom and autonomy of the contracting parties is strengthening again as a principle also in the field of labour relations; the imbalance of powers, resulting in a weaker negotiating position of those who (would like/need to) work for their living, is becoming a general feature of labour relations, pushing more and more people into precarious working and living conditions.

¹⁵ Already before this turn, characterized by the reinforcement of the (neo)liberal paradigm, the labour and social law corrected the existing imbalance of powers and rights only to a limited extent. However, the trend was, generally speaking, different than today, i.e. to improve working conditions, to strengthen labour and social rights, to gradually develop them upwards, to add new rights and to raise the level of labour and social protection.

About the limits of labour law in this regard and its corrective nature (»marginal correction of the free labour market«) see Rigaux, M., *Labour Law or Social Competition Law? The right to dignity of working people questioned (once again)*, In: Rigaux, M., Buelens, J., Latinne, A. (eds.) 2014, p. 3.

On the past and present role of labour law see, for example, also Freedland, M.: *Otto Kahn-Freund, the Contract of Employment and the Autonomy of Labour Law*, In: Bogg, A., Costello, C., Davies, ACL, Prassl, J., *The Autonomy of Labour Law*, Hart Publishing, Oxford-Portland 2015, p. 29-44; he point out that labour law is still (again?) “a body of law which continues to support and facilitate the infliction of many forms of precarity, exploitation and legal exclusion upon large and growing sectors of the labour force” (p. 44).

¹⁶ See, for example, Castel, R., *La montée des incertitudes – travail, protection, statut de l'individu*, Seuil, Paris 2009, p. 23-25, 97-99; Perraudin, C., Thèvenot, N., Valentin, J., *Avoiding the employment relationship*, *International Labour Review*, 2013, Vol. 152, No. 3-4, p. 525-547; Supiot, A., *L'esprit de Philadelphie – la justice sociale face au marché total*, Seuil, Paris 2010; Bronstein, A., 2009, p. 23, 30-68 and others.

¹⁷ Rigaux points out that “under the impulse of the EU more and more systems are getting subject to market laws” and that “the society has been replaced by the market” (Rigaux 2014, p. 7).

3. Recent crisis – just strengthening the general trend of (neo)liberalism

Recent crisis has only strengthened these characteristics.¹⁸ The CSRs and MoUs, the weakness of EU legislative activity in the field of labour law, but on the other side the increased intensity of the EU influence on national labour and industrial relations via economic and monetary policies, the case-law of the CJEU as regards the relationship between fundamental labour rights and economic freedoms, the “rigidity” indexes, the TTIP etc. – all these examples go in the same direction.

Let us take the TTIP negotiations as an example. They are often presented as reconciling the conflicting interests of the (social) Europe and the (liberal) US.¹⁹ However, the TTIP is actually just one of the attempts trying to strengthen the neoliberal rules all over the globalized world; it pursues common, not conflicting interests of the business on both sides of the Atlantic and fits well into the rest of the EU neoliberal policy. Human dignity, human rights perspective and the existing international labour standards are neglected. The TTIP, if concluded, will only reinforce this general neoliberal trend also within the EU.

This is going on in the name of lower (labour) costs and higher competitiveness. It is supposed to “boost growth” and “create new jobs” and resolve the problems of the crisis.²⁰ In this context, labour and social rights are usually considered as an “obstacle” and labour law as the cause of the “rigidity” of the labour market.

Such approach does not bring any effective and sustainable solutions to the current problems. And the economic crisis has been often used just as an excuse for

¹⁸ The recent crisis hit harder the precarious workers, the structure of employments has changed, there are less 'standard' employments 'in the middle', while there are more flexible, precarious employments, self-employment etc. (Vaughan-Whitehead, D. (ed.), *Work Inequalities in the Crisis: Evidence from Europe*, ILO, Geneva 2012; Hurley, J., Storrie, D., Jungblut, J.-M., *Shifts in the job structure in Europe during the Great Recession*, Eurofound, Dublin 2011; European Union, *Employment and Social Developments in Europe 2012*, Publications Office of the EU, Luxembourg 2012, p. 36-45,143-179). The impact on collective bargaining has been critically analysed as well (see, for example, Koukiadaki, A., Távora, I., Martínez Lucio, M. (eds.), *Joint regulation and labour market policy in Europe during the crisis*, ETUI, Brussels 2016; and many others).

¹⁹ Will the EU be able to preserve its “European social model”?

²⁰ Not just quantity, the quality of jobs must be important. Otherwise, precarious work patterns are generated again and again.

introducing even more neoliberal measures, also in the field of labour relations, although labour and social rights have not caused this crisis.

4. *The role of labour law – concretization of the principle of human dignity and human rights in everyday life of people (protection against precarity and insecurity)*

On the contrary, labour and social rights are essential for the development of every human society. *They should not be considered just as an appendix, a “collateral benefit” of economic growth, conditional, if a society “can afford” them.* They actually reflect the substantive, material approach to dignity, equality and human rights.²¹

Although the emergence of labour and social law does not have its roots in human rights, it is necessary – after a century of intensive development of human rights paradigm, especially after World War II, and taking into account the most important (legally binding!) international and European treaties on human rights – to contextualise, understand and interpret labour and social law, to evaluate its aims and goals, its effects and functions from *the human rights perspective*.

The potential of labour law is the actual concretisation/realization of human rights for the majority of people who earn their living by working for someone else. Labour law has the potential to bring abstract human rights into everyday life of people.²² It has the potential to empower people with human dignity. But only if it guarantees an *adequate high level of workers’ rights* and only if it *applies to all situations* in which working people are in need of such protection.

²¹ It is a complex task to define these notions and there are different human rights doctrines. I follow the doctrine of the indivisibility of human rights and the material (substantive), rather than formal understanding of human rights. Most generally speaking, human rights aim at guaranteeing human dignity to all; they are the reflection (at least at the declarative level) of the “recognition of the inherent dignity ... of all members of the human family” (Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Preamble). A general principle, written in human rights instruments, is non-discrimination and equality. Hence, the essence of human dignity is equality; there is no human dignity if people are not treated equally. And on this pillar of equality, a whole set of human rights rests (covering different aspects of human existence and activities, some being more concrete and others more general), aiming at guaranteeing people freedom and security in order to be able to live and pursue their activities, develop their personal and professional life according to their needs and interests and capacities, taking into account also equal rights of other persons, and at the same time to be able to fulfil their duties towards the society and other members of this society. However, there is no such freedom if people are lacking security. (Kresal 2014, p. 150).

²² *Ibid.*, p. 150-151.

It was already the ILO Declaration of Philadelphia that set the foundations of the human rights approach for the regulation of labour and social relations.²³ The famous statement that “universal and lasting peace can be established only if it is based upon social justice” is further concretized in the Declaration: it emphasizes that “labour is not a commodity” as one of the fundamental principles, points out that “all human beings, irrespective of race, creed or sex, have the right to pursue both their material well-being and their spiritual development in conditions of freedom and dignity, of economic security and equal opportunity” and further explains very clearly that:

- “the attainment of the conditions in which this shall be possible must constitute the central aim of national and international policy” and that
- “all national and international policies and measures, in particular those of an economic and financial character, should be judged in this light and accepted only in so far as they may be held to promote and not to hinder the achievement of this fundamental objective”.²⁴

The economic and financial policies must therefore be framed within this human dignity (human rights) objective.

According to the human rights perspective, labour law has to protect people against the precariousness of working conditions, it has to promote quality jobs and non-discriminatory practices of employers, prevent in-work poverty; it has to guarantee decent work for all. From the human rights perspective, labour law is not rigid if it gives high level of workers protection, it is well developed. From the human rights perspective, workers have the right to decent work and to the protection against precarious working conditions. Labour and social rights are essential for human dignity and, therefore, there could be no human rights’ society if fundamental social rights are not fully respected.²⁵

²³ Later followed by numerous human rights instruments after the World War II.

²⁴ The ILO Declaration of Philadelphia, I., II. (a), (b), (c).

²⁵ On human rights and labour law, fundamental social rights, the indivisibility of human rights and human dignity see, for example, Young, K. G., *Constituting Economic and Social Rights*, OUP, Oxford 2014; Barak, A., *Human Dignity*, CUP, Cambridge 2015; De Schutter, O., *International Human Rights Law*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2010, p. 561; Dorssemont, P., *How the European Court of Human Rights Gave us Enerji to Cope with Laval and Viking*, In: Moreau (ed.), *Before and After the Economic Crisis: What Implications for the ‘European Social Model’?*, Edward Elgar, Gheltenham 2011, p. 217-235; Aliprantis, N., *Les droits sociaux dans les instruments européens et transnationaux: Défis à l’échelle mondiale*, Bruyant, Brussels 2009; Herrera, C.M., *Les droits sociaux*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris 2009; Castel, R., *L’insecurité sociale*, Seuil, Paris 2003;

Unfortunately, the Constitutions and international, including European, treaties on human rights are too often not taken seriously enough. The fundamental right to human dignity and the beautiful powerful building of human rights constructed on this pillar are too frequently misused at the declarative level, whereas at the same time human rights perspective is too often overlooked in everyday life of people, including their work and labour relations.²⁶

5. Conclusion

From the human rights perspective, precarious work is not acceptable. It seems quite clear that the neoliberal model which treats workers as costs/commodities and pushes numbers of people into the precarious working and living conditions is not consistent with the human rights perspective.

If a particular economic system or policy is not able to prevent precarisation of employment, respect decent work standards and guarantee a decent standard of living for everyone, if it does not respect the perspective of human rights, including fundamental social rights, then it is the system or policy that has to be questioned, not labour and social rights. They are necessary for the concretization of legally binding human rights and actual realisation of human dignity in everyday life of people. A developed labour and social law, which guaranties an adequately high level of rights, and sound industrial relations with strong social partners and fruitful collective bargaining are the necessary, *sine qua non* conditions for combating precarious work and precariousness of working and living conditions in general.

Supiot 2010; de Burca, de Witte (eds.), *Social Rights in Europe*, OUP, Oxford 2005; Pellonpää, *Economic, social and cultural rights*, In: Macdonald et al. (ed.), *The European System for the Protection of Human Rights*, Nijhoff 1993; Moreau, M.-A., *Les droits de l'Homme au travail en 2008: au-delà de la logique des droits de l'homme et des droits sociaux fondamentaux*, In: Boy, Racine, Siirainen (eds.), *Droits économiques et droits de l'homme*, Larcier 2009, p. 509-534; and many others. Critically about linking labour law to human rights law see, for example, McCrudden, C., *Labour Law as Human Rights Law: A Critique of the Use of 'Dignity' by Freedland and Kountouris*, In: Bogg, Costello, Davies, Prassl (eds.) 2015, p. 275-289.

²⁶ Kresal 2014, p. 151.

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