

Review

Work After Globalization: Building Occupational Citizenship
(Edward Elgar, Cheltenham, UK. Northampton, MA, USA, 2009)
Guy Standing

The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class
(Bloomsbury Academic, London, 2011)
Guy Standing

Reviewed by Edward Webster

Globalisation has changed the nature of work argues Guy Standing in his path-breaking book *Work after Globalization: Building Occupational Citizenship*. A new class structure now exists, including a global 'precariat', alongside unsustainable insecurity and inequality.

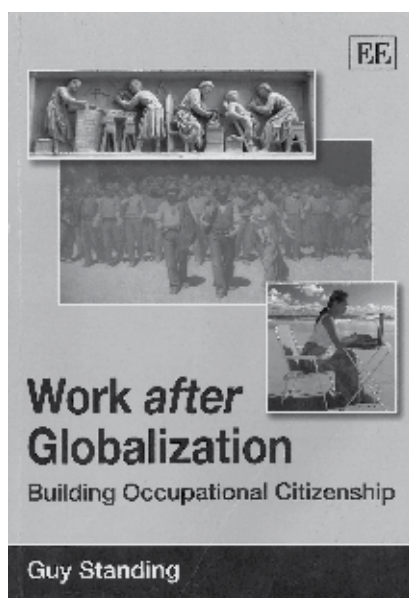
For example, 20 years ago a United States corporate executive could expect to get 140 times more than an ordinary worker. Today it is over 500 times more.

This growing class break up has weakened the standard employment relationship – full-time labour by a man (the breadwinner) supporting a dependent wife (a caregiver). Unions as a result are losing the key foundation of their power – workplace bargaining.

Enterprise benefits are shrinking, governments are cutting state benefits and money wages are rising. Indeed for Standing 'once the world began to shift towards an open economy, there was no way the labourist model could be sustained'.

According to Standing in the previous era of 'industrial citizenship' built around industrial unions, the notion of 'the working class' shaped intellectual thinking, collective action and state policy. Now this industrial class structure has broken into a 'globalisation class structure' made up of seven groups.

At the top are the *global elite*, a tiny minority of very rich and high

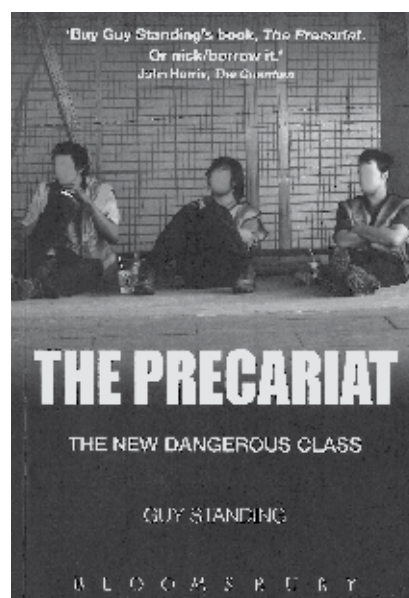


earning people. Beneath this elite are high-income earners in stable, full-time employment.

This *salariat* consists of employees paid on a monthly basis, in civil services, corporations and parastatals. The salariat is being partly globalised with many now expected to spend time in another country away from their families.

The third group is made up of *proficians* – who work on short-term contracts, are well paid as consultants and independent contractors but have job security. Other proficians are retired professionals who return to their old or similar jobs on short-term contracts.

Below the salariat and proficians, in terms of income and status, are



the *working class*, who are men and women in manual jobs, stably employed, paid relatively high wages and likely to belong to unions. But the global chase of labour market flexibility has weakened their job security. This group is the withering working class.

Below this core are the new masses of the *precariat*, the working poor with no jobs or income security. The precariat are people in temporary and part-time jobs working in call centres in sprawling cities such as Mumbai or Sao Paulo and 'mini-jobs' paid by welfare in Germany. They also include graduate student 'interns' working for little or no pay, doing petty office jobs.

In *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*, Standing estimates that at least a quarter of the adult population are in the precariat.

'This is not just a matter of having insecure employment, of being in jobs of limited duration and with minimal labour protection ... It is being in a status that offers no sense of career, no sense of secure occupational identity... There are also few benefits from the state.'

The final two groups in this class structure are *the unemployed* and *the detached*. The unemployed are a social group made up of those without jobs for a long time or who have never had a formal job. At the bottom of the ladder are the detached, cut off from mainstream society, wandering in the streets, bus and train stations, and in city parks.

The global elite are the clear winners in the new South Africa. An open economy has made it possible for South African capital to globalise, not only across Africa, but throughout the world.

But the proficians, the salariat and the working class are also winners in South Africa. But their victory is short lived as they are on the defensive both from capital and the precariat, the unemployed and the detached.

The free global market has made us all insecure he argues. The 'winners' may have a higher income but it costs more to live. Whereas in the past education and health care and personal security were covered by the state, today they are increasingly privatised.

In 2008 in a German Opinion Poll, three quarters feared old age poverty. According to Eric Hobsbawn's *Age of Extremes* what happened after the Great Crash of 1929 can be compared to what is happening now.

So today security has become an important concern and politics is centred on: 'protection from the terrible uncertainties of unemployment, sickness or accident and the terrible uncertainties of old age'.

Standing makes an important contribution to the debate on labour renewal. For example, the precariat do not have an organised voice.

Increasingly decent work is being challenged by market-led globalisation. This maybe the end of labour as we have known it in 20th century European social democracy.

However, it needs to be emphasised that casual labour is not new and is as old as the capitalist system.

Standing's vision of the future is 'occupational citizenship'. This is where the status of work (productive and creative activity) and leisure (active participation in public life) is raised above that of labour (hard toil) and play (recreation for recovery and consumerism). He believes that a basic income given to all individuals will provide the foundations for this 'mild utopia'.

A basic income would also enable citizens to accept low wages and to bargain more strongly. The precariat's most important need is economic security, to give some control over life's prospects and the sense that shocks and hazards can be managed.

According to Standing the agent for achieving this new 'politics of paradise' will be the global precariat, a class-in-the-making, if not yet a class-for-itself, in alliance with the proficians. His model for giving voice to the precariat is the Self-Employed Women's Association (Sewa) of India. Sewa has successfully organised informal workers into a nation-wide union of over one million members.

National and international union organisations are also supporting the precariat. Importantly these organising initiatives are being undertaken with established labour movements, not in opposition to them.

UNIONS AS WORKER MOVEMENTS

However, the new classes are not fixed groups. Rather than dismissing traditional trade unionism and the

industrial working class, it may be more useful to rethink trade unions as worker movements. This will require broadening their membership at the top and at the bottom of the globalised class structure.

After all, it is only by bringing together wage labour and precarious labour that a new job creating and green developmental path could be built. The future of the labour movement lies in new forms of organisation. So, new sources of power need to be built.

Standing's important work contains a warning. Globalisation has created a potentially dangerous class, the precariat that 'is being led astray by demagogues like Berlusconi, mavericks like Sarah Palin and neo-fascists everywhere'.

Unless the progressives of the world offer 'globalisation's child' a feasible alternative it 'will be all too prone to listen to the sirens luring society onto the rocks'.

Whether Standing provides such an alternative is a matter for serious debate. It is not clear to me that sharp distinctions can be drawn between work and labour, leisure and play. Neither am I convinced that a basic income grant is preferable to a public employment scheme such as the one South Africa is developing with its Community Works Programme.

In countries where basic needs have not been met surely the first priority is to build physical and social infrastructure, a task that will inevitably involve labour.

However, what is clear is that labour needs to rethink its role in the age of globalisation. This is as much a theoretical task as it is a political one. It requires us to go back to the theories on labour. I can think of no better starting point than these outstanding books by Standing. ■

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