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The Needs of Dutch Precarious Workers Regarding Paid and Unpaid Labour

Stream: Austerity

Date: TUESDAY, 5 April 2016

Time: 13.30 – 15.00

Room: Maritim 12-14

Since the last two centuries, the century of the labouring man as characterized by Standing (1999), paid labour has become more important for peoples' social, psychological, and economic well being. Where lifetime employment was once commonplace, it is a rare event in the twenty-first century. Social, economic, and political forces have aligned to make labour more precarious (Kalleberg, 2009, p.8). The neoliberal idea that employees can market their own labour, the demand for increasing flexibility, and the reduction of labour costs have all led employers to seek a more flexible workforce (Skorstad & Ramsdal, 2012). One way they obtain flexibility is by hiring temporary workers based upon the changing requirements of their organizations (Smith, 1997). This situation has resulted in precarious labour relations in which, foremost, people from the most vulnerable groups in any society (e.g., migrants, younger and older workers, and less-educated workers) are at risk for slipping into a permanent state of precarious labour in which a period of paid labour alternates with a period of unemployment.

Precarious labour has far-reaching consequences for employees (see, for example, Standing, 2011).

Research shows that precarious workers feel powerless to change their work relationship (Ashford, Lee, & Bobko, 1989). Their precarious work situation and their feelings of powerlessness emerge from dynamics related to social, economic, psychological, and political links between employees and employers (see, for example, Baron, 1988).



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A body of research has examined how precarious workers perceive their uncertainty (e.g., Schmidt, 1999) and obligations (Robinson, Kraatz, & Rousseau, 1994), and the effects of their precarious labour situation on their physical, social, and psychological health as well as on their economic well being. As argued, precarious workers are exposed to unpredictability depending on employers' needs, as their employment is contingent upon the changing needs of employers and their companies (Kalleberg, 2000). There is a body of research that deals with the reasons employers foster and governments contribute to precarious contracts. There is, however, little known about the needs of those who offer their precarious labour: the precarious workers themselves. To our knowledge, no research has been conducted on the needs of precarious workers regarding paid and unpaid labour.

In the study, we consider needs as essential or very important requirements that precarious workers have to accept in order to make their precarious labour relations endurable. Insights into these needs contribute to the debate on precarious work and to understanding the needs of those who perform precarious labour. These insights can also help policy makers reconsider their labour policies. The paper, therefore, addresses the following research question: What are the needs of precarious workers regarding paid and unpaid labour?

In the study, we define precarious workers as those who are paid a minimum wage, who perform temporary work with no prospect of a long-term contract (two years or more), or who are unemployed and looking for paid work.

We conducted this explanatory study in an urban area of Amsterdam in the Netherlands. To control for the effects of the local economy, we collected data from one urban area. The urban area has a high rate of unemployment and a high poverty rate, and has a highly diverse ethnic population. A focus group setting and in-depth interviews were used to collect the data.

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