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Dimensions of Precarity

A Contradictory Case of Non-Standard Employment

Tobias Karlsson

Abstract

This paper discusses the concept of 'precarious employment' in relation to the Swedish shipbuilding industry in the 1960s and 1970s. In this setting, characterized by shortage of labour, a dual labour market structure emerged, where some workers were directly employed by the shipyards and others indirectly employed through intermediaries. The case differs from classical accounts of dual labour markets and it is not obvious to use the term precarious employment to describe the situation of the external workers. On the one hand, the external workers had insecure jobs and were involved in triangular employment relationships, where the true identity and responsibility of the employer was unclear. They were also excluded from the social security systems. On the other hand, the external workers appear to have had higher incomes, opportunities to work long hours, less responsibility for unrewarding maintenance tasks and perhaps even the advantage of working under more flexible supervision. The case demonstrates the diversity that can be found in historical work arrangements and suggests that the term precarious employment should be applied with some caution, both past and present.

Keywords: precarious employment; dual labour markets; shipbuilding industry, Sweden, 20th century

JEL classifications: J33; J42; L24; N64

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Introduction

Since the 1980s, a number of different concepts have been coined to describe the changing nature of employment relations. 'Precarious employment' is probably the one that has made the greatest impact. (Kalleberg, 2011; Lewchuk et. al. 2008; Rodgers, 1989; Standing, 2011; Quinlan, Mayhew and Bohle, 2001) In a recent paper, Michael Quinlan (2012) put the concept into historical perspective. By looking at parliamentary debates and newspaper reports, he traces the discourse of precarious employment back to the days of the Industrial Revolution and onwards to the 1930s. He argues that historical actors were using the concept in essentially the same way as today, meaning 'irregular and insecure work arrangements' (Quinlan, 2012: 3). Thus, it seems fair to say precarious employment was reinvented in the 1980s, after some decades in oblivion. Quinlan's use of history makes us see the current debate in a new light. However, history can do more than provide parallels to the present. History also contains a wide variety of experiences that are not so easily fitted into contemporary perceptions and conceptual toolboxes. These experiences are important to take into consideration as they may challenge perceived wisdoms and inspire theoretical development.

This paper discusses the concept of precarious employment in relation to the dual labour market of Swedish shipbuilding workers in the 1960s and 1970s. The national setting is strongly associated with the standard employment relationship. Sweden was at the time a mature industrial society in the age of mass production. The economy was operating close to full employment and social democrats were about to build one of the most ambitious welfare states ever seen. The Swedish society and labour market had corporatist features. Terms of employment were typically regulated in collective agreements. Private intermediation of labour had been banned in law since 1935. Unionization had reached exceptional levels. The blue-collar confederation unified most working-class occupations, among which metal workers constituted a backbone. The Metal Workers' Union gathered workers in the mechanical engineering industry, of which shipbuilding was a significant part. However, the labour market of shipbuilding workers had peculiar features: some workers had ongoing, full-time employment contracts and others were employed by external firms, but working at the shipyards.[1] Could it be said that the latter were in precarious employment? As will be seen in the paper, the answer is not obvious.

[1] In the following, I prefer to use the terms 'external' or 'indirectly employed' workers instead of the more value-added terms, such as 'grey workers' (*gråarbetare*) or 'loan workers' (*lånearbetare*), which were used by

The note will proceed by introducing the previous literature on the Swedish shipbuilding industry, and the sources on which the literature rests. Thereafter comes a brief account for the rise of a dual labour market with particular features, before a discussion of the case in relation to common ideas associated with the concept of precarious employment.

Sources and previous research

The overall history of the Swedish shipbuilding industry is well researched. Bohlin (1989) has provided the most thorough account of the labour market structure of shipbuilding workers, including the externalization of employment. Bohlin's discussion on the significance, nature and causes of externalization lacks explicit theoretical references, but is empirically well founded as he draws on many different types of sources. He shows that external workers constituted a significant, and rising, share of the total number of shipbuilding workers in the 1960s, and emphasizes shortage of labour as the main cause for this development.

There are several oral-history-based monographs emanating from the efforts of previous shipbuilding workers to document and write their own history (see for example Andersson and Sjölin, 1990; Dunge, 2004; Nilsson, 2005). However, due to the nature of this labour market, few workers who participated in the oral-history projects had experience of indirect employment. There is also contemporary interview material from a few sociological investigations on the causes of personnel turnover at the shipyards, of which the most notable is the so-called Kockums report (Ohlström, 1970). The purpose of the report was to find out the causes of the high personnel turnover among welders and sheet-metal workers. The main focus of the report is on the perceptions of directly employed workers.

Private intermediation of labour was controversial in the post-war decades and came to be monitored by the Swedish Labour Market Authority (*Arbetsmarknadsstyrelsen*). Among other things, this resulted in quantitative data on the number of external workers from the late 1960s to the early 1970s. Further qualitative evidence can be found in the archives of trade unions and companies (shipyards), and in court proceedings. The latter source reveals some details on how the relationships looked between the shipyards and the external firms.

Previous research makes it clear that external employment relationships were significant in the Swedish shipbuilding industry. The literature and sources are biased towards views from 'above' (union leaders, civil servants and managers) and from 'the side' (directly

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contemporary actors. Similarly, I use labels such as 'regular', 'internal' or 'directly' employed workers to denote workers with what was perceived to be standard employment relationships at the time.

employed workers). To a large extent, the voices of the external workers are missing. However, there are some exceptions. The principal investigator of the Kockums report, Bo Ohlström, was aware of this problem. Although it was outside his mission, he tried to get in touch with external workers as well and managed to organize informal talks and a group interview (Ohlström, 1970). Furthermore, Kuosmanen (2001) has done a retrospective ethnographical study on Finnish migrants in Sweden, of which some have experiences of being indirectly employed workers at shipyards.[2]

The emergence of a dual labour market

In brief, the Swedish shipbuilding industry, with major shipyards in Malmö (Kockums) and the Gothenburg area (Götaverken, Eriksdal and Lindholmen), was highly successful in the decades after World War II.[3] Outcompeting many other countries, including Great Britain, in terms of market share and productivity, Swedish shipyards could invest in new machinery and facilities. For many years, Sweden was one of a few countries that could at least try to meet the challenge from the rising superpower in shipbuilding: Japan. The Swedish shipyards focused on the building of large, fairly standardized, oil tankers and the like. The tendency towards building big ships with the latest technology (welding and block building) meant that more workers were needed, in particular two occupational categories: sheet-metal workers and welders.

Until the late 1960s, the general situation in the Swedish labour market can be described as tight (Furåker, 1986; Lundh, 2010). Employers in general, and those in shipbuilding in particular, complained about excess labour mobility (Waara, 2012). They sought to recruit labour from other countries and until the late 1960s Sweden had virtually unrestricted immigration, although trade unions formally acted as gatekeepers. However, the inflow of workers from abroad was not of sufficient magnitude to ease the situation in the labour market. Another way for the employers to increase the supply of labour was to invest in vocational education. Some shipyards operated their own schools (Yokoyama and Nilsson, 2014), but this strategy also could not solve the shortage of labour, for two reasons. Firstly, many of the apprentices left the companies after having completed the training programme,

[2] There is also a monograph in press more specifically focused on the experiences of Finnish shipbuilding workers in Sweden. Inkeri Lamer, *Raskas Metalli – suomalaiset laivanrakentajina Göteborgissa*, forthcoming at Institute of Migration, Åbo.

[3] If not otherwise stated, the following section is based on Bohlin (1989).

not only for other shipyards but also for other industries (Jutvik, 1974). Secondly, it became increasingly difficult to attract apprentices as the whole system of primary and secondary schooling was reformed in the late 1960s (Nilsson, 2013; Yokoyama and Nilsson, 2014). The reform had the intention to integrate vocational education with the general system of education, which was financed and run by the state.

As the general situation in the labour market became less tight in the late 1960s, the migration policy became more restrictive (Lundh, 2005). However, welders and sheet-metal workers were still hard to come by for the shipyards. The state responded to the demands of the shipyards by increasing the spending on training of welders and sheet-metal workers, but only slowly. In 1975, the government declared that special measures were going to be aimed at these two occupational groups (Swedish Government, 1975). However, at this point in time the heyday of the Swedish shipbuilding industry was approaching its demise. One after another, the big shipyards were first nationalized, and then closed down. But that is beyond the scope of this paper.

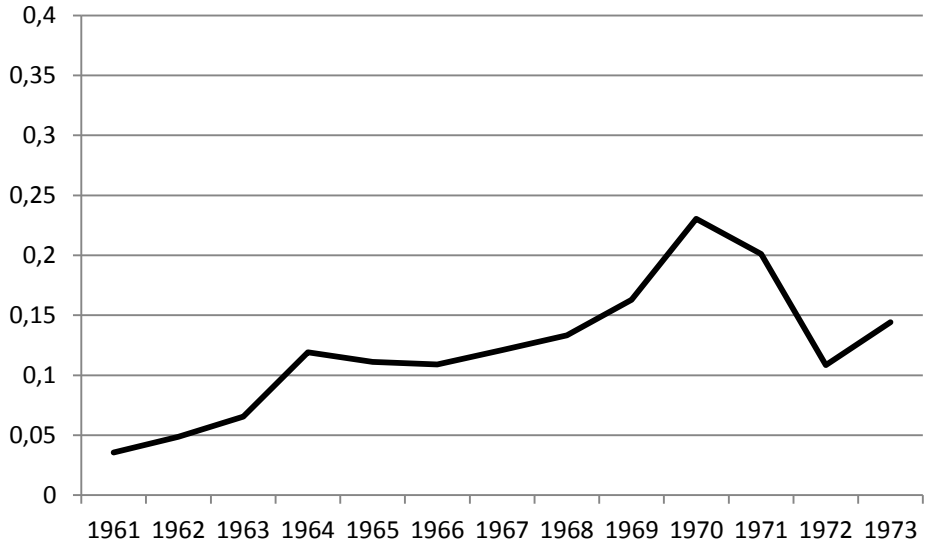
What is important to establish here is that well before the decline of the industry, firms who saw opportunities to profit from the shortage of labour emerged around the shipyards.[4] Some of these firms were running traditional contract businesses and doing specific tasks, for example, electronic installations and cleaning up jobs (so-called *klassningsarbete*). Such firms had existed well before the period covered in this paper. The new development, which was firstly observed in the 1950s, was that there were firms who supplied welders and sheet-metal workers (Beckholmen, 1979: 55; Eckhart, 2004: 82–89). This practice was highly controversial, and according to the union, to be regarded as illegal intermediation of employment.

As mentioned, the Labour Market Authority's monitoring of the use of external workers at the shipyards gives us a good idea of the quantitative importance of the practice. Figure 1 is based on the Labour Market Authority's figures for the big shipyards in Gothenburg, complemented by estimations by Bohlin (1989: 301, 323). As seen in the figure, the share of external workers in relation to total employment increased from less than 4 percent to 23 percent during the period 1961 to 1970. In the two years after 1970, the share was pushed down to 11 percent and then followed an increase up to the end of the period. There followed a decrease and an upturn before the end of the period. Although the development cannot be traced in

[4] In the following I mainly use the term 'external' to denote these firms. In the contemporary debate, these firms were given a variety of labels, such as 'grey firms' (gråfirmor), 'lending firms' (*lånefirmor*) and 'rucksack firms' (from the Finnish *reppufirmat*), see Kuosmanen (2001: 126).

detail after 1973, qualitative evidence suggests that the large-scale use of external labour at the shipyards continued to exist (Beckholmen, 1980; Svedberg, 1974).

Figure 1. The share of external workers at the shipyards in Gothenburg 1961–1973



Comment: Figures until 1967 are estimations

Source: Own calculations based on Bohlin (1989: 285).

Dimensions of precarity

There is no universally accepted definition of precarious employment. Following Rodgers, many researchers would, at least in theory, agree that it is a multi-dimensional concept. Rodgers (1989: 3) summarizes his view in this way: 'the concept of precariousness involves instability, lack of protection, insecurity and social or economic vulnerability'. Disagreements exist, among other things, in what dimensions to include. Standing (2011: 17) lists no less than eight defining 'labour insecurities', including aspects such as opportunities for skill acquisition and representation. Lewchuk et. al. (2008) argue that not only should current job characteristics be considered, but also control over future employment. The multi-dimensional nature of precariousness means that researchers may face some challenges when making the concept operational. Rodgers (1989: 3) acknowledges the problem of ambiguity: 'an unstable job is not necessarily precarious. It is some combination of these factors which identifies precarious jobs, and the boundaries around the concept are inevitably to some extent arbitrary'. This idea can be related to the lively discussion on whether various dimensions of job quality are correlated or not (Coats and Lekhi, 2008; Eurofund, 2013; Kalleberg 2011). Theoretically, the matter is not straightforward. While the theories of compensating wage

differential allow that jobs include mixes of pleasant and unpleasant characteristics, theories of labour market segmentation suggest that job qualities are polarized (Peck, 1996). The literature on precarious employment is typically based on the latter theoretical perspective, implicitly assuming that there are good jobs and bad jobs. As will be seen, the labour market of Swedish shipbuilding workers offers an alternative picture.

Uncertainty is at the centre of our understanding of precarious employment. It should be noted that there was no employment protection legislation in Sweden until 1971 (Nycander, 2010; Skedinger, 2010). Up until then, employment protection was regulated in collective agreements and in implicit understandings. Among regular blue-collar workers, the prevailing norm was that job losses should be allocated according to the principle of reversed seniority ('last in, first out'). In the 1950s and 1960s, directly employed shipbuilding workers faced relatively small risk of losing their jobs due to shortage of work. High turnover meant that shipyards could reduce the workforce without using layoffs. Compared to directly employed workers, it is reasonable to assume that the external workers had jobs with shorter time horizons and higher risks of job loss. For the shipyards the external workers were partly, but not exclusively, a labour reserve to be called upon in booms and let go in busts (Bohlin, 1989). In addition, Ohlström (1970) notes that the relationships between the external workers and their direct employers were loose: "those [workers] who did not work properly were soon fired".

The level of pay is where the characterization of the external workers most clearly deviates from the common ideas of precarious employment. It was not only that the incomes of external workers were well above the poverty line, but their incomes were also said to have been substantially above those of directly employed shipbuilding workers. In the Kockums report, a directly employed worker states that: '[…] Kockums pays, let us say, 10 *kronor* while a subcontracting firm pays 15 *kronor* for the same job' (Ohlström, 1970: 79, own translation). While the respondent may have been imperfectly informed and may have had an interest in exaggerating the difference in pay, this statement is just one of many similar testimonies and exemplifies a common perception at the time. Most likely there was a considerable earnings gap between internal and external workers, to the advantage of the latter.[5] This gap was not because of different rates of pay (per hour or task), but related to the external workers' opportunities to work longer hours, and the fact that they were not permanent residents in the municipalities of the shipyards. As non-residents, they received

[5] Court proceedings suggest that external workers had the same wage rates (see Bohlin, 1989: 312–313, 316).

substantial tax-free subsistence allowances on top of their wages (Beckholmen, 1979: 59; Bohlin, 1989: 313).

Higher earnings and other benefits meant that there were incentives for internal workers to go external. Union historian Beckholmen (1979: 56) describes how a young help worker at the shipyard could be recruited by an external firm, only to reappear in the same position, but with higher earnings.[6] However, the shipyards' attitude towards such transitions became less permissive (Ohlström, 1970). Often, therefore, the change from an ongoing contract to an external firm required a change of working place. The transition from internal to external employment was also associated with other costs. External work may have been rewarding in the short run, but precarious in the long run.

From a legal perspective, the discussion on precarious employment often revolves around definitions of who is an 'employee' and who is an 'employer' (ILO, 2011: 28-30; Lewchuk et. al. (2008: 289–390). These definitions matter, since rights to various social safety nets are often tied to being an employee of a certain employer. The discussion on the external workers in the Swedish shipbuilding industry had a prominently legal dimension. The main strategy of the Metal Workers' Union to counteract the external firms was to get them classified as private intermediaries of labour rather than contract firms. The crucial issue was supervision. Were the external workers directed by the shipyards' staff or were they supervised by the external firms' own foremen? After reports from the Labour Market Authority, a number of cases were taken to court (Johnson, 2010: 47). Stricter legislation was put in place in 1970, primarily due to the situation in the shipbuilding industry. In 1973, the Supreme Court set a precedent (Bohlin, 1989: 316–317). Since the shipyard's foremen at least occasionally gave direct instructions to the external workers, the Supreme Court regarded the arrangement as illegal intermediation of labour. The precedent intensified discussion among shipyards of how to reduce the reliance on external workers, but it did not put an end to the practice.

Some of the employment intermediaries were operating close to legal boundaries, or even crossing them.[7] There is anecdotal evidence of tax evasion and evasion of social security contributions (Beckholmen, 1979: 63; Kuosmanen, 2001: 126; Laakonen, 1996: 120). This had negative implications for the workers. Without properly declared incomes, workers were left with lower unemployment support and other social benefits in cases of need (Kuosmanen,

[6] This is also a pattern found by Inkeri Lamer in her interviews with Finnish shipbuilding workers in Gothenburg, 5 May 2015, personal communication.

[7] Most likely, there was a spectrum of firms, ranging from small informal businesses to formal, medium-sized enterprises (Kuosmanen, 2001: 132).

2001: 132; Laakonen, 1996: 120). Mobility over national borders could also create problems with taxation, even for those who worked for serious contract firms. Overall, it seems that many external workers were poorly informed about social rights and obligations. According to Ohlström (1970: 69), the external workers 'did not seem to know and even less care about anything else than the wage they got'.

As noted by Kuosmanen (2001) and Ohlström (1970), alcohol use was a prominent feature of the external workers' lifestyle. In their home towns, the workers often socialized in restaurants and pubs, which could function as informal employment centres. At these meeting places, external workers informed each other about job opportunities, and occasionally recruiters showed up. Some of the jobs were in other locations, where the workers lived under primitive conditions and worked long hours. But, as one worker remarked, when returning home 'the bus was filled with beer and the pockets filled with money' (Kuosmanen, 2001: 128).

In current research, it is typically seen that some tasks are done by workers with standard employment contracts and other tasks by workers with looser attachment to the firm. It is often, but not always, the case that 'core' activities are performed by regulars and 'non-core' activities by external workers (cf. Kalleberg and Marsden, 2005). In the case of the Swedish shipbuilding industry, workers with the same occupations, but different employment contracts, were doing similar tasks. Ohlström (1970) also reports some complaints from directly employed workers that external workers were given preference to core, and more attractive, tasks: 'They get the most qualified and best work and that benefits them', as one of Ohlström's (1970: 73) respondents phrases it. Another respondent describes how directly employed workers were allotted to unskilled tasks, such as sweeping, while external workers were doing skilled tasks (Ohlström, 1970: 77).

Discussions on how to define precarious employment frequently move towards characterizing workers in precarious jobs, where it is generally believed that people with few skills, women, young (and sometimes old) people and immigrants are overrepresented. Some of these characteristics applied to the external workers at the Swedish shipyards, but not all. As already may have become evident, the external workers were not unskilled. Ohlström (1970: 16) reports that it took at least one year to train a 'satisfactory' welder. The skill requirements for a sheet-metal worker were even higher. According to most sources, the typical external worker in the shipbuilding industry was a fairly young, unmarried man (Beckhomen, 1979: 62; Kuosmanen, 2001: 127). With regard to country of origin, the external workers, just as the directly employed workers, appear to have been a heterogeneous

group, with Finns as the major subgroup along with Norwegians, Swedes and workers from southern and eastern Europe. The composition of the external workers probably underwent development over time. Among the external workers, non-Nordic countries of origin are not mentioned in the sources until the early 1970s.

When discussing precariousness as an analytical concept, Burgess and Campbell (1998: 6–7) distinguish between a comprehensive and a narrow approach. The narrow approach is basically what have followed so far when comparing the conditions of two groups of workers. The comprehensive approach means looking at characteristics of all employment relationships – direct and indirect, permanent and temporary. In this perspective, standard employment relationships may also have precarious features and the use of non-standard contracts may be associated with 'spill-over effects'. One such spill-over effect may be widespread feelings of uncertainty also among those that still have ongoing jobs (Quinlan and Bohle, 2009). As phrased by Kalleberg (2009: 8), 'the institutionalization of the temporary-help industry increases precarity because it makes us all potentially replaceable'. Some researchers even suggest that this is a conscious motive for managers to externalize employment (Pfeffer and Baron 1988: 276; Standing, 2011: 54).

When it comes to the Swedish shipyards, it is not likely that external workers were intentionally used to put pressure on internal workers. In fact, when defending the practice, shipyard managers said that it served to strengthen the employment protection of directly employed workers (Beckholmen, 1979: 61–62). Without external workers, the jobs of regular shipbuilding workers would be threatened. In the discussion, union representatives rejected such a view. Yet, it may be noted that even if the union loudly criticized the use of external workers, it never used its sharpest weapon – a strike – against the practice. Eventually, facing the general crisis of shipbuilding in the mid 1970s, the Metal Workers' Union accepted external employment relationships, as long as the external firms had collective agreements (Bohlin, 1989: 328–330).

There is no evidence of directly employed shipyard workers feeling insecure due to the existence of external workers. However, the psychosocial working environment at the shipyards was clearly affected by the existence of two kinds of employment relationships. Thinking in terms of 'them' and 'us' flourished (Beckholmen, 1979: 41–54; Lundin, 2007;

Ohlström, 1970).[8] There was a widespread belief among directly employed workers that the outsiders were less responsible and stole tools. Many internal workers felt that they were being treated unfairly by the management compared to the external workers (Ohlström, 1970). They felt that the external workers were receiving more generous rewards for their efforts, had more relaxed regulations of working hours and that they were getting more pleasant tasks.

When considering the depicted differences between the two groups of workers, it should be established that the two groups had limited contact with each other. Typically, the directly employed workers had not been external workers themselves. And even if their paths crossed at the workplace, communication was hindered by language barriers. Among 26 respondents in the Kockums report who expressed opinions about the external workers, only one (a Finn) declared that he personally knew these workers (Ohlström, 1970: 73). The transcriptions from the same report are abundant with expressions such as 'from what I have heard', 'it is told', and suchlike (Ohlström, 1970: 73–82).

According to Ohlström (1970: 69–70), external workers largely confirmed many of the views expressed by the directly employed workers. The external workers thought they had 'better working conditions' and more 'democratic and flexible' foremen. They also thought themselves to be 'better in cheating' than directly employed workers, which here meant better knowledge about where quality controls of performed work were to be made. Unfortunately, Ohlström was only able to interview a small group of external workers. It is hard to tell whether their views are representative of external workers in general.

From a more general perspective, the use of external workers may also have affected the health and safety environment at the shipyards. The shipyards were already dangerous working places before the use of external workers. The Metal Workers' Union and the management were collaborating on reducing accident risks. According to representatives for the union, the external firms were not involved in these efforts. The external firms were accused of failing to educate their workers in health and safety issues (Anon., 1969; Beckholmen, 1980). There is no systematic study of the relationship between workplace accidents and the use of external workers in the Swedish shipbuilding industry, but such a link is possible. After a decreasing trend in the 1950s, the relative number of accidents increased at the shipyards from 1964 onwards (Berggren, 2008: 601, 604). A particularly serious accident

[8] I have not found evidence of 'moral exclusion' – the attempts of one group to discriminate against and dominate another – of the kind reported by Byoung-Hoon and Frenkel (2004). The lack of evidence does not, however, allow us to conclude that moral exclusion did not exist.

occurred in 1971, when ten workers died, of which four were directly employed and the rest external workers.

Concluding remarks

This paper presents a case of non-standard employment with precarious features in a setting characterized by shortage of labour. However, the described case includes contradictions. On the one hand, external workers in the Swedish shipbuilding industry had insecure jobs and were involved in triangular employment relationships, where the true identity and responsibility of the employer was unclear. External workers were also excluded from the social security systems. On the other hand, external workers appear to have had higher incomes, opportunities to work long hours, less responsibility for unrewarding maintenance tasks and perhaps even the advantage of working under more flexible supervision. The perceived advantages were reflected in flows from direct employment to indirect employment, rather than the other way around.

Many questions regarding the external workers remain unclear. How did they perceive their situation, their relations to managers and other worker categories? Did they consider themselves as shipbuilding workers at all? How were they affected by the final demise of the shipbuilding industry? An intriguing question is how they look at their own experience of external employment in hindsight. Possibly, what appeared as a rewarding employment contract then may be perceived as a poor deal today.[9] It may be the case that the itinerant lifestyle made it difficult for external workers to establish and maintain family relationships (cf. Kuosmanen, 2001).

Having said that, it is clear that the term ‘precarious employment’ should be applied with some caution, both past and present. There are not only good jobs and bad jobs, but also a variety of situations in the sphere of work that are contradictory. By paying more attention to the historical diversity of work arrangements, a better understanding of why precarious employment emerges in some situations, but not in others, may be achieved.

[9] This is a view expressed by some workers interviewed by Inkeri Lamer, 5 May 2015, personal communication.

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