Definitions of wage labour in the legal and social sciences are useful for historians of work, but they never cover the full human experience. The following definition attempts to include as many aspects as possible: “Wage labour is work, which is performed on the basis of a contract between a worker (or a group of workers) and an employer, and which the employer remunerates in the form of a wage.” Wages may consist of money or goods in kind. Cases in which employers remunerate workers arbitrarily (without taking into account a specific amount of work), in which remuneration takes place without a contract (for example, when a housewife feeds and clothes her husband and children), and in which employers coerce workers into employment without a real contract, as in the case of corvée labour in pre-market societies like Ancient Egypt or the Pre-Columbian societies in the Americas, convict labourers, or chattel slaves are therefore excluded. Frequently, the recipient of the wage is free to spend it at will, but not always. Exceptions include child labourers, who have to pass their wages on to their parents or guardians, or workers in a truck system, who are obliged to spend at least a part of their wage in the employer’s shop. Sometimes wages are also paid to slaves-for-hire, who have been sent out by their owner to earn money with an employer, and who are usually allowed to keep a part of their remuneration. They perform a kind of wage labour if they themselves, and not their owner, makes an agreement with their employer. In sum, wages are but one type of remuneration for work. In this chapter, we will only use the term wage labour if wages are paid based on a contract.

According to our definition, wage labour is based on market exchange: the workers offer their capacity to work, and the employers offer remuneration in money or kind in return. A major characteristic of wage labour is that it presupposes a contract, implicit or explicit, oral or written. The contract specifies (i) the identity of the contracting parties; (ii) the relationship between performance and remuneration; (iii) the duration of the agreement; and (iv) the conditions under which it may be terminated prematurely by the worker or the employer. In the remainder of this article I will discuss systematically, but briefly, these four elements of the labour contract, thus further clarifying what wage labour is and how it overlaps in multiple ways with other labour relations. Thereafter, I will give a concise historical outline of wage labour from its origins to the present day.

1 General works on which this essay is based are Marcel van der Linden, Workers of the World. Essays toward a Global labor History (Leiden and Boston, 2008); Marcel van der Linden and Leo Lucassen (eds), Working on Labor. Essays in Honor of Jan Lucassen (Leiden and Boston, 2012); and Jan Lucassen, Outlines of a History of Labour (Amsterdam, 2012). The latter publication and this essay adopt the global taxonomy on labour relations as developed over the last decade at the International Institute of Social History (see chapter 4.1).
The labour contract and its elements

Historical evidence shows that it is much more important to know whether a contract is recognized by the contracting partners and by local or broader society than whether parties have entered into it implicitly or explicitly and—in the latter case—whether and how it has been put on paper. Recognition of such an agreement by the polity is, after all, essential for the enforcement of the contract and for solutions in the case that the contract is breached by one of the parties involved. The way that it is documented—in memory, on a piece of paper that is or is not signed, by a notarial deed, etc.—may be very important in a particular case but not for the definition of wage labour. The different forms of entering into a contract relate more closely to the levels of literacy and the juridification of a society.

i. The contracting parties

In labour history, we nearly always talk about the relation between the wage labourer and the employer as if these were two individual people.² The reality is often very different. Labourers are often hired as a group and not individually, or individual labourers agree amongst themselves, locally or nationally, to accept work only under certain conditions. Journeymen’s guilds, mutual benefit societies and trade unions are examples of more permanent workers organizations that collectively bargain.³ Another example of groups that collectively take on work are production cooperatives, dating back to the nineteenth century, but this does not pertain to wage labour.⁴

Employers can unite in order to impose conditions on workers who wish to be employed by them. An employer doesn’t need to be an individual but can also be the state in a market economy or another corporate body that does not work for profits. In terms of contract enforcement this has major consequences, as we will see below. The Soviet Union and other socialist countries, which existed in the twentieth

⁴ David F. Schloss, Methods of Industrial Remuneration. Third edition revised and enlarged (London, 1898), pp. 319–365, 406–419; Van der Linden in this volume Ch. 7.
century, were special cases. There markets, including labour markets, were abolished and replaced by state organized employment that left out labour contracts but maintained remuneration by way of wages. This is another example of work for which wages are paid but which, according to the definition used in this chapter, is not considered wage labour.

Because of the historical importance of collective contracting and its relative obscurity this phenomenon needs some more elucidation. According to David F. Schloss, cooperative work is characterized by the following elements: a) the members of the cooperative are associated by their own free choice, and they determine for themselves how many people and which people are part of the group; b) the associated workers select amongst themselves their own leader; c) they arrange the division of the collective wages between all of the members of the group (including the leader) in such a manner as is mutually agreed upon as being equitable. According to rules made before the work starts, the group determines which members receive which part of the total sum received by the group.⁵

This so-called cooperative subcontracting was already documented amongst Mesopotamian brick makers in 484–477 BCE.⁶ With the spread of large mono-cultures, cooperative subcontracting became very popular in market economies, as it enabled employers to respond quickly to short term demand and take on many labourers at once. It was first found to be a common practice in Classical Antiquity and again from the late Middle Ages onwards in Western Europe. Outside agriculture, it dominated seasonal work like mining, the public and private construction of dikes, canals, and (rail)roads, and the construction industry.

In the mining industry, the basis of the group was often the household, and men, woman, and children could be part of the group. A particular seam, from which coal or ore was to be extracted, was subcontracted to the group.⁷ Breaking ore at the surface was also subcontracted to groups of women. The demise of serfdom in Central and Eastern Europe enhanced this type of organization. In Europe it reached its peak

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before WWI. After the war, mechanization diminished the need for seasonal wage labour, especially in agriculture and construction. When mechanization spread, workshops were replaced by electrically powered factories with machines. Supervisory challenges were solved by the introduction of piece rates—but collective bargaining, which had already existed in the agricultural sector and in other sectors, as described above, did not take place. Instead, the cotton industry contracted the much sought-after skilled labourers who could work the new machines individually. These piece-wage foremen, in turn, engaged unskilled urban workers, amongst which were many children, against time wages—a practice called sweating, according to Schloss. The result was one of the horrors of the classical Industrial Revolution: the extreme exploitation of one group of labourers by another, while employers declared themselves free of responsibility.

### ii. Performance and remuneration: wage types and modes of wage payment

Any employer, whether of wage labour or slave labour, must make sure that the worker’s labour capacity is maintained, at least in the short term. Therefore, he or she must make sure that the worker directly receives or is able to buy the appropriate amount of food, rest, clothing, and shelter. This is the bare and often barren relationship between performance and remuneration. Employers (should) also understand that by adding positive incentives they may get more or better results (see Chapter 7). This may be achieved by the level of the wage and other, secondary, labour conditions, like paid leave, sick leave, a pension, and other perks, but also by linking performance and remuneration directly, as in the case of piece or task-based wages.

When the employer can easily supervise the quantity and quality of the work done by his or her labourers time wages are common. This is true for most small-scale workshops. When supervision is more difficult, because of the distance to the workforce (e.g. in the cottage industry, in mining, public works, and agriculture) or the size of the workforce, indirect supervision is more appropriate. In those cases, not the work process itself but its results must be measured and assessed and expressed in a piece wage. Therefore, time matters less, although minimal and maximal periods may be stipulated.

Collective piece rates are an intrinsic part of cooperative subcontracting. As a rule, they are not distributed simply in equal parts, as experience and responsibility play a certain role. Mixed forms of (individual) time wages and (collective) piece rates appear in the form of progressive wages or in the form of profit sharing. In

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9 Ludwig Bernhard, *Die Akkordarbeit in Deutschland* (Leipzig, 1903), pp. 16 – 22.
the nineteenth century, both were propagated as an answer to the emerging labour unrests. Progressive wages imply that a fixed minimum wage is supplemented by a premium, related to the efficiency of the performance. One of its appearances was time-wage piece-work, in which a fixed time rate was supplemented with a premium per unit of output in excess of a standard quantity.¹⁰ Premium wages were advocated around 1830 by men like Charles Babbage (1791–1871), Robert Owen (1771–1858), and Charles Fourier (1772–1837). Profit-sharing, also sometimes called industrial partnership, became popular one generation later.¹¹

Product sharing is a related form of remuneration, directly linked to performance. Historically, it was used amongst sailors, bargemen, fishermen, and crews of whaling boats. Sailors and bargemen could be paid a share of the freight, fishermen part of the catch. The oldest and best known example is share cropping in agriculture, documented for the first time in ancient Mesopotamia. Small tenants with few or no means of their own could become tenants. Not only did they receive the land, but they also were given seeds and utensils and—in return for their labour—could keep between one quarter and one half of the crop.¹²

The combination of piece wages for a foreman and time wages for the actual labourers, paid to them by the foreman, who thus becomes an exploiter of his fellow workers—a perversion of cooperative subcontracting described above, started in the cotton industry. This abusive practice encouraged the emergence of the early British trade unions in the 1830s, after the repeal of the Combination Acts in 1824. From then on, with piece-rate foremanship, piece rates as such became anathema for most trade unionists, an issue discussed by theorists like Louis Blanc and, borrowing from him, Karl Marx himself.¹³ Nevertheless, around 1900, cooperative subcontracting with piece rates dominated not only wage labour in German agriculture, construction, and brick making, but it also prevailed in the metal industry and made headways in the woodworking and textile industries. At about the same time, in the United Kingdom, according to the Webbs, nearly half of the principal trade unions, representing almost 60% of the aggregate membership, insisted on piece-work. These examples

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¹⁰ Schloss, Methods of Industrial Remuneration, pp. 48–49, 87–113. This differs from a task wage in which the workman has to perform a certain task at a fixed time wage, without any premium, and with the risk to receive less if the task has not been finished.


¹³ Bernhard, Akkordarbeit in Deutschland, pp. 51–67: they saw the abolition of piece wages as a precondition for the abolition of piece-wage foremanship (French marchandage; German Zwischenmeister- or Akkordmeistersystem) by ‘task-masters’.
demonstrate that there is no simple unilinear movement from individual to collective remuneration or the reverse.¹⁴

Individual time wages combined with strict quality assessments in large-scale factories and leaving out intermediate task-masters were greatly enhanced by the introduction of the assembly-line in combination with scientific management. Elaborated in the Taylor-system (named after Frederick W. Taylor, 1856–1915) and in Fordism (named after Henry Ford, 1863–1947), it not only became a favourite in market economies but was also emulated in communist countries.

These organizational innovations in large scale industries implied that it became harder for collective or individual piece work in the labour market at large. Piece rates, individually and collectively paid out, and mixed forms of time and piece wages globally played and still play an important role, although in the North Atlantic their importance was reduced in the twentieth century.

The more direct the supervision, the more likely it was that employers also determined the working time. This became most acute with mechanization and their concern to pay off the machines’ purchasing price by keeping them going as long as possible. The abuses in the textile industry provoked the first factory laws in the United Kingdom in 1818, restricting working hours, to be followed by many more.

For the labourers, not only the wage level and the relation between it and performance but also the modalities of wage payment mattered greatly in daily life. They were affected by the frequency of payments of wages and advances to wages, the method of payment, and possible restrictions on the spending of the wages.

Regarding payments, room and board, i.e. payment in kind, is undoubtedly the oldest form of wage payment. Above, the examples of soldiers and share cropping in classical Mesopotamia were discussed. And for soldiers in barracks and sailors on board ships this continued to be an essential part of their remuneration, although soldiers on the move often had to take care of their own food. Other labourers whose remuneration consisted mainly of room and board were live-in servants and apprentices.¹⁵

Since the advent of deep monetization¹⁶ in the Mediterranean, Northern India and China more than 2000 years ago, wages could be paid in coins equalling hourly

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¹⁶ Regarding the production of small change in sufficient amounts, facilitating the payment of daily and hourly sums and their spending at markets and in shops, see Jan Lucassen, “Deep Monetization in Eurasia in the Long Run”, in: Bert van der Speck and Bas van Leeuwen (eds), *Money, Currency and Crisis. In Search of Trust 2000 BC to AD 2000* (London, 2017, forthcoming). Deep monetization was equally important for small-scale producers, peasants, share croppers, artisans, and workers in the cottage industries, who depended on advance payments as they were unable to live on credit until
wages or less. This made the emergence of labour markets more feasible, because, with these easy means of exchange, workers could purchase food and other necessities in market places and shops. This also added to the choice wage labourers had in the way they could spend their earnings. Such a choice could be limited by wages paid out in tokens only accepted in specific shops. This is the truck system, in which the employer could make an extra profit (as often he or one of his relatives owned the shop).¹⁷

In periods of heavy price fluctuations of bread grains employers and workers strategically tried to convert money wages into wages in kind and vice versa. When the price of bread grains rose quickly, workers preferred payment in kind instead of in coins, whereas employers were inclined to prefer the contrary.

The regularity of wage payments as well as the terms under which actual payments take place (after the performance of a task, daily, weekly, bi-weekly, monthly, or even less frequently) determine the need for credit, as wage labourers, as a rule, do not have extensive savings. When small change was rare, like most of the time in early-modern England, credit became very important for wage earners because their employers paid them in long intervals. Credit was available from local shopkeepers, but only to a certain limit. There was extensive legislation for extorting money from debtors, culminating in the imprisonment of many debtors.¹⁸

The actual level of the wages and their purchasing power in a market economy is not only the end sum of all individual contract negotiations between workers and employers. It depends as much on the collective strategies of both sides and on state interventions stipulating minimum, maximum or average wages. Collective strategies were common amongst cooperative subcontracting groups as well as journeymen associations and similar migratory groups, like traveling brothers.¹⁹

### iii. The length of the contract

In order to discuss to what extent wage labour may be called free or unfree it is not only important to know whether the contract period is limited but also how long the contract period is. The longer the duration of the contract, the fewer the opportunities for a worker to change jobs and thereby improve his position. However, a long-term or lifelong contract doesn't have to be despised by a labourer. To the contrary, as

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long as the remuneration is high enough, it can be seen as very favourable. Higher ranking professional soldiers or workers in the so-called secret cities of the Soviet Union benefitted from long-term contracts and high remuneration. The latter were very well cared for specialists in the weapon industry. During the Cold War, they were forbidden to talk about their work to others, let alone leave their job or the town they lived in, which did not even appear on official maps. Despite the advantages of well-paid, tenured jobs, the liberty for a worker to change his or her employer after giving reasonable notice may be seen as an essential character of a free labour contract.²

In labour history, the length of the contract has become an issue of contention when discussing indentured labour and other forms of advances to wage labourers that lead them to incur debts or enter into peonage. To what extent should these forms of labour be seen as free or unfree? Are they forms of slavery?

Wage labourers may be indebted for many reasons, e.g. because of the adversities of life that they could not cope with because they lacked the necessary savings. Another reason is the cost involved in acquiring paid work. The necessary funds can be advanced by so-called jobbers, who take care of work placements and travel costs if the placements are far away. These jobbers are most successful when prospective workers are suffering from dire circumstances. Take the big farmers of the Roman Campagna around 1800 who sent their agents up to the Apennine mountains with grain at the end of the winter season. The starving peasants, turned into debtors, were simply asked to descend in the summer to assist in the harvest and thereby pay back their loan. To this day, the poor in India take advances from jobbers, which they must pay back by doing seasonal work afterwards. If the loans cannot be paid off, the debtors must come back every year until their children inherit the obligation. In this way, families become eternal debt peons, totally at the mercy of the employer.²¹

As a rule, the costs necessary for finding work overseas are prohibitive for wage labourers and that is why intermediaries offer to advance the necessary funds. In return, the future worker, now indebted like in the Italian example, must commit him- or herself to perform work for an overseas employer in order to pay back the loan. The best-known example is that of the *indentured labourers* who left England for the American colonies in the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries. In the similar French case, they were called *engagés*. Their debt was transferred from the original creditor to the captain who shipped them to their new destination, and after arrival it was transferred to their new employer, who, for a fixed number of years, had his indentured labourers entirely at his disposal. After the abolishment of the slave trade, Indians became indentured labourers in the British and Dutch colonies worldwide.

and the same happened to the Chinese, the Japanese, and the inhabitants of the Pacific. (See also chapter 4.4.)

Income insecurity was and still is one of the most threatening characteristics of wage labour, but long contracts with one employer and the accompanying lack of freedom are hardly desirable either. Decent working conditions and inexpensive labour intermediation have always been aspired to by workers. Early forms were the placement bureaus of craft guilds and especially of journeymen associations, which cherished the tramp. After arrival in a new town, their members knew which inn to go to and where to find a “father” and a “mother” who, besides treating them with hospitality, could tell them where jobs were available in their craft. Early trade unions provided the same services. In the twentieth century, together with local and later national authorities, they tried to monopolize labour intermediation in public labour exchanges. This was achieved in several countries, most completely in Germany, where labour mediation was combined with unemployment benefit provisions.²²

iv. The conditions under which the contract may be terminated prematurely by a worker or an employer

Whatever the length of the contract, many do end earlier than expected or stipulated by the parties involved. Because this is so common, conventions exist for what is considered a normal term of notice. But what is the consequence when one of the parties does not abide by the conventions? What is considered to be a legitimate reason for such a breach of contract by the labourer or the employer and what are the consequences of illegal breaches?

In England, the rules regarding breaches of contracts were very strict from the late Middle Ages onward. Because of labour shortages after the Black Death, employers successfully managed to bridle what they considered to be excessive demands of the workers. The Ordinance and the Statute of Labourers (1349 – 1351), culminating in the Statute of Artificers (1562 – 1563) prohibited departure before voluntary service agreements had been fulfilled and mandated penal sanctions for breaches of contracts. Under these laws no adult was allowed to walk around without a paid job and looking for work was easily defined as “vagrancy” and accordingly punished. A labour contract had to be concluded for a year and wages had to be fixed according

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to governmental rates. The penal sanctions for breaches of contracts were only abolished in the United Kingdom in 1875.\textsuperscript{23}

This system was expanded throughout the British colonies, starting in North America (in the USA it was repealed in the early nineteenth century), and later in India and other colonies in Asia, Africa and Oceania. Parts of the Dutch East Indies followed the British example for a short while in the 1860s. On the European continent, however, the situation was different. In general, labour contracts were part of civil law. This meant that indemnities mostly had to be paid to the party that could prove to have been damaged by the breach of contract. Mostly, workers had to pay. More rarely, employers paid.

This is not to say that changing jobs on the European continent was easy. Going as far back as the Ancien Regime, employers blacklisted workers who had been sacked or had left their job against the will of the employer. This happened locally and sector wise.\textsuperscript{24} Even more serious was the introduction of the \textit{livret} in France in 1803 (after earlier examples in 1749 and 1781). All factory workers had to carry this personal work passport and hand it in for registration with the employer. When the worker left the job the employer had to return it. Inside the \textit{livret}, the employer wrote remarks about the worker’s performance, including bad behaviour or debts not yet settled (because of advances received). From this point on, employers could only hire people carrying such a \textit{livret}. In France, the \textit{livret} was abolished in 1890. In other countries, previously part of the French Empire, it also had a long life. In Luxemburg and the Prussian Rhine provinces it existed until 1860, and in Belgium it was used until 1883, although in the case of Belgium the employers did not use it properly. Besides, in France and Belgium work passports were also used for domestic servants, and many other countries issued such documents for travelling workers and workers in general.\textsuperscript{25}

A special type of labour contract enforcement was universal for sailors and soldiers from very early on. Any infringement on discipline, let alone breach of contract, was immediately punished by the ship master or the military officer. Punishments varied from fines to corporal or even capital punishment. Particularly in wartime and for army personnel around the world such laws are still in use. Nevertheless, the ILO convention, in force since 1958, aims at abolishing penal sanctions worldwide.


Historical developments

The earliest examples of wage payments date back to some 5000 years ago, when the first states emerged in Mesopotamia. Like their city-state predecessors and like somewhat later in Egypt, for a very long time these polities organized their subjects according to tributary and redistributive obligations. Nevertheless, in two ways new types of labour relations could emerge there. Because these concentrations of power easily provoked wars, many prisoners were made, and instead of killing them they were reduced to slaves. At the same time, professional soldiers were maintained on a more regular basis, which implied regular payment in kind. Of King Sargon (c. 2,350 BCE) it is said that “5,400 men [= soldiers] eat before him.”

Labour markets emerged later, between 2000 and 1000 BCE, when officials organizing work for temples turned into subcontractors. At the same time, commodity markets were needed on a regular basis, where independent producers sold food and other necessaries to labourers. Wages were paid in silver (in the shape of chips) and grain, but it was not until the ‘invention’ of coins as medium of exchange around 600 BCE that there was a break-through of waged labour.

In Babylon, at about that time, self-employed labour and wage labour were much more prevalent than slave labour, while reciprocal labour had become relatively unimportant. Monetization and wage labour spread quickly from Anatolia into the Mediterranean and the Near-East. Only Egypt was late to adopt it; this did not happen until it was conquered by Alexander the Great. Nevertheless, the last pharaohs, who stuck to their tributary and redistributive state model, occasionally hired Greek soldiers, who had to be paid in coin.

In North-Western India and in China similar developments took place a few centuries later. In the Mauryan Empire in North India (c. 321–185 BCE), small change was abundantly available and the Arthashastra distinguished amongst slaves, bond-

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ed labourers, corvée labourers, casual labourers, and permanent labourers working for piece or time wages. In Qin-China (well-known for its “terracotta army”) small banliang coins were introduced around 350 BCE to replace bigger denominations. It was used both to pay corvée labourers (15–30% of the male productive population), convicts and casual labour. After the collapse of the Qin their Han successors (206 BCE–222 CE) abolished much of the forced work, restored the labour market and enlarged the circulation of small change.

Monetized wage labour was there to stay, although it had its ups and downs. Remarkably, between 400 and 1100 it retreated in Western and Southern Eurasia, whereas at about the same time the opposite happened in the Arab world and China. Roles were reversed after 1100, when markets and wage labour reappeared in Europe and India but retreated for a few centuries in China until they experienced a renaissance under the Ming and first Qing emperors. In North-Western Europe, around 1500 half or more of the population depended on wage labour. Further towards the East, forms of unfreedom re-emerged (the “second serfdom”).

All great Pre-Columbian American polities were organized along similar lines as what we have seen in Eurasia before the advent of markets, monetization, and wage labour, although the Aztecs were in the process of developing markets when the Europeans arrived. At home and in their newly-colonized Atlantic islands the first conquerors, the Spaniards and the Portuguese, considered free wage labour to be the norm. However, aside from that they kept a lot of slaves because of their so-called just war with non-Christians. On their newly-won Atlantic islands, slave labour was wide-spread and became the model for the use of slaves in the Americas. In the sixteenth century, the Spaniards applied this model, to the detriment of the indigenous population. The Portuguese, who also conquered important ports on the West African coast, nearly completely depended on slave labour in Brazil.

The Dutch, the French, and the English, who took important parts of the Caribbean from the Spaniards after 1650, did not replicate the labour relations back home but copied the Luso-Brazilian example—including the use of slaving stations on the West African coast. An exception was the emigration of indentured labourers from

31 Yuri Pines et al. (eds), Birth of an Empire. The State of Qin Revisited (Berkeley, CA, 2014); Lothar von Falkenhausen, Chinese Society in the Age of Confucius (1000–250 BC). The Archaeological Evidence (Los Angeles, 2006); Anthony J. Barbieri-Low, Artisans in Early Imperial China (Seattle and London, 2007).
32 Van Bavel, Invisible Hand.
England to the Caribbean—a temporary success in the seventeenth century—and to Northern America.\textsuperscript{35} However, from the late 1680s African (American) slave labour began to dominate, including in North America. This continued, increasing with time, over the next two centuries.

While the transatlantic slave trade had an adverse effect on the development of wage labour in the Americas and certainly in Sub-Saharan Africa, Eurasia offers a mixed picture in the early modern period. Wage labour and self-employed labour (bearing in mind the proto-industrialization, which included women and children) were the dominant forms of labour in Western Europe, and they were only mixed with slave labour in the Mediterranean. The same held true in most of the other successful polities like the Ottoman Empire, the Safawid Empire, and especially the Moghul Empire as well as the Ming/Qing Empire in China. Nevertheless, slave labour was already present in Asia before the arrival of the Europeans—i.e. imported from Africa to the Middle-East and Western India—and the Europeans rather gave it a boost. The Portuguese—but also private European traders—were instrumental in increasing the use of slave labour.\textsuperscript{36}

In the nineteenth century, wage labour underwent several major changes. First, slowly but surely it lost the severe competition from unfree labour after the abolition of serfdom and slavery—notwithstanding serious drawbacks that occurred regularly (Hitler’s Germany, Stalin’s Russia, Mao’s China, Pol Pot’s Cambodia). Second, urbanization and industrialization induced a slow demise of independent producing groups like artisans and peasants. Slow, because for generations factory workers tried to stick to cottage and home industries and certainly to small scale food production on garden plots as much as possible. As a consequence, the proportion of wage labourers in the total working population increased. Laws restricting the (night-time) labour of women and children caused shifts in the gender and age composition of waged labourers. The same was done by welfare state arrangements in both the communist and the capitalist world, including old age care, pension schemes, the increase of general wage levels, the decrease of working hours, and, in many countries, the leaving of the workforce by females who became housewives. This happened in the first decades after the Second World War. Consequently, social equality increased, first inside developed countries and rather recently in countries around the world.

The demise of the Soviet Union and its satellite states and reforms in China initially seemed to reinforce tendencies already visible in the North Atlantic world. As a consequence, the poverty gap between the North Atlantic and countries like China, and to a lesser extent other parts of the so-called Global South have been narrowed. However, inequality within the countries of the so-called Global North and Global


\textsuperscript{36} Matthias van Rossum, Kleurrijke tragiek. De geschiedenis van slavernij in Azië onder de VOC (Hilversum, 2015).
South have increased substantially over the last decades. They have experienced multiple economic crises and repeatedly volatility since the 1970s. In fact, many positive trends have been reversed. The rights of the employees, enshrined in elaborate legislation, collective labour contracts, and public job mediation, have been weakened, and independent production has been propagated, thereby undermining the formal ideal of free wage labour. This has been successful to a certain extent, although at times independent production is merely a form of disguised unemployment. In an attempt to maintain the newly won material welfare, both husbands and wives engaged in wage labour and the working hours per household started to grow again. No wonder the labour movement has continued to become weaker since the 1980s.\footnote{Lucassen, \textit{Outlines of a History of Labour}.}
Suggested reading


