

Call for papers for a Special Issue of ZfW – German Journal of Economic Geography

Restructuring Work and the Dilemmas of Labour in Twenty First Century Capitalism

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As we enter the third decade of the twenty first century, capitalism continues its dynamic mutation towards automation, digitalisation, and the 'gig economy'. Such changes have important implications for labour, both in terms of employment trends; the distribution of work and forms of labour; and the ability of workers to exercise power to influence their situation (agency). This differs geographically between firms, regions and varieties of capitalism.

Recent debates in economic geography have depicted two contradictory trends. On the one hand, economically, the current 'wave' of new technologies and gig work generates innovation and new markets. This offers opportunities for start-ups and the upgrading of existing firms, with positive effects on employment. On the other hand, digitization and the new forms of unregulated gig work intensify competition between firms, and between workers, as the following illustrates.

Within firms, digital technologies not only substitute routine work by machines, but to an increasing extent also replace complex activities. The remaining digital work is characterized by a lack of public awareness that work is the subject of negotiation and struggle, as labour and union history remind us. Therefore, despite the fact that digital technologies are in principle much more flexible than conventional mechanical technologies, the scope for designing and shaping them in favour of humane working conditions is rarely to the fore. Instead, recently digitalization has created new opportunities for managers to control work, accelerating tendencies to play off workers against each other on a worldwide scale. Similar issues abound in the shift towards precarious work in the 'gig economy', where new geographies of employment threaten to further disrupt established norms and practices. Obviously, the dilemma is how to generate and implement digital innovation without a new regime of global exploitation.

This dilemma has policy implications. Many governments promote 'smart' work, artificial intelligence, Industry 4.0 (Fuchs 2020), and a futuristic Green New Deal etc. The Covid-19 pandemic has furthered encouraged such industrial policies. This new push for digitalization as part modernisation policies challenges labour unions and works councils, who campaign for labour-oriented policies. Without (multiscalar) individual influence and collective power on the part of employees and their representatives, human work in the future might be subject to even more precarious conditions than before. This raises important issues of (informal and formal) agency, e.g. by resilience, resistance, bargaining, strikes, collective agreements and laws, which all influence workers' ability to exercise power and influence in shaping capitalism.

This view goes far beyond the focus on the 'digital divide', i.e. the regionally different access to the internet. More than ever, the current dilemma requires a societal –

including an academic – discourse that offers original and convincing answers and brings in novel and substantial ideas to the social narrative. Such approaches to human labour in 21st century capitalism include governance, socio-cultural and habitualized patterns and politico-constitutional structures for a more humane and democratic world of work (Cumbers et al. 2020).

This special issue encourage contributions that contribute to these issues. Key questions include the following.

- How do new forms of labour characterize actors, their networks and practices, and related institutional arrangements in and between regions, within cities and rural areas? Why and how do the new forms of labour differ spatially?

- How is digital work organized at inter-firm level in MNCs and GVCs/GPNs? How can the new (inter-)dependencies be characterized?

- Who decides on the design, shape and production of digital technology (driven by whose interests)? Where are the key players located (core economies, emerging economies) and how does this affect transnational processes of labour control?

- In which spatial contexts, and why, does digitalization imply positive impacts on working conditions and skills, and where and why does it generate negative impacts (e.g. low pay, deskilling)?

- How do dominant players (such as Amazon in the U.S., or Chinese internet firms) contribute to, or hollow out, global labour standards?

- How do firms use digital freelancers and subcontractors? How do their work conditions differ due to different firm strategies and value chains? How do digital freelancers and subcontractors act in order to improve their working conditions? What are the opportunities for national regulation and global standards in order to improve such jobs?

- How do governments, unions and NGOs influence digitalization and the gig economy in order to improve labour in different parts of the world?

We welcome contributions for this Special Issue that bring an economic geographical lens to the questions of twenty first century capitalist dynamics with questions of labour agency and economic democracy. The contributions should not only provide analyses that describe and explain the structures and processes from a geographical perspective, but also explicitly contribute to a much-needed discussion about the social and economic consequences for labour.

The Special Issue will be published in 2022. Potential contributors should submit an abstract (of no more than 250 words) to fuchs@wiso.uni-koeln.de by 10st February 2021, and will be informed about the guest editors' decision until 1st March 2021.

Full papers (of about 9,000 words) will be due for pre-submission to guest editors by 1st July 2021, and submission to ZfW –German Journal of Economic Geography by 1st September 2021.

Cumbers, A., McMaster, R., Cabaço, S., & White, M. J. (2020): Reconfiguring Economic Democracy: Generating New Forms of Collective Agency, Individual Economic Freedom and Public Participation. *Work, Employment and Society*, 34(4), 678-695. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0950017019875935>

Fuchs, M. (2020): Does the Digitalization of Manufacturing Boost a 'Smart' Era of Capital Accumulation? *German Journal of Economic Geography*, 64(2), 47-57. <https://doi.org/10.1515/zfw-2019-0012>