

Jörn Janssen:

The Worker in the Process of Intensifying Socialisation of Production

1) Questions

Who is a worker? This question needs to be specified with regard to space and time where and when this term is used. Assuming even that English is the universal global language, the answer will be different according to social areas around the globe and to the stage in social development and typically overlapping in time and space. This ambiguity is expressed in the heading of the conferences, “The Future of Work”, and it may be added ‘across the globe’. Strictly speaking, there cannot possibly be a single answer to this question as the globe is diverse and the future is uncertain. Yet the question is justified given the global process of assimilation in the present dynamic of developing the future. Under these auspices, we can observe not only where the workers are dominantly heading, but also explore the conditions and inherent agents possibly determining the direction of the development.

These conditions and agents can be identified under a wide range of theories, knowledge, observations and fields of research. Theoretically, the following considerations will be based on historical materialism. Given the workers represent the subjective agents of production, the labour process is the obvious environment in which work is generated and therefore the focus of knowledge and observation. As a means of understanding the dynamics of ‘production’, historical research is indispensable particularly in the sectors of labour and economics.

This context and approach determines also the meaning of the term ‘worker’ which addresses human beings in their capacity to contribute labour to the social production process. Labour encompasses physical as well as mental labour in the whole range of sectors including e.g. conception, extraction, production, and distribution. In all occupations, workers act as the subjective power driving the process under specific respective social relations. It is these social relations that will be regarded as instrumental in the process of transformation, for instance most recently the progressing dissolution of employer-employee relationship¹ in transforming the status of the ‘worker’.

2) Perceiving the nature of transformation of labour relations

The perception of processes of transformation varies according to the time span applied in the analysis. Depending on the overall span, different features will come to the fore. A change in the short term may be just a phase in a persistent cycle over a long period in which other movements may appear to be determinant. Three dimensions will be distinguished in our case as means to identify the dynamic of the present stage, a) 650 years since the end of feudalism, b) 250 years since the beginning of industrial capitalism and c) 40 years since the demise of the socialist planned economies. These stages can equally be identified in terms of labour relations, since a) the emergence of wage labour, b) the rise of capitalist employment and c) the financialisation of work relations.

a) Since the end of feudalism

In 1349, after the Black Death, in England the relatively liberal feudal kingdom introduced statutory wage regulations under a specific labour jurisdiction, the ‘Justices of Labour’. In the following century serfdom under feudal lordship became marginalised and, as a consequence, land turned into a commodity under multi-layered lord-tenancy relations largely based on the

¹ Jörn Janssen, *Employees without Employers, a New Status*, in CLR-News 3/2007, pp. 17-23.

employment of wage labour. This was the origin of the era of wage relations between labour and property, dominant initially in England and Western Europe, giving rise to colonialism and covering eventually the so-called advanced industrial part of the globe. Perhaps the most relevant transformation in this relationship concerned the dominant object of property in the confrontation with labour, first land, then means of production and, finally, financial assets. In this process of transformation, the owner as employer gradually became anonymised and eventually marginal. Hence wage labour relations have ceased to be the determinant agency for 'the future of work'.

b) Since the beginning of industrial capitalism:

Thomas Newcomen's invention of the steam engine in 1712 or James Hargreaves' Spinning Jenny in 1764 are usually mentioned as having triggered industrial labour development. It was in the factories where labour unions came to establish their most stable basis for collective action and organisation including the 1917 Soviet and 1918 German Revolution by shop stewards.² Under continuing capitalism, collective bargaining and national agreements on wages and working conditions as well as forms of company management codetermination were the means of workers to obtain their share in the growth of productivity. But more recently automation of industrial production and so-called artificial intelligence with the rise of the gig economy and the dominance of the services sector have superseded industrial capitalism as the basis of collective labour organisation.

c) Since the demise of the socialist planned economies

The years between the Soviet Revolution and the implosion of the Comecon socialist states may be identified globally as the confrontation between the liberal and planned economies, most of the time under the Second World War and the 'Cold War'. This confrontation came to an end by 1989 associated with the rapid intensification of global exchange and division of labour epitomised by the rise of the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa). In contrast to this diversity of national regimes of work relations, the volatility of financial capital transcends all borders of civilisation and the spatial distribution of social production and services is virtually universal. National regulations cannot possibly claim any more any decisive impact on the future of work.

3) Intensified socialisation of production

Trying to evaluate the dynamic of the transformation of work under these three different historical perspectives based on wage relations, industrialisation or national regimes of labour relations, no common positive pointer to the future of work can be detected. Wage relations have largely lost their basis in a labour-property confrontation or partnership, industrial development is being replaced by the rise of artificial intelligence and the human species is unlikely to transcend the globe by expanding across the planetary, let alone the universal system in the near future. However, there is something in common to all three ultimate crises in terms of their dynamics of transformation, the social labour process in a process of disintegration. What is the status of the worker in this process? An answer to this question will imply the one posed to this study day, "Who is the Worker?": Every individual human being as a constituent agent in the process of social production and services, which implies that being a worker is to represent a universal civil status, not any more employment dependency. Though this transition can already be detected in the present state of development³, it is far from generally perceived as

² The role of shop stewards in the German revolution was recently explored by Ralf Hoffrogge (2014) *Working Class Politics in the German Revolution. Richard Müller, the Revolutionary Shop Stewards and the Origin of the Council Movement*.

Translated by Joseph B. Keady, edited by Radhika Desai. [Historical Materialism Book Series, Vol. 77] Brill, Leiden.

³ See e.g. Shelley Marshall (2016) *A global regulatory New Deal for precarious and informal workers*, Seminar 16/02/2016 at the Australian National University, Canberra.

such, let alone adequately underpinned by institutional arrangements. How to amend this deficit will be the subject of the next section.

4) Consolidating the status of the worker

At present, nation states of so-called advanced economies have particular institutions for the regulation and protection of labour: labour courts, job centres, schools for vocational and academic education, labour unions and employers' federations, labour research centres etc. If the worker is recognised as representing a civil status instead of an employment dependency, respective institutions will be required to regulate and consolidate this status. Whether these institutions can be developed through the transformation and adaptation of existing ones or be set up from scratch is a matter of practicality, but it requires a strategic concept of their main functions for the near future. More as an illustration of the direction than a description of these functions, we shall focus on three main areas: a) education, b) work allocation and c) labour included in civil judiciary.

a) Education of the worker

It may be difficult to draw a definite line of distinction, but according to the division of labour there will be a distinction between dominantly general and work education. In turn, work education will consist of components, in schools or learning centres, training workshops, and workplaces. Given the increase of mental and decline of physical qualifications required in all occupations, a unity between 'vocational' and 'academic' education and learning will be structured only according to distinctions of occupations. Another distinction between initial and continuing education will be superseded by a continuity of learning in the whole course of the professional career. Finally, given the inherent widening and intensification of qualification, curricula are to be permanently developed or adjusted by a common network of institutions at regional, national and transnational levels to educate workers for the globally interconnected process of production and services.

b) Work allocation

What at present is called 'labour market' will become, in fact already is, an inadequate form of competitive labour supply based on the traditional employee subordination under capitalist employers. The inadequacies of this 'market' function have increasingly been compensated in the last generation by so-called 'umbrella companies', labour agencies, labour platforms, labour subcontracting, self-employment etc. with job-centres as the last resort in this multifaceted regime. As work has become most variable in an increasingly objectively and geographically divided and complex process of production and services, the distribution, supply or allocation of workers requires coordination at all levels of the network. This is a function of information including control and supervision through specific institutions of work allocation.

c) Labour included in civil judiciary

Advanced economies have developed codes of labour legislation supported by special courts of labour jurisdiction. These are institutions compensating for the inequality of workers subordinated under the ownership privileges of employers, claiming to maintain equal rights under relations of dependency. The core object of contention is the wage paid by the employer as the means for the subsistence of the worker. For most workers the wage - or salary - directly paid by the employer has already become the minor part of subsistence, the major part being paid by indirect wages such as holiday pay, disability and sick pay, unemployment benefit, and old age pensions supplemented by a large number of social benefits and services provided by civil governments. The diverse proposals for an 'unconditional' basic income as a common civil right are only a first step in an outdated complex system of pay division and differentiation. A worker's civil status implies the right to adequate subsistence, an income differentiated perhaps according to his/her contribution to the social process of production and services in terms of

qualification.⁴ Under this regime a separate 'labour' judiciary becomes redundant, in other words, the status of the worker would be consolidated under civil law and jurisdiction.

5) Securing equality for workers, restricting property rights

The upgrading of the status of the worker corresponds with the demise of the status of the employer based on property of the means of production and services. This is a process which has been going on already at least for a whole century. The Russian Revolution in 1917 was the first decisive step in the abolition of private property in industrial assets. After the Second World War, the Soviet system was extended to include the Comecon states⁵ whilst China converted to Maoist socialism and, to various degrees, capitalist states introduced more and more social benefits, services and wage components as well as embryonic workers' co-determination in capitalist corporations. This stage of history associated with the Cold War came to an end with the implosion of the socialist states on the one hand and the revival of a new liberalism dominated by capital deserting the control of industrial in favour of financial assets on the other. Hence the confrontation between labour and property has been increasingly divided and turned into an indirect anonymous relationship⁶. Consequently, financial capital movements became largely independent from real assets and their management. Nevertheless, employment dependency, control and submission persist between employees, or workers, at different levels of hierarchy, but all of the same civil status. In this transformation of employment relations, the diversity of income has risen to astronomical levels, dividing the workers and lifting the top layers of management into the wealth categories of the financial elite. To finish this distortion a universal wage scale within a moderate span is to become a matter of democratic decision. On the other hand, property rights will have to be substantially restricted, in a transition period by taxation, excluding private appropriation of all forms of natural resources such as the use of land, water, air, and fossils, as well as of material and intellectual assets in the process of production and services.

6) Developing the ILO

The process of rising global interdependence of production and services requires respective regulation, in the first place for a coordinated international assimilation and equalisation of the status of the worker. Establishing effective institutional provisions cannot be a single act but remains a complex process of (r)evolution. It is obvious that such a process can be built on existing foundations, among many others the United Nations, the International Labour Organisation and the International Court of Justice. Perhaps, equally importantly, the great variety of institutions in almost every country of the globe in charge of regulating labour relations will be involved. It has been pointed out that all these institutions and their objectives are already in a most critical state of transformation, generally speaking, being structured and oriented in relation to traditional outdated perceptions and standards now confronted with a newly changed reality. The many debates and proceedings about Uber drivers and various forms of platform labour in different countries provide typical examples of this dilemma. A first step everywhere is the recognition that the 'standard' or 'typical' employment relationship is a fiction that has never existed except as an ephemeral transitional form in a process of change. Hence, restoring the past is almost certain to fail and quite rightly these 'research seminars on WORK' envisage "The Future of WORK", one which can only be based on the dynamic of the present

⁴ Bernard Friot has suggested a salary paid according to qualification to every adult person active either in education or production and services: (1998) *Puissances du salariat. Emploi et protection sociale à la française*, La Dispute, Paris.

⁵ We will not mention many other variants such as Cuba, Yugoslavia, the Czech Republic etc.

⁶ See Jörn Janssen above footnote 2.

and which we have tried to understand at a general level under three different temporal auspices.⁷

What is missing in this picture, is the variety of geographical conditions as they are enshrined in different conventions, agreements, contracts, regulations, jurisdictions and institutions at national and federal levels. Any attempt to promote the process of innovation and global coordination has to take these diversities into account and to confront them. Therefore, at this stage, a strategic framework for the administration of WORK under civil government⁸ is needed in order to focus the debate at all levels. This is explicitly the aim of these ‘research seminars on WORK’. It must, however, be made sure that this forum does not remain a one-off but will be turned into an institution for the continuous process of WORK development. Maybe the present seminars already generate the basis of a manifesto as well as a programme for a globally coordinated debate. Ideally, this ought to be organised by a committee directly under the United Nations. It might also be envisaged to reform the ILO into a civil rights body responsibly solely to the United Nations, superseding its dependency on social partners under tripartite regime. At the same time the International Court of Justice ought to integrate global labour jurisdiction. This would be a decisive step in “the emancipation of workers from all employers”⁹.

⁷ See above in section 2, a, b, and c.

⁸ See above outline of three main areas in section 4, a, b and c.

⁹ See in the call for papers on “Who is a Worker”.