Rethinking Precarity and Capitalism: An Interview with Charlie Post

Jordy Cummings[1] **(JC):** The theme of this year's *Alternate Routes* is the "paradox of low-wage, no-wage work", and there is a great deal of analysis of an allegedly new historical subject, "the precariat". What do you make of this "paradox"? Is capitalism really that different in 2015 than it was 20, 30, 40 years ago?

Charlie Post[2] **(CP):** Capitalism is certainly different today than it was during the so-called "Golden Age" of 1945-1975. During those years, "full-employment" – unemployment below the "frictional" rate of 3-4 percent, the dominance of full-time work with unemployment insurance, health care, pensions and the like (provided by the state, private employers, or some combination) – was the norm. This "full-employment" model also included some measure of job security – either legal or contractual protections from arbitrary dismissal, etc.

The "Golden Age" was, in my opinion, *exceptional* in the history of capitalism. It was the product of a combination of a long period of rising profitability (1933-1966) and a militant labor movement across the industrialized world. Workers had threatened the foundations of capitalist rule (France and Spain in the mid-1930s, France and Italy immediately after World War II, France in 1968, Portugal 1974-1975) or severely disrupted capitalist accumulation in mass strike waves in the mid-1930s, immediate post-war years and again between 1965-1975. Capital was forced to make major concessions to labor. The "full-employment" model and the expansive welfare state were the most important gains, giving workers unprecedented security of employment.

However, the "Golden Age" was not typical of the history of capitalism. Piketty, in his greatly overrated *Capital in the 21st Century*, has demonstrated that the *very slight* decline in income and wealth inequality in this period was a short-interruption of capitalism's historic tendency to *increase* inequality. Not only was the period exceptional for small decreases in inequality, but in the "full-employment" regime. The period since the mid-1970s – with the growth of part-time (but still mostly

1 Jordy Cummings is a PhD candidate in Political Science at York University. He has published in *Red Wedge*, *Socialist Studies* and *Socialism & Democracy*.

2 Charlie Post is Professor of Sociology at the Borough of Manhattan Community College-City University of New York. He is author of *The American Road to Capitalism: Studies in Class-Structure, Economic Development and Political Conflict, 1620-1877.*

long-term) jobs, less job security and greater consequences of unemployment because of the dismantling of social welfare – is actually a return to the capitalist norm. If you look at the advanced capitalist societies before 1945, they all experienced lots of part-time work and lots of insecure employment – and guaranteed health care, pensions and the like were enjoyed by a distinct minority of the working class. Even the most "privileged" workers – the skilled 'labor aristocrats' of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – experienced prolonged bouts of unemployment.

JC: In a June essay for *Viewpoint Magazine*, Aaron Benanav[3] wrote that in response to the rise of this theorization, some, you in particular are "seeking to defend a more or less classical orientation, [and] have sought to deny that any such radical recomposition of the working class has taken place." He seems to, by implication, be suggesting a sort of non-workplace oriented model of organizing, not dissimilar, some might argue, to how some labour leaders want to appear to be helping precariously employed service and other unskilled workers without actually *organizing* them. Do you have anything you'd like to say about the Benanav piece?

CP: I will reserve my empirical criticisms of Benanav's use of data for my reply in *Viewpoint*. To me it is unclear what Benanav is advocating for *strategically*. He caricatures my strategic position. I do not advocate a return to the sorts of working class political parties (mass social-democratic/popular frontist-reformist, "Communist") and trade unions (dominated by the officialdom and committed to capitalist state regulated union recognition mechanisms, routine collective bargaining, reliance on the grievance procedure) that characterized the "Golden Age." Benanav uses the term "Fordism," which is either associated with the problematic "Regulationist School" or is, as Simon Clarke has argued, without analytic value.

However, I do argue that strong *workplace* organization, based in key manufacturing and logistics/transport industries, is absolutely necessary if we want to rebuild working class power. So will some sort of political organization that gives expression to a new workers' movement (recognizing, in the light of the experience of the Italian PRC and Syriza, the problems such parties will inevitably face if electorally successful). However, I think that workplace organization, in particular, will only be rebuilt through a rejection of the current norms of "trade union legality." The industrial unions were organized in the 1930s through direct action

3 Benanav, A. (2015, June 15). Precarity Rising. *Viewpoint Magazine*, https://viewpointmag.com/2015/06/15/precarity-rising

(strikes, sit-downs, etc.), rather than state sponsored 'recognition' elections. Union power rested on strong organizations of shop stewards who lead brief short strikes and slow-downs over workplace grievances. This is the only road to the revival of workers powers today.

The strategy of non-workplace organizing – at best workers' centers of low-wage workers based in their neighborhoods; at worst, the SEIU's new attempts to convince employers that concessionary contracts with unions will help be more profitable than non-union firms – is a dead end. Neither an emphasis on low-wage workers *alone* – especially those with the least social power – nor offers of "labor peace" will rebuild the labor movement. Only a strategy based on identifying which groups of workers actually have the ability to disrupt accumulation – and on the *exercise* of that social power will lead to a new workers' movement. I believe this strategy is applicable to the so-called "service sector" – in particular organizing the giant transnationals like Wal-Mart or McDonalds. Organizing store-by-store, relying on 'moral power' and symbolic disruptions will not organize this sector. Only by organizing "up the supply chain" – among better-paid, more stably employed warehouse and logistic workers – will unions be able to wield sufficient social power to organize the industry as a whole.

JC: You have long been critical of the so-called "labour aristocracy" thesis, that, to put it simply, workers in 'advanced capitalist countries' are not prone to militancy due to their being beneficiaries of 'super-exploitation'. Do you see a relationship between the "precariat" line and the "labour aristocracy" line?

CP: Absolutely! Both disparage the strategic importance of full-employed, relatively well-paid workers in industry and transport-logistics. Both fetishize low-wage workers with little social power. Both appeal to *elitist* tendencies on the left and in the labor movement – either labor bureaucrats or leftists influenced by Stalinism and/or social-democracy who believe that workers need to follow their 'enlightened' leadership. These sorts of folks are worried that better paid, more socially powerful workers will actually want to run their own organizations. Workers with little social power tend to be much more reliant on their 'leaders' and their attempts to leverage influence with politicians and employers through symbolic actions.

JC: Among others, you have argued that there is growing potential working class power within the logistics sector. Can you expand upon this?

CP: The centrality of the logistics center is rooted in the spread of what Kim Moody and others call "lean production." Lean production was a very successful drive to raise the rate of surplus-value through a hyper-

Taylorist division and simplification of tasks, massive speed-up, use of non-union workers ("out-sourcing") and more contingent workers. Along with these measures to increase the rate of exploitation, "just-in-time" inventory systems reduced the costs of capital and raised profitability. By eliminating large inventories of spare parts in manufacturing – or inventories of merchandise in retail – firms saved on building warehouse space and on the interest they paid while parts or merchandise remained unused or unsold.

"Just-in-time" inventory is actually a return to the norms in many industries *before* the organization of industrial unions in the 1930s and 1940s. What the auto industry used to call "hand-to-mouth" inventory systems proved to be highly vulnerable to disruption by small groups of workers, especially those who would stay at their work-stations and stop working ("sit-downs"). "Hand-to-mouth" was abandoned because workers were willing to take advantage of their potential social power. With the smashing of the conventional union movement over the past forty years, capital has felt confident about returning to this system. However, it *recreates* potential bottlenecks and points of pressure for workers.

When strategically placed workers act on their renewed power the results are quite amazing. In 1995, workers at a GM plant in Flint, Michigan that produced all the brake-assemblies for GM cars and light trucks in North America struck against forced overtime. Within a week, they had shut down approximately 24 or 26 GM factories in the US, Canada and Mexico. GM gave in and suspended forced overtime in Flint. More recently, port truck drivers ("truckeros") on the West Coast docks – mostly Latinos classified as 'independent contractors' – struck, shutting down some of the largest ports on the continent (Long Beach, CA) and winning recognition as *employees* with the right to collective bargaining. The spread of just-in-time inventory systems to retail and fast food in North America also gives workers tremendous *potential* power. Unfortunately, few unions involved in the attempts to organize workers in these industries (SEIU, UFCW) have focussed on warehouse and logistic workers. Instead, they engage in flashy acts of "symbolic" disruption – one-day strikes by minorities of workers at a single store – that are incapable of changing the relationship of forces and compelling capital to grant union recognition. Only the small United Electrical Workers (UE) has chosen to focus on logistical and warehouse workers.

JC: As well, you have been skeptical of claims regarding the centrality of the service sector. Can you say a bit more about this?

CP: I come from a political and intellectual tradition that has long been suspicious about claims that the industrial working class – workers

in manufacturing, transport-logistics, telecommunications, etc. – no longer matters to the revival of socialist politics. All of the data indicates that industrial output, adjusted for inflation, has risen as both an absolute magnitude and a percentage of Gross National Product since the early 1980s – surpassing levels at the end of the last long boom. Clearly, the percentage of industrial workers has fallen – as it has since the 1890s as a result of mechanization and a rising rate of surplus-value. Put simply, the potential social power of industrial workers has probably *increased* in the neoliberal era. The notion of 'immaterial labor' is a hot mess. It confuses highly *material* labor – work in the telecommunications industry creating and maintaining the infrastructure for computerization – with forms of mental labor – designing machinery and work-systems. While the former is central, the latter workers are unlikely to be in the lead of a new workers' movement.

JC: Like many of us, you are active in your union, as an academic worker. I would say that probably the majority of socialists in academia are precariously employed – at least by my own observation. My point in raising this is my contention that the reason that "precariousness" is such a 'hot topic' is that it has been theorized by often precariously employed academics. Do you have any thoughts on this? What is the role of the academic labour movement and how can more solidarity develop between the tenured and untenured?

CP: The growing experience of real *precarity* is quite marked among academics, and may help *partially* explain the popularity of the notion of the "precariat" among graduate students and young professors. However, we should not lose track of how labor bureaucrats and their intellectual supporters promote the notion. Blaming "precarity," "deindustrialization-globalization" and other "sociological" factors for the decline of the labor movement does two things for the labor officialdom. First, it lets them off the hook – their dead-end strategies are no longer responsible for the decline of organized labor. Second, low-paid and precarious workers appear as "low hanging fruit" – workers who can easily be recruited into powerless unions, but who can pay dues.

In terms of academic labor's strategic place – I am skeptical. While I have been very active in my faculty union for over twenty years, I do not think that academic labor will be an important element in transforming the labor movement. I reject the essentially elitist notion (that leaders of my union are very fond of) that "academic labor" brings "big ideas" to the labor movement. Actually, the greatest source of radical ideas in the labor movement has been skilled industrial workers – few of whom were college educated, no less college professors. I do, however, think is it crucial for

radicals in the academy to be engaged in *workplace organizing*. Whatever social power academics have will only be realized through collective action at the workplace. I think the key to developing solidarity between different segments of the academic workforce is convincing the more 'privileged' faculty that their conditions of work are directly tied to those of less secure faculty. Put simply, the more part-time and untenured faculty universities and colleges can hire, the greater the ability of managers to lower the salaries, increase the workloads, etc. of full-time faculty. If we can convince full-time and tenured faculty of this, solidarity may well increase.

JC: You have called yourself a "Capital-Centric" Marxist, in the tradition of Robert Brenner and Ellen Meiksins Wood. Does this account of the historical development of capitalist social property relations have any influence on your analysis of the prospects for the working class movement in 2015?

CP: Yes, in two ways. First, Brenner and Wood have been among the most important left intellectuals defending the centrality of workers and workplace organization to the survival (or revival) of the socialist project. Brenner's work on social-democracy/reformism is especially valuable in understanding the strategic and tactical limits of the labor officialdom. Second, I have used "*Capital*-centric" Marxist, rather than "Political Marxist" (at least most of the time), to *broaden* the tradition. Brenner and Wood have demonstrated that only with the emergence of social property relations where exploiters and exploited must reproduce themselves through market competition do we see the dynamic of productive specialization, technical innovation and accumulation – the operation of the *law of value*. Others, in particular Anwar Shaikh and his students, have done the heavy lifting in analyzing the dynamics of established capitalism – accumulation, competition, and crisis. The work of one of Shaikh's students, Howard Botwinick, on capitalist competition, capital mobility and differentiation within the working class is central to my analysis of the roots of the crisis of organized labor. The reissuing of his book, *Persistent Inequalities* as part of the *Historical Materialism* book series in 2016 – and its appearance as an affordable paperback in 2017 – is extremely important in disseminating these ideas to a broader intellectual and activist milieu.