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Can the Precariat Be Organized?: The Gig Economy, Worksite Dispersion, and the Challenge of Mutual Aid

Georges Van Den Abbeele

The development and success of the welfare state during the twentieth century coincides with the power of labor unions and their influence on the political process, both through the ballot box and by direct action in the form of strikes, boycotts, and protest marches. Already in the nineteenth century, however, and prior to the development of the modern welfare state, nascent labor unions modeled the concept of welfare as a function of mutual aid within the organized proletariat. Unions stockpiled supplies, for instance, in anticipation of strikes and work stoppages so that membership could survive management retaliations such as the suspension of pay or the denial of access to the workplace. Indeed, the history of trade unions, and before that of guilds and craftsmen corporations, is inextricably bound with that of mutual organizations, fraternities, and benevolent associations. Peter Kropotkin famously argued that robust forms of mutual aid are a necessary as well as species-beneficial result of evolution, defying classic Hobbesian and social Darwinist views that emphasize the fierceness of individual competition and the value of a model where only the “fittest” survive.¹ What we call the welfare state is perhaps most plausibly understood as the nationalization and homogenization of diverse

1. Peter Kropotkin, *Mutual Aid: A Factor in Evolution* (New York: McClure, Philipps & Company, 1902).

organizations for mutual aid, amalgamated under the paternalistic aegis of the state.²

But this history of labor's triumph, most especially in liberal democracies, can be interpreted in different ways. On the one hand, there is the triumphalist narrative of collective organizing to realize a progressive agenda of more equitable wages, safer working conditions, limited hours, and benefits ranging from paid vacations to pension plans. A widely posted bumper sticker from the early 2000s loudly proclaims this outcome: "Unions: The Folks Who Brought You the Weekend." Under this scenario, the welfare state would again simply expand and incarnate at a national level and for its entire citizenry the "safety net" secured in local labor disputes between specific businesses and their workers, and embedded in various forms of mutual organizations associated with specific trade unions or local communities.

On the other hand, one could also understand the broad accession of benefits to workers by management less as corporate retreat than as an effective response. Giving *some* due to workers' grievances also preserved the essence of the liberal state and its capitalist infrastructure at a time when these were seriously threatened by socialist and communist alternatives. The dramatic rise of the welfare state in Western Europe after the Second World War occurs in tandem with the U.S.-funded Marshall Plan, itself arguably a geopolitically interested form of mutual aid³ and a corollary of the Cold War Truman Doctrine aimed at containing the spread of communism. The welfare state thus can be seen, from this perspective and

2. The so-called welfare state can also be seen as the overcoming of the historical tensions between the free establishment of mutual aid organizations, on the one hand, and their attempted eradication by Church and/or State, on the other hand, as in the infamous French *Loi le Chapellet* or the British Combination Act, both of which outlawed all professional or occupational organizations. While such anti-syndicalist legislation drove trade union mutual aid underground until their repeal in the later nineteenth century, they also allowed the growth of specifically charitable organizations during that same period, most especially faith-based associations such as the Salvation Army or the various Catholic relief agencies.

3. While debates about mutual aid and welfare turn around the differing potential roles of state and private organizations, how should one conceive of relations *between* states that mimic the function of mutual aid at the geopolitical level? Diplomatic programs like the Marshall Plan and its successor USAID, or more recently the Chinese "belt and road" initiative, borrow amply from the rhetoric of charitable aid and are proposed as gifts to other nations rather than loans that would require repayment. On the other hand, their intent is to assert economic and political influence by bringing the nations receiving the aid into the orbit of the nation providing the aid. And indeed, their domestic political support is acutely dependent upon the nationalistically self-serving underpinnings of such charity.

has long been noted, to function as a small dose of reform that is worth the prevention of the more fearsome alternative of revolution. Better to give the workers a little bit of job protection than to let them run the show!

With the demise of the communist alternative in the late 1980s, however, the need (or excuse) for the protective bulwark of the welfare state disappeared. As communism receded, neoliberalism roared in, fueling the decline in support for state-based aid by viewing its beneficiaries as not only an irredeemable expense to the state but as increasingly demotivated citizens by dint of their very dependency on state support. At the same time, the political and financial power of labor unions was diminished as the self-designated representatives of the traditional working class. The functional end of communism also enabled the rise of globalization as the worldwide dominance of capital and its concomitant practices of circumventing uncooperative as well as overly generous nation-states (both rogue states and welfare states in good international standing). The ability for capital to move jobs, resources, and supply chains across borders and around the world radically transformed the relation between worksite and economy. The holistic production model of the traditional factory, for example, where everything was built on location from available raw materials, gave way to today's manufacturing plants, which function merely as the final point of *assembly* for complex commodities (airplanes, automobiles, appliances) whose individual components are produced in multiple different locations around the world. In concert with the rise of telecommunication technologies and the World Wide Web, these developments further weakened the traditional proletariat and the kinds of labor practices and protections typically put in place at the local or national level. Not much in the way of labor negotiation or resistance could be mounted when whole industries could be readily moved to other locations or countries where wages were lower—and they are always lower somewhere.

Today, in the wake of a shrinking, stagnating proletariat, we see the concomitant growth of what has come to be called the precariat,⁴ a term made popular by Guy Standing to describe that “precarious” labor force behind what has elsewhere been called the gig economy, which treats workers as contingent or “independent contractors” with few or no rights to

4. While the word remains most associated with the work of Guy Standing, he himself indicates the origin of the term with French sociologists as well as its early use in Italian alternative May Day demonstrations. See Guy Standing, *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*, rev. ed. (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), p. 10.

claim traditional employee benefits, including standard hours, predictable income, health insurance, AD&D, or retirement plans. What the precariat would reveal instead is a world in which there is no longer proletarian wage labor (compensation based on time), nor fixed salary (managerial, professional), but only payments per individual service rendered. To the extent that the very term, precariat, is modeled directly on the preexisting category of the proletariat, its analysis all but requires a certain continuation of Marx's materialist approach, but as we shall see the definitional challenges of the new term end up questioning some of those materialist assumptions, particularly as concerns work in the digital environment.

As for the suggestive term "gig economy," that appears to have been coined by Tina Brown in a 2009 editorial in the *Daily Beast*, where she proclaimed, "No one I know has a job anymore. They've got gigs," defined as "a bunch of free-floating projects, consultancies, and part-time bits and pieces they try and stitch together" to make ends meet.⁵ Although Brown nowhere mentions it, the expression "gig" betrays its origin in the arts, specifically in popular music (and especially jazz), where payment is issued per individual performance. This might mean a concert, a theatrical performance, or a stand-up act, which is treated as a service rendered by an independent agent, who is not otherwise dependent upon the payor of the gig and remunerated on a one-time contractual basis. Such service providers are also often referred to as "independent contractors," a term that has come to bedevil discussions about the wider use of this "gig" metaphor to very different services and activities. In the actual functioning of the contemporary gig economy, however, a lot of time is spent on standby where the worker awaits assignment for gig work (a ride, a delivery, phone work, construction, or repair jobs, perhaps even an entire university course made available at the very last minute for a contingent lecturer) but is not paid until the gig itself is actually completed, or in some situations, at least undertaken. This differs dramatically, of course, from a traditional proletarian wage model where workers are steadily employed in tasks for a specified amount of time (eight hours per day, five days per week, in the classic version), or even in the competing model of payment by the piece, where one's income could in principle be increased by completing more tasks within a specified time, or just by extending the allotted time. Beyond

5. Tina Brown, "The Gig Economy," *Daily Beast*, January 12, 2009, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/the-gig-economy>.

these material conditions, part of being in the precariat is to live, so Standing describes, with the insecurity of uncertain work, and work typically of a kind that bears little or no occupational satisfaction and leads nowhere, often with zero-hour contracts that nonetheless require one to be “on call” for immediate task completion for periods of time that may far exceed the traditional job shift, at least if one wants to make a livable wage.⁶ But this “precarity,” it seems to me, is to be distinguished from traditional “gig” artists who stereotypically hold some “day job” that, while it may not be what they want to do (such as waiting tables or driving a cab), provides at least the basic income for them to pursue their real career aspirations as artists when not occupied by this work. The so-called gig economy turns this on end, since for gig or precariat workers, the day job, such as it is, is the gig itself, or at least indistinguishable from whatever other gig one might also be able to pick up beyond that one. To quote Brown again, “No one I know has a job anymore. They’ve got gigs.”

One holdover of the arts model not noted by either Brown or Standing is that performing a gig also typically presupposes ownership of some though usually not all required means of production (musical instruments and theater props, for instance, but not the concert hall or the theatrical venue). The gig concept, if not the word, could also then apply to the classic “professions” such as lawyers and doctors, who typically manage their own equipment, offices, and staff, and who independently charge fees based on a combination of services and time, referred to as “billable hours.” And as in the professions, there are indeed all manner of truly “independent” contractors who are independent to the degree they are not employed as workers by the folks to whom they provide services for an agreed-upon rate, namely, the contractual basis of the exchange between the buyer and the seller of services. Typically, these independent contractors are themselves their own businesses and not in anyone’s pay.

The expansion of the gig model to the wider field of those we consider members of the precariat, however, means that they are expected not only to meet some ongoing or repetitive work assignment on behalf of an entity that hires them but also to bring and maintain their own means of production (such as their own equipment and uniforms, or an auto for Uber and Lyft drivers, which they must also pay to license, maintain, and repair).

6. Guy Standing, *A Precariat Charter: From Denizens to Citizens* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), pp. 72–74.

And to the extent that the arrangement by which services are provided construes each gig as an independent contract, no assumptions need be made about the ongoing needs of the service provider in terms of the traditional benefits of sustained employment, including healthcare, vacation pay, or retirement plans. The gig economy thus operates under a pretense that the precariat is actually professional, not an unskilled reserve but a reputedly entrepreneurial set of service providers with their own means and demands. One wonders, though, to what extent this “professional” ideology also contrarily works to de-professionalize labor (and possibly the professions too!), while asserting the transfer of owned means to the worker as a freedom to contract, not unlike the “right to work” laws that have undermined both the solvency and the clout of labor unions by allowing individual workers to opt out of union membership or payment of dues. Under the gig economy, and in a kind of uncanny return to early industrial labor when workers were famously defined by Marx as those with nothing to sell but their own labor power, individual contractors today must bring not only their ability to work but also the means by which to work. At the same time, they find themselves in even greater competition with each other while the corporation controls brand name, access, and oversight of individual worker performances. Until recently, for example, one could not directly tip Uber drivers but only rate them online afterward, and their agglomerated score would be featured on their profile.

Finally, the gig economy can be viewed as an alternative mode of outsourcing, one that transcends the conventional cross-border forms of globalized exploitation not by seeking a competitive foreign environment with depressed wages but by unloading the very cost of both fixed and variable capital onto domestic workers, who have subsequently to overcome even more adversity to attain a living wage but with fewer or no benefits in sight; thus the onus of making profits falls to them. Is this why so many app-based companies, like Uber, cannot seem to make an actual profit while benefiting from revenue in the form of financialization, stock options, investment schemes, and so on? Has capital thus found a way to supersede the classic tendency of the rate of profit to decline by the development of digital instruments that effectively reduce the costs of both fixed capital in the form of equipment and variable capital in the form of employee benefits by not having either?



What are the consequences, then, for solidarity and mutual aid within the new parameters of this gig economy, which compounds contingent labor with a digital environment that atomizes and de-spatializes the workforce? It should be noted, first, that the development of mutual aid in the tradition of organized labor was facilitated by the site-based structure of industrial work, the factory, itself concentrated in populous urban environments and the locally based process of unionization—whose “locality” is proudly displayed as each union’s formal designation as the numbered “local” affiliate of the umbrella organization. For classic Marxism, the dialectic whereby the concentration of capital produces its own force of resistance in the concentration and concomitant “organizing” of labor power was also understood as the ultimate driver of revolution. Conversely, in Marx’s words, “the workers’ power of resistance declines with their dispersal.”⁷ Indeed, the site or space of work itself seems to lie at the very heart of the Marxian dialectic of class consciousness and struggle. It is where and how individual workers identify with each other, not as mere individuals exploited or alienated from the products of their labor, but as the collective subjectivity of a “class” socially and structurally defined by its place in the relations of production called capitalism. Moreover, it should also be understood that this class consciousness cannot be just an antagonistic one toward the capitalist but must also project a mutually sympathetic and identificatory relation between individual workers, hence the origin of “mutual aid” independent of class struggle per se, and even of unionization itself. Worker solidarity is just as key to a sense of class consciousness as is the dialectic of class struggle, perhaps even more so to the extent that identification with others in the same group is a condition for reciprocal care and hence mutual aid.⁸ The history of labor unions is unsurprisingly one of alternating emphases between the horizontal aim of building internal cohesion and concomitant mutual aid and the vertical demands of external confrontation or negotiation. For there to be collective bargaining with the employer, a sense of collectivity must first be established. The common space of the workplace, and by extension the local community, appears as a necessary though perhaps not altogether sufficient condition for collective identity to take place. Mere propinquity may not be enough,

7. Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1976), p. 591.

8. On this double cohesiveness of any collectivity, see also Sigmund Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1955), 18:65–143.

but without it collective solidarity is difficult to imagine, much less to achieve. While there are many cases of shop environments that do *not* organize as unions, one would be hard pressed to find a single case of a trade union successfully emerging in the absence of a common workplace, be it the transitory or occasional site of seasonal work, which is nonetheless lived as collective experience and thus a propitious source of worker solidarity.

What the postmodern development of the precariat and the gig economy creates is an increasingly dispersed and occasional workforce that eschews this possibility of site-based organization while lessening the sense of collectivity between individuals who may be said to work together but never meet each other physically, if at all. Furthermore, redesignating workers as independent contractors not only eliminates rising labor costs and state-regulated employee benefits but also discourages the possibility of collective consciousness among workers who rarely know or encounter each other and are assumed to be independent of each other. The combination of competition and isolation makes for unpredictable behavior for those caught in the precariat, although desperation, frustration, and anger cannot but rise to the surface, typically directed toward “others” who either enjoy or are assumed to enjoy some unfair competitive advantage, be they newly arrived immigrants or long-standing residents, varying minorities or majorities, domestic elites or foreign surrogates. Not knowing who or where one’s real competitors are fuels the rage and occludes the possibility of collective identification with one’s erstwhile “competitors,” all the while leaving management essentially unseen and off the hook. For this reason, Standing refers to the precariat in the very subtitle to his book as the “new dangerous class,” one that in more recent years we see associated, rightly or wrongly, with the rise of militant forms of populism. At the same time, though, the very extremity of the competition in isolation works against any durable collective action.

These obstacles to precariat solidarity are further aggravated by what Standing analyzes as the precariat’s triple provenance: (1) remnants of the old proletariat who view their change in status as a step down; (2) migrants and minorities whose engagement is weakened and threatened by their lack of civil and social rights, more denizens rather than true citizens; and (3) people with a high degree of education who in the past would have entered various salaried occupations and now find themselves critically underemployed in low-paying or low-level jobs far below their

professional training and who thus suffer from what Standing calls “status discord” or “status frustration.”⁹ The problem is that these three elements of the precariat are not only socially and culturally heteroclitite but under current circumstances irreducibly antagonistic to each other, meaning that the precariat is not only “not yet” a class, and perhaps not even what Standing calls a so-called “class in the making,” but a socioeconomic category that is essentially “at war with itself”:¹⁰

One group in it may blame another for its vulnerability and indignity. A temporary low-wage worker may be induced to see the ‘welfare scrounger’ as obtaining more, unfairly and at his or her expense. A long-term resident of a low-income area will easily be led to see incoming migrants as taking better jobs and leaping to head the queue for benefits. Tensions within the precariat are setting people against each other, preventing them from recognizing that the social and economic structure is producing their common set of vulnerabilities.¹¹

To the extent that the precariat accordingly “does not feel part of a solidaristic labor community,”¹² Standing sees it as “the new dangerous class,” one susceptible to multiple competing forms of extremism and populism,¹³ divided against itself as much as its members feel divided from the other sectors of society. Moreover, any potential feelings of mutual empathy or solidarity are blocked to the extent that “people in incipient competition conceal from others knowledge, information, contacts, and resources.”¹⁴

While Standing’s analysis plausibly describes the internal strife of the precariat in terms of its being rather optimistically a class “in the making,” one can wonder, on the one hand, whether such a self-divisive collectivity

9. Standing, *The Precariat*, p. 11.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 28.

11. *Ibid.*, pp. 28–29.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 14.

13. The distinction here between extremism and populism is my own. It seems clear that there are elite forms of extremism just as there can be moderate populisms. I disagree fundamentally with the currently common conjoining of the two terms, even if there are manifest examples of extreme or militant populisms. In fact, there are multiple competing forms of these two political tendencies. And I also disagree with the commonly held assumption that populism is necessarily a right-wing phenomenon. I discuss this issue more thoroughly in my “Challenges for a Left Populism: A Response to Chantal Mouffe,” *Global Discourse: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Current Affairs* 9, no. 2 (2019): 439–43.

14. Standing, *The Precariat*, p. 26.

could ever actually coalesce into a “class” with its own identity and consciousness, and, on the other, whether the traditional proletariat was all that different in terms of its own internal strife. Indeed, the myth of a unified, self-conscious proletariat is belied by the history of labor struggles that have pit worker against worker (in scab labor) and workers against their own unions (wildcat strikes), and different unions against each other (teamsters vs. service workers, for example).¹⁵ In countries with strong labor representation in politics, differing union organizations may vie for who speaks on behalf of working people, as in the case of the long rivalry in France between the Confédération Générale du Travail (CGT) and the Confédération Française Démocratique du Travail (CFDT). In countries with weaker labor politics, union actions may be directly limited, such as by the American Taft-Hartley legislation of 1947, which forbids, among other actions, general or solidarity strikes that may “imperil the national health or safety” as well as strikes by employees of the federal government. And then there is the long-standing conflict between the formalized working class and the so-called lumpenproletariat, which Marx refers to as a “reserve labor army” made up of the unskilled and unemployed, who can be enlisted at capital’s convenience to make up for labor shortages or to circumvent striking workers. Conversely, the formal proletariat can always be threatened with being tossed out of the workplace and unceremoniously dumped into its “lumpen” correlate. And while it would be tempting to see the contemporary rise of the precariat as the generalized expansion of the lumpenproletariat, I think it would be more plausible to view the former as the postmodern overcoming of the distinction between the formal and lumpen proletariats, a sublation that far from enabling some unified working-class consciousness creates even more division and dissent.¹⁶

How can this be, and what is the contemporary reality of the precariat really about? The classic distinction between proletariat and lumpenpro-

15. Not to mention the vexed question as to whether any concept of subjectivity can justifiably be attributed to a collective entity such as the proletariat. See Jacques Rancière, “La représentation de l’ouvrier ou la classe introuvable,” in *Le retrait du politique*, ed. Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe (Paris: Galilee, 1983), pp. 99–111.

16. Indeed, Brown’s initial description of the gig economy points to this disintegration of traditional job categories, although her dismay stems from the apparent *expansion* of the precariat into the kinds of jobs associated with higher income: “To people I know in the bottom income brackets, living paycheck to paycheck, the Gig Economy has been old news for years. What’s new is the way it’s hit the demographic that used to assume that a college degree from an elite school was the passport to job security” (Brown, “The Gig Economy”).

letariat is, among other factors, an issue of access to the workplace itself, with unions having a stronger interest in policing those boundaries than even management. Unions are above all concerned with protecting *their* workers, providing them security and mutual aid, and ensuring that their wages, benefits, and work conditions stand above that of workers outside the shop or factory. Management, on the other hand, requires the flexibility of moving labor in and out of the workplace as needed for the demands of production and profitability. Hence, the long-standing conflict between “closed” and “open” shops, the former requiring that all workers in a given workplace belong to the representing union as a prerequisite to employment. In the United States, one of the provisions of Taft-Hartley was precisely to outlaw closed shops, a stipulation subsequently broadened in many states by the passage of “right to work” laws that, as previously noted, have incrementally limited workplace requirements for union membership or even the paying of dues.

What the debate about open shops foretells is the postmodern dematerialization of the workspace itself, most especially in those societies where the basis of the economy has shifted from the production of goods to the delivery of “services,” and from the surplus value realized in the labor process to the financialization of capital itself. This de-siting of labor has been exponentially exacerbated by the app-based or digital platform organization of business, most evidently in the service industries, which have reorganized commercial activities not around a location—shop, factory, bank—but around the virtuality of an app or a website that in many cases is the *only* point of contact between workers and employer or between sellers and buyers. Add to this the resulting impact of not knowing one’s coworkers/competitors, with whom one no longer shares a common space, and we can foresee the steep challenge to collective action amid greater levels of internal strife between those ostensibly in the same employment.

All these tensions have been heightened by the unanticipated duration of the current COVID-19 pandemic, beginning with the increasingly fraught distinction drawn in differing jurisdictions between “essential” and “nonessential” work or between those still expected or required to work as before and those whose activities could be, if not entirely eliminated, at least done from the relative safety and comfort of one’s home via remote access technology. While this distribution appeared at first to designate primarily professional medical and emergency services, the ongoing duration of lockdowns and social-distancing protocols increasingly required the addition of major sectors of both the precariat and the traditional

working classes, including delivery drivers, transportation workers, grocery and warehouse employees, gardeners, janitors, repair crews, etc. Those, however, not included in these “essential” categories simply lost their work altogether, most unsparingly in the so-called “leisure” sector of the economy, such as dining, hospitality, and tourism, where precariat work abounds. While many professionals, including teachers, were able to transition readily if not seamlessly to remote work, guaranteeing their continued employment and income status, the precariat—already a “class” divided in itself—was further split by a steep fault line between those whose “essential” status *required* them to continue working under increasingly challenging and medically perilous conditions and those forcibly cast out of all productive labor. On *both* sides, the precariat has become even more precarious, either for an ever more risky and potentially lethal work environment or for the end of all work opportunities entirely. Moreover, the traditional site-based environment of the traditional proletariat as well as of the professional class (from factory to office) has either been crippled by COVID social-distancing restrictions or probably indefinitely de-sited to the digital screen-world of remote or virtual interaction.



With the decline of the opportunity for site-based organizing, and given the fundamentally riven status of the precariat, what conditions for collective action and mutual aid might there be? Can social media, for example, take the place of factory-based unionization by enabling both mutual aid and providing a platform for overcoming the exploitation of workers who are no longer paid by wages but by the gig? What are the challenges and opportunities for such a resistance in the context of recent legislative attempts to redefine the status of so-called “independent contractors,” a categorization that disclaims the traditional rights and benefits of employees by denying their very status *as* employees? To what extent can social media take up or not the organizational role of the workshop floor? One could point to the proliferation of “mutual aid” apps, Facebook groups, and Twitter feeds that span the gamut from ephemeral GoFundMe appeals to more organized attempts at structuring solidarity. It must also be said, though, that what social media might gain in speed and ease of dissemination also brings the concomitant perils of heightened surveillance, manipulation, and disinformation by both corporate and state actors *and* an even more increased sense of isolation between users, whose sole support

for solidarity may be limited to the mere “liking” of a tweet or post. And I have already indicated the political consequences of that sense of isolation and social atomization, which social-distancing protocols can only exacerbate. Moreover, while social media can, and indeed has, enabled various kinds of organized protest that can bring attention to the plight of gig workers, it seems less plausible that it can support a sustainable organization such as a traditional labor union, much less a broad-based and ongoing mutual aid organization. This is the scenario we have seen with popular movements such as Occupy Wall Street or Black Lives Matter in the United States or the *Gilets Jaunes* in France: much mass involvement with high-visibility events that eventually peter out with little actual change effected.¹⁷ We may be in a period of such sudden and periodic revolts whose effectivity is sharply limited by the absence of a sustainable organization that can convert short-term anger into longer-term change.

In terms of a specifically precariat advocacy, the example of the California-based website Gig Workers Rising (GWR) is instructive. Here is how this site describes itself:

Gig Workers Rising is a campaign supporting and educating app and platform workers who are organizing for better wages, working conditions, and respect.

We go to airports, parking lots, online groups—wherever drivers get together and invite them to join with other drivers, making sure they know that by standing together, gig workers have the power to redefine the gig economy.

Gig Workers Rising has organized countless meetings, listening sessions, protests and actions. We supported drivers who organized a national day of action on the day of Uber’s initial public offering. We also organized a 3-day caravan from LA to Sacramento, to demand that AB5 be passed so that drivers are no longer locked out of basic worker protections and rights.

We will continue supporting drivers as they organize for the wages, protections and voice in their jobs that all working people deserve.¹⁸

17. While the BLM protests in the wake of George Floyd’s murder seemed initially to buck this trend by urging a broader and more widespread social reckoning with race, it remains to be seen whether the scale of even this momentum can overcome institutional inertia to achieve durable change.

18. Gig Workers Rising website, <https://gigworkersrising.org>.

On the one hand, GWR engages creatively in classic labor organizing techniques: finding workers where they are, in this case various kinds of transit points (both actual and virtual) rather than classical loci of commodity production, i.e., not where you make things but where you wait on unpaid standby in anticipation of the next gig. Subsequent to these meetings and “listening sessions,” GWR has followed up with “protest and actions,” including a caravan to Sacramento, California, in support of a legislative bill to protect “basic worker protections and rights.”

Yet the collective action invoked seems more readily to recall the kinds of activities and public demonstrations typically associated with civil rights struggles and new social movements that garner public support for a cause rather than the more classical labor action of direct confrontation with a corporate employer. To what extent, it may be asked, can gig workers engage in an actual strike against a management whose entire foundation is virtual? The precariat experiences the full precariousness of work to the extent that its members are readily disposable in a way that skilled and specialized factory workers are not. In a classic strike action, all production at a worksite can be ground to a stop, while visible picket lines around it both make the workers’ action manifest and define a boundary that no union member (even of a totally different sector) will cross to facilitate the plight of management. While some picket actions have been launched against the physical headquarters, for example, of Uber in San Francisco,¹⁹ the functional ubiquity of such an app-based business in fact relegates any such site-specific labor activity to essential meaninglessness, except perhaps to the extent it can generate some positive but necessarily ephemeral media coverage. Management, on the other hand, can work freely from anywhere that has a viable internet connection, a difference rendered even more overt under the pandemic. As for striking workers, the effectiveness of their action is seriously limited by the fact that the app can keep functioning in their absence and “scab” drivers, for example, can be quickly hired with notoriously little review from among the throngs of those who have access to a car and a driver’s license. There remains, of course, the option of direct action to disrupt the app or the corporate website, but the former again faces the conundrum of hurting workers

19. “Uber, Lyft Drivers Rally in SF for Employee Protections,” *NBC-Bay Area*, August 27, 2019, <https://www.nbcbayarea.com/news/local/uber-lyft-drivers-rally-in-sf-for-employee-protections/148232/>.

more than management while the latter will only have fleeting value as publicity.

It is interesting, therefore, that the most forceful activity of GWR has been less engaging in direct action or negotiating with corporate entities than lobbying the state legislature for *legal* intervention on their behalf, specifically the passage of California AB5, a bill that strove to carefully distinguish the status of an employee from that of an independent contractor. The gist of the law is to restrict the definition of the latter only to those who meet the following “ABC test”:

(A) The person is free from the control and direction of the hiring entity in connection with the performance of the work, both under the contract for the performance of the work and in fact.

(B) The person performs work that is outside the usual course of the hiring entity’s business.

(C) The person is customarily engaged in an independently established trade, occupation, or business of the same nature as that involved in the work performed.²⁰

Yet the problem with the legislation is that despite its good intentions, it turns out not to be so easy after all to distinguish clearly a professional or artistic contractor from a precariat employee. Despite the apparent clarity and intuitive good sense of the ABC test, the actual text of the bill still had to list, and in some cases, analyze a host of different occupations that muddy the distinction between employee and contractor. Some of these “exceptions” were the result of advance lobbying by targeted groups, but subsequent to the law’s passage, it faced further scrutiny and various levels of resistance by all kinds of occupations that identify as independent contractors but were not explicitly included in the text of the law, such as freelance journalists and writers who sell or “contract” their stories to different publishing or mediatic venues, independent truck drivers, certain performance artists, manicurists, even yoga instructors.²¹ In *The Precariat*, Standing himself rather presciently cautioned against the lure of a

20. The easiest access to the text of AB5 is via the California State Legislature website, https://leginfo.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill_id=201920200AB5.

21. Margot Roosevelt, “New California Law AB5 Is Already Changing How Businesses Treat Workers,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 14, 2020, <https://www.latimes.com/business/story/2020-02-14/la-fi-california-independent-contractor-small-business-ab5>; and John Myers, “A Flood of Proposed Changes to California’s AB5 Awaits State

definitional solution, all the while trying to preserve the term: “There have been interminable debates over how to distinguish between those who provide services and those who provide service labor, and between those dependent on some intermediary and those who are concealed employees. Ultimately, distinctions are arbitrary, hinging on notions of control, subordination, and dependence on other ‘parties.’”²² We seem to have come to an impasse. If the distinctions are indeed “arbitrary” between independent contractors and precariat employees, then is not the very definition of this so-called class, which is at once “in the making” and “at war with itself,” itself arbitrary? The problem, then, is not merely whether we can arrive at a satisfactory definition of what the precariat is, but *qua* problem it serves as a sign that perhaps, no matter how we may try to define it, the precariat is not. In other words, there may be no precariat *per se*, and therefore it cannot actually organize, at least not as a “class” of people materially defined by a distinct economic status or position. Rather than a class of individuals, it seems we are struggling with a kind of relation, specifically one of “control,” of “subordination and dependence on other parties.” Such dependency on others necessarily implies at least some degree of precarity, which in turn raises the question of who would not be included: are not even the most independent of contractors dependent on someone or something, be it the fickleness of those buying their services, the fragility and insecurity of the supply chains one needs, or on the medium that enables the exchange between buyer and seller, whether that medium takes the form of a professional broker, an advertising agency, or an impersonal but inflexible app? What the question of the precariat raises, then, rather than the identity of a class of workers, is the future of work itself, or the work of the future as divorced from the traditional remuneration by wages and benefits and as fully embracing the hyper-capitalism of a market relation to work where productivity or creativity is valued only in the item-per-item exchange, in the general equivalent of any given gig with any other.

That being said, in the wake of AB5’s passage into law in January 2020, Uber and Lyft among others, in apparent admission of the catastrophic consequences that this law might hold for their bottom line, challenged the law in the courts while creatively finding other ways to keep

Lawmakers,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 28, 2020, <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2020-02-28/proposals-change-ab5-independent-contractors-labor-law-california>.

22. Standing, *The Precariat*, p. 18.

redefining their workers not as employees but as contractors, thus vitiating the very aim of the legislation, while adding provisions to allow drivers in given circumstances to modify their rates and refuse rides. Steve Gregg, the organizer of the GWR blog, took no time to retort: “This is a smokescreen to make it look like we have more say than we do.”²³ More ambitiously, Uber, Lyft, and related interest groups also sponsored a ballot measure, Proposition 22, in the 2020 California general election, the “Protect App Drivers and Services Act,” in order to undo the legislative impact of AB5. Their campaign website attacked the bill in the classic style stemming from the 1905 Supreme Court ruling in *Lochner v. New York*, which invalidated labor laws as infringement of an employee’s due process right to negotiate one’s terms of employment: “A new law jeopardizes the freedom of hundreds of thousands of Californians to choose to work as independent contractors,” while the Uber-sponsored proposition would “protect worker flexibility,” thus converting an issue of inequality into one of presumed “freedom.”²⁴

Unsurprisingly, the app-based companies’ inherent skill at communication and persuasive outreach contributed to their success in the ensuing election, with a strong approval margin of 59 percent (far outstripping support for Trump, for example, which peaked at only 34 percent in California).²⁵ The bipartisan appeal of Prop 22 is all the more impressive to the extent that the campaign was framed by a starkly partisan divide between the support of GOP leadership and candidates for the proposition, on the one hand, and vocal opposition to the proposition from the Democrats, on the other hand. Many Democratic voters nonetheless clearly supported the Silicon Valley initiative, despite contrary advice from their leadership. The result was a scrambling of the expected electoral outcomes in a way that reflects the ever-shifting politics of high technology itself, as it tries to weave a path between the cultural politics of the left and the fiscal conservatism and deregulating spirit of the right. Moreover, and beyond these mixed political aims, the outcome of the 2020 election revealed the unsuspected strength of corporate advocates to undo unfavorable social

23. Kari Paul, “Uber Changing App to Avoid Reach of California’s New Gig Workers Law,” *Guardian*, February 7, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2020/feb/07/uber-ab5-changes-drivers-california>.

24. Protect App-Based Drivers and Services website, <https://protectdriversandservices.com>.

25. California Secretary of State Alex Padilla, Statement of Vote: General Election, November 3, 2020, <https://elections.cdn.sos.ca.gov/sov/2020-general/sov/complete-sov.pdf>.

legislation by well-organized electioneering to a massive and in fact largely sympathetic electorate. While GWR and similar groups advocated loudly on behalf of workers whose income depends wholly or even primarily upon gig work, the Prop 22 organizers featured images and stories of ordinary-looking folks who, as in the traditional artists' sense of the gig, clearly had a supporting job and for whom the gig work was an attractive and easy way to earn *extra* income as a side occupation during their off-hours from their regular work. In an interesting reversal of the traditional artists' need to have a day job to support the passion of their off-duty gigs, the vision painted by the Prop 22 supporters was of normal employees, presumably wedded to their day job, for whom gig work is a source not of underpaid artistic and personal expression but actually a real side job enabling occasional extra income. For the traditional artists, the real vocation is the gig work in relation to which day work is merely a support; for the workers in the Prop 22 ads, the day work is the "real" job and gig work but a desirable though not necessary source of extra income. Who could object to such workers for whom their classification as independent contractors actually ensures and enables their own moonlighting desires, thus protecting their "flexibility"? On the other hand, while clear examples of both abound among gig workers, neither the traditional artist nor the occasional moonlighter correspond to the reality of many precariat workers for whom the gig work is their *only* job. So, if the precariat is itself a splintered entity as per Standing, we would have to say correlatively that not all gig workers are precarious, or even members of the precariat however we may understand it. Some really are "independent" contractors while others just as clearly are not. The gig economy, in other words, does not exactly map out onto the precariat per se, all of which further compounds the problems of collective solidarity and potential for mutual aid already exacerbated by the inability to map out the boundaries of what we consider to be the precariat itself.



We can treat two issues by way of conclusion. The first issue concerns the definitional problems of the precariat and the status of work itself under the conditions of the gig economy. The second issue would address the possibilities for mutual aid under these same conditions. With regard to the first issue, it might be helpful to consider "precarity" less as a noun than as a verb, that is, less the constitution of a "class" no matter how incoherent or

internally conflicted than as a general process by which the gig economy redefines what we mean by “work,” in ways that may be either advantageous or disadvantageous to different workers based on their particular circumstances. On the one hand, the expansion of the gig economy could be imagined as a kind of capitalist utopia, where a leveling of the relations between employers and employees is reconstituted as a universal and presumably equitable marketplace between buyers and sellers. On the other hand, the slippery slope of such an “uberization” could also conjure a world where teachers, health workers, and government employees, among others, could see their traditional benefits and job security disappear as they transition into becoming part-time, contingent, or “occasional” contractors. At either end of this spectrum, we would all become part and parcel of the universal precariat, for better or for worse. We are all vulnerable, but this raises even further challenges for organizing a precariat that verges on definitional mayhem, between its not including anyone to its including just about everyone.²⁶ And depending on the detail of these circumstances, the reconfiguration of one’s job as gig work could either be liberating or crippling. This ambiguity of outcome is what we see reflected in the contentiousness of the debates surrounding precariat labor and even the institutional question of *where* those debates should be adjudicated, as we can draw from the California example: internal negotiations, collective actions, public outreach, legislation, court rulings, state regulations, public referendums, etc.

The answer to our initial question regarding whether the precariat can indeed be organized does seem to be resolved in the negative. On the one hand, the precariat seems structurally incapable of a self-definition, much less one able to galvanize a collective identity or action. On the other hand, the gig economy is not unequivocal, between the freedom/demand to work where and when one wants and the economic or social constraints of being bound to the digital and impersonal algorithms of an app for one’s

26. I cannot forego the opportunity to signal the example of universities’ decades-long defunding of tenured faculty lines to hire ever more contingent lecturers, who now teach the majority of classes in American higher education. One might also note *a contrario* the surprising strength of unions at all educational levels K–16, which we can see as linked to the actual physical location of most schools and campuses. What will happen, however, with the spread of online education and the concomitant opportunity for further work-related stress, such as being on call 24/7 for student queries, which is already an expectation for many online instructors? It would not be surprising to see the education sector as a likely setting for workers struggles concerning the status of the precariat.

very survival and well-being. Where one stands between these is in turn a sign of inequality, both in terms of the resources (or lack thereof) one can bring to the table initially and in terms of one's concomitant potential for generating wealth on the basis of accumulated gigs. While the gig economy may be in its own way equivocal, no one would claim that it is egalitarian.

Which brings us back to the question of mutual aid in a work world where collective engagement and solidarity are no longer supported by spatial or social commonalities. If we are to follow Kropotkin's argument about the evolutionary necessity of mutual aid for human development, then we need to ask where new forms of mutual aid can arise in the context of the demise of shop- or local union-based aid, on the one hand, and of state welfare, on the other. Three possibilities appear on the horizon, involving respectively the client, the state, and the gig economy itself.

The first of these, quite evident on the GWR website, is that of involving not just other drivers but also the riders themselves in the support for gig workers' rights and needs, not just as in the traditional mobilizing of customers through boycotting campaigns but, more unusually, by engaging customers in the very organizational work of building union solidarity. In a sense, this move follows upon the kinds of initiatives that focus on such disparate issues as prostitution or tourism, where the consciousness-raising and solidarity of the "client" is leveraged through a reconfigured sense of what the "collectivity" in question really looks like. The GWR site has an entire page dedicated to enlisting riders in their struggle, including a set of tips for sympathetic riders to engage their drivers in "safe" conversation about their real working conditions along with a pitch to encourage the driver to visit the GWR site. But one doesn't need to be a go-between from driver to representing organization. One can also deal with drivers directly, as I often do, asking for their personal contact info and then engaging them directly when needed, thus bypassing the entire corporate app structure. In this sense, these workers can become truly "independent" contractors not beholden to any explicit or occult form of corporate management. Whereas in the traditional capitalist economy, the struggle had to be between the producers (workers) and those who controlled the means of production (capitalists), with the consumer as secondary, resistance to the inequities of the high-tech gig economy can perhaps best take the form of a worker-consumer alliance against those who design and control the apps. It also suggests that what may really matter is less that

the disparate, scattered, and self-conflicted entity we call the precariat find a way to organize itself than that there should be the establishment of a much broader social consensus in support of whatever we call the precariat as “the common set of vulnerabilities” that we all share, at least potentially. And beyond the question of collective advocacy, this reconfigured solidarity can also offer new mechanisms for mutual aid itself, as in direct appeals to riders for help with issues facing drivers. Thus, the loss of common space and interpersonal contact between workers is overcome in the personal contact between service worker and customer, be that the physical contact of one’s doorstep or the shared space of a vehicle. On the other hand, the reality of the recent California elections suggests the still tenuous character of such common cause, and the as yet unclear potentiality for forms of mutual aid between workers and customers.

Whence one alternative to the now-failed legislative band-aid of trying to help the precariat by ever more carefully defining relevant job categories, along with their specific rights and privileges, is to think beyond any specific class and address the vulnerabilities faced by the precariat at the level of the state in terms of providing a guaranteed minimum salary and benefits for all members of a given society. But this is also to go well beyond the traditional welfare state by guaranteeing one’s basic livelihood rather than simply a safety net for unanticipated hardship. Indeed, this is the solution proposed by Standing himself in his 2017 follow-up, titled clearly enough in the British edition as *Basic Income, and How We Can Make It Happen*, and with the same title but with a significantly revised subtitle in the American edition as *Basic Income: A Guide for the Open-Minded*.²⁷ Work would then become, as in Marx’s utopian aspiration, a self-fulfilling activity, a free expression of human creativity rather than necessity, art instead of labor. But in addition to the obvious questions of economic viability (such as the risk of a baseline inflation that would adjust to the rising level of income distribution, or alternatively the lack of takers for jobs that are undesirable but socially necessary), one must ask

27. Guy Standing, *Basic Income, and How We Can Make It Happen* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2017); Standing, *Basic Income: A Guide for the Open-Minded* (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 2017). Among many others, also see Philippe Van Parijs and Yannick Vanderborght, *Basic Income: A Radical Proposal for a Free Society and a Sane Economy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2017); and David Pan, “Economy and Ecology: Federal Populism and the Devil in the Details of Universal Basic Income,” *Telos* 191 (Summer 2020): 137–62.

if this is even psychologically possible. Would we be in thrall to a humanity increasingly defined by its very laziness—which some would argue is perhaps not so bad?²⁸ Or would we engage in productive activity (call it work, or art, or even leisure) only if coerced by the exigencies of mere survival, of bare existence? In a sense, we don't know and cannot really know since this has never been tried on the scale proposed by advocates of basic income. Such a revamped welfare state might very well preempt other forms of mutual aid, which raises a different set of questions. In this vision, we can all do “gigs” in the artistic sense and without the tedium of having to rely on a day job, but then these freedoms would come at the expense of a greatly expanded state. Alternatively, though, the application of a truly universal basic income might also free the state of the need for its bureaucratic trappings and allow other kinds of supportive interaction outside its purview.²⁹

Finally, a third possibility could also be emerging, which would take the form of extending the gig economy into mutual aid itself, again if we consider the prevalence of apps like GoFundMe or Kickstarter. A quick review of the Apple app store reveals over a dozen such apps, as well as businesses like Mutual Aid Labs LLC that design apps for “cost effective solutions” to emergencies. The question remains, though, of whether the “one-off” or gig-like expression of mutual aid can evolve into something more organizationally sustainable, rather than an appropriately precarious form of mutual aid for a precariat unlikely to ever develop a fully mutual sense of itself. On the other hand, the gig expression of mutual aid takes place independently of the precariat, whatever we may take it to be, and can serve in a punctual fashion as mutual aid between *any given* internet interlocutors.

Thus, while the gig economy may generate more precarity throughout the workforce writ large, and as such offers a challenge to traditional forms of mutual aid, the kinds of mutual aid it can foster could transform the classic basis of worker solidarity materialized in local trade unions into novel interactions between workers and clients. Or it could encourage a general expansion—even a functional and conceptual reconfiguration—of

28. Eugène Marsan, *Éloge de la paresse* (1926) and Paul Lafargue, *Le droit à la paresse* (1880), reprinted as a single volume (San Bernardino: FV Éditions, 2012).

29. I thank Stephanie Weiner for this intriguing suggestion. I also thank the students in my 2020 seminar at UC Irvine on Political Economy for their input into my thinking through the questions I raise here.

state welfare in the form of universal basic income. Or it could enable its own extensive if ephemeral set of gig-like interactions, promoting mutual aid in specific circumstances and needs occurring between specific individuals or groups with their own specific concerns and not otherwise connected by common space, occupation, or civil status.

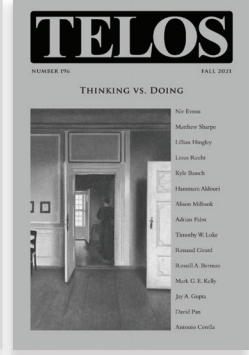
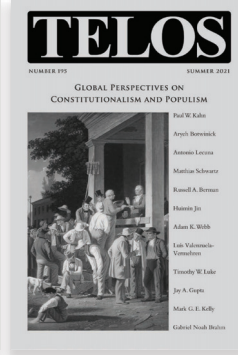
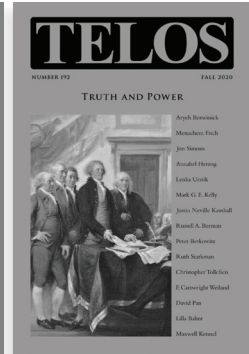
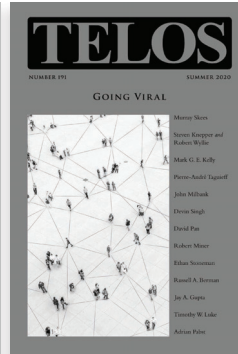
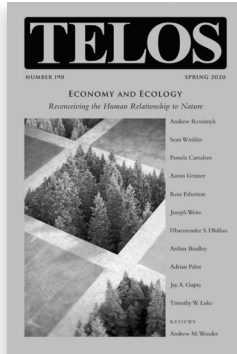
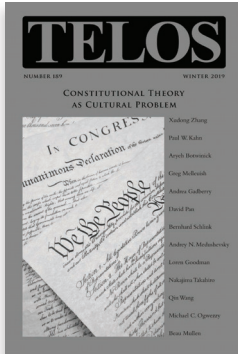
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