CALL FOR PAPERS

Addressing Labour’s Precariousness in Sri Lanka and Beyond

1st and 2nd February 2018
ICES

Taking the relationship between labour and precarity as its central focus, this conference seeks to inquire how labour’s precariousness is produced in Sri Lanka and the wider South Asian region. It aims to examine the national, regional and global processes that contribute to this precarity and to understand how workers experience its effects. Global debates about precarious labor have framed it in multiple ways: as an outcome of neoliberal reforms related to labor market flexibilization that shift risks and responsibilities from employers to workers (Standing 2011, ILO 2012); as a life without the promise of stability (Tsing 2015); as a condition of millennial capitalism (Shaw and Byler 2016); and more broadly as a politically induced state produced by failing social and economic networks that differentially expose vulnerable populations to injury, violence and death (Butler 2009).

In Sri Lanka, decades of neoliberalism coupled with historical inequalities and changes in political economic and social fault lines have profoundly transformed labour and wage relations. On one hand, recent years have seen the weakening of existing legal protections and the erosion of possibilities for collective bargaining related to wages, rights, entitlements, and labour conditions that were hard won by Sri Lanka’s once robust labour movements. On the other hand, the global ascent of the ‘gig economy’ and its flexibilization of labour is creating new kinds of precarious workers with temporary jobs delinked from local employment protections and welfare guarantees. Alongside these new forms of work, old and enduring forms of precarious labour continue to exist, unrecognized as work by Sri Lanka’s labour laws and overlooked by the island’s labour movements. With increasing intensity, a wide range of workers across Sri Lanka are experiencing precarity, ranging from those who were guaranteed protections by the state to those who were never brought within the fold of the island’s labour laws.

As a starting point, our conference seeks to highlight the critical importance of revisiting our existing conceptions of labour, and of work itself. Popular and scholarly debates about
labour have been dominated by a particular construction of the worker: as an employee with a wage, a contract, and a fixed place of employment. This construction of a worker shapes labour laws, regulatory policies, employment practices, advocacy strategies and activism, in Sri Lanka and globally. Yet, such conceptions of workers exclude a vast number of those who engage in forms of precarious labour: mine workers, domestic workers, artisans, manpower workers, drivers, those whose work is linked to caste-based occupations, and those who work for shares rather than wages, to name a few. The conference will look at how precarious labour is produced and exacerbated through hierarchies that are class and caste-based, ethnicized and gendered. It will aim to address the effects precarious labour has on workers, in particular, the issues they face in terms of livelihoods, health, debt, as well as their struggles to mobilize and seek legal recourse.

We seek to open a collaborative dialogue on precarious labour that brings together scholars, practitioners, and policy-makers. The conference aims to fill existing knowledge gaps, develop an agenda for further research, foster conversations between scholar, practitioner and policy-maker, and generate recommendations for strengthening policy and legal frameworks. We invite papers, films, and expressions of interest in all three languages from researchers, academics, activists, unionists, documentary filmmakers and artists that address the following themes:

**Conceptualizing Work and Workers**
To understand precariousness in labour today, we must interrogate how work and workers have been conceptualized in Sri Lanka and beyond. How have public and private institutions, the state, trade unions and workers themselves come to define ‘work’ and ‘workers’? What forms of work unsettle the idea of labour as linked to a wage, a contract, a location and a direct employee-employer relationship? We seek to conceptualize precarious work in Sri Lanka by documenting a wide array of work that involves risk, uncertainty and insecurity, often without guarantees of fixed and regular wages and with unstable arrangements such as shareholding, commissions and flexible commitment that fall outside the purview of traditional labour protections.

**State, Law, and Economics**
We seek to understand how legal and economic histories and sensibilities have driven who gets counted as a worker and how that affects consequent protections offered to workers by the state and others. Do the legal and economic parameters defining and governing the definition of ‘a worker’ reproduce and sustain labour’s precariousness? What drives certain forms of work, such as housework, sex work and agricultural work, to remain outside of the purview of state regulations? What are the contours of the current unequal contestation between capital and the state on the one hand, and unions and workers on the other, over ‘reform’ of labour laws?

**Experiences of Precarity and Precarious work**
How do workers experience uncertainty and risk and how are these experiences shaped and worsened by wider social inequalities based on ethnicity, class, caste, religion, gender, and sexual orientation? We also seek to understand how precarity is experienced by different
occupations, sectors of work (fishing, mining, work with hazardous waste, agriculture, etc.), and types of work arrangements (sharecropping and shareholder arrangements, non-contractual, non-waged, commission-based work, gig economies, etc.).

**Workers’ Struggles and Collective Mobilization**
We seek to understand how workers exercise solidarity, what forms of collective action and bargaining they rely on, and how they form coalitions. What is the nature of the challenges faced by agitating workers? What new forms of solidarity and mobilization are emergent or are called for, both for ‘unorganised’ workers as well as for workers in the organised sector? How can we leverage international solidarity and build in international experience?

Please send abstracts or briefs about your work in not more than 300 words and a biographical sketch of no more than 100 words to the conference organizers Annemari de Silva (annemari.ices@gmail.com) and Nethra Samarawickrema (nethras@stanford.edu) by the 31st of October. Successful applicants will be notified by the 30th of November. Consequent drafts of papers and presentations will be expected by the 20th of January 2018.

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