



## 11<sup>th</sup> ANNUAL GLU CONFERENCE

### ***“Structural Power, Zimbabwean Migrant Labour and the South African Private Security Industry”***

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#### **Abstract**

*Low skilled labour migrants who occupy bottom ends of labour markets in host countries remain trapped in contours of exploitation and precariousness. With the increasing erosion of working class traditional sources of power, a characterising feature of the prevailing neoliberal order, the agency of low classes as they resort to alternative sources of power requires a renewed and thorough investigation. Drawing on data collected through an ethnographic experience and in-depth interviews collected between August 2014 and September 2015 on a purposively selected sample of Zimbabwean migrant security guards in the Private Security Industry in South Africa’s Gauteng Province, this paper analyses the agency of migrant security guards as functioning decision makers in their own lives not mere passive victims of the ills of capitalist exploitation. The way power is exercised by migrant security guards, either individually or collectively goes beyond the common organising strategies celebrated in various academic debates. Organising by this particular group follows a more natural way, enhanced by their migrant statuses and social networks. Under circumstances where low classes treat wage employment instrumentally, as a source of livelihood and a tool for meeting varied socio-economic and political objectives, it becomes necessary to devise actions that are both strategic and convenient enough to overcome daily precarious situations. These strategies are not aimed at directly confronting capital for such an attempt is synonymous with tempering with their livelihood source. The unusual position that they occupy as providers of labour and potential labourers give them a leverage towards negotiating for better working conditions and improved wages.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Migrating for work as necessitated by the interplay between globalisation and neoliberal policies' destructive to social reproduction is increasingly becoming a growing global trend. However, low skilled labour migrants remain trapped in contours of exploitation and precariousness in host countries. Their struggles continue to highlight ways through which capital exploit labour through immigration status and the social relations of gender, race and class globally.

Notoriously optimistic about the agency of the working class in a capitalist society, Marx predicted that members of the working class would become increasingly subject to common conditions of degrading work and poverty, and increasingly brought into contact with each other through socialized production. Generating a class consciousness of the unjust economic structure, he believed these conditions would propel the industrial working class or proletariat into collective struggles to replace capitalism with socialism. He was however less optimistic about the agency of the unorganised and unpolitical lower classes of society who are not interested in revolutionary advancement, the lumpenproletariat. In contemporary sociological analysis, the legacy of the lumpenproletariat as a marginalised and excluded layer of the working class is apparent in concepts such as the "underclass" and "declass," the "working poor" and "sub-proletariat," and now the "precariat" and the "informal proletariat" (Offe 2011:466).

Low skilled migrants who occupy bottom ends of labour markets in host countries around the world continue to strategise in the face of exploitation and oppression and often find themselves on the frontlines of struggles against precarity, austerity and other forms of capitalist exploitation which impact all working people (Choudry and Hlatshwayo 2016). Despite powerful external forces shaping the experiences of these workers, they are not passive victims of unseen influences and are, in fact, functioning decision makers and actors in their own lives (Hodson, 2001:50). Giddens (1987) conceptualizes individuals as knowledgeable reflexive agents who can justify their actions and have the capability to act and react rationally to the problems confronting them.

With the increasing erosion of traditional sources of power, particularly through collective action (union organising), I make an attempt in this paper to explore alternative sources of power utilised by low classes (migrant security guards) as actors in their own lives. Before turning to these arguments, a background on migration and resistance is necessary. I see my contribution in this paper as building on this scholarship (migration and working class power) but also taking it forward to consider recent developments in migrant labour and the strategies that minority groups employ to fight exploitative structures.

Firstly, I foreground migrant labour in an attempt to go beyond studies that emphasizes the precarious experiences of labour migrants in traditional sectors like construction, agriculture and mining. (Bezuidenhout and Buhlungu, 2010; Crush, 1999). Secondly, by highlighting working class agency, I go beyond a dearth of data and information that tend to pacify migrants as passive subjects and zero-actors who are unable to challenge structures that perpetuate their precarious lives. The ability of individuals to influence their success is generally glossed over in academic debates on precarity. Whilst literature on precarity emphasises on what precarious workers are and what they are not, there is little room for agency in explaining how precarious workers navigate precarious conditions because precarity is often conceptualised as a lack of power/abilities to act. Standing, 2011; Barchiesi, 2011 and Webster, 2006 for example talk about how work and life in general is precarious and people are caught in precarity traps. These workers are defined by the things they lack (income security, labour market security, employment security, job security, skills reproduction security) and the things they do not do (joining trade unions).

### ***Migration patterns and dynamics***

Studies that have focused on human migration at a global scale (see Cohen, 1987; Castles and Miller, 2009) have tended to portray migration as moving in one direction, from poor countries in the Global South to rich countries in the Global North, particularly for economic gains. However, migration is not only a South-North phenomenon. The movement of people is being evidenced across and among Southern countries, and within these countries. In fact, Southern Africa has a long history of

population mobility, both internal and external. According to Segatti (2011), Southern Africa is emerging as an epicenter of African migration.

The contemporary period of neoliberal globalisation has coincided with the growth of the service industry globally. Research shows that the PSI is one of the fastest growing and job creating industries across the world (Born, Caparini and Cole, 2007). According to the Human Rights Watch (1998), the service sectors in South Africa notably security, catering and domestic work are increasingly witnessing a proliferation of migrant workers from neighbouring countries such as Zimbabwe, Lesotho, Swaziland and Mozambique. In South Africa, the PSI is a consequence of the country's social inequality, violence history and inadequate police force. Statistics suggest that the number of registered active security guards (411 109) is more than double the South African Police (Hartley, 2011:3). However, the PSI is very popular with unfair labour practices and precarious forms of employment such as long working hours, low pay, employment instability, higher accident rates and fewer opportunities for acquiring skills and promotion.

### ***Resistance/Working Class Power***

Chun (2009) argues that the contemporary period of global capitalism and its associated practices of labour deregulation, privatization and flexibility is synonymous with the deterioration of working class organisations globally, and has rendered marginalised workers particularly susceptible to precarious and unfavorable working conditions. Compared to workers in full-time and permanent jobs, workers in flexible employment relationships usually receive fewer benefits and statutory entitlements, are subject to a greater risk of employer abuse and are less likely to be unionised. However, struggles, organising and resistance of migrant workers are a vital part of a social and political force in a global power struggle.

Since the 70s, the ascendance of neoliberal economic policies has weakened trade unions, eroding and declining their relevance. Indeed, many trade unions have struggled to organise rank-and-file militancy due to deterioration in workplace conditions and the systematic erosion of workers' power. Similarly, the challenge of organising migrant

security guards in South Africa remains a reality. Security unions like SATAWU<sup>1</sup> like other unions are not spared from the general organising challenges. Generally, the level of unionisation among vulnerable workers and immigrant workers occupying precarious positions is very low or close to non-existent. According to Standing (2011), lacking representation security is one of the defining features of those in the precariate.

According to Silver (2003), the growth of global capitalism has seen the emergence of new forms of power on the part of the working class in their battle to secure economic and political concessions from the state and capital. One common form of structural power used by migrant security guards is the working class bargaining power. This form of structural power is mobilised by the refusal to continue working and, in addition to strikes and sit-ins, can also encompass covert forms of industrial conflict such as sabotage or go-slows. For migrant security guards, a strategic position they occupy gives them a leverage to interrupt or restrict the valorisation of capital. In winter and festive seasons when migrants take time off work to spend time with their relatives, families and friends, the demand for security services is generally high. In some instances, the harsh weather conditions in winter force these workers to resort to other sources of income. Some will just decide to fake illnesses or simply withhold their labour.

Under circumstances of a lacking of associational power (worker representation), as is the case with migrant security guards, Chun (2009) argues that marginalised groups can still mobilise other effective strategies to counter structural barriers. The withdrawal of labour is a common and effective strategy used among low classes and in some sectors like agriculture, this is mainly applicable harvesting seasons (Wilderman 2015). By stopping work, wage-earners can cause major costs for entrepreneurs and force them to offer better remuneration or working conditions. The way in which power is exercised by migrant security guards is more individualistic and goes beyond the traditional forms of collective action.

The use of working class bargaining power has been effective in other sectors with high labour productivity and highly-integrated production processes. In these production lines, work stoppages have an impact that goes far beyond the work of just those on

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<sup>1</sup> South African Transport and Allied Workers' Union

strike (Silver 2005: 31). Latest developments are increasingly showing that workplace bargaining power is not only exercised in the direct production process and labour intensive sectors. Writing about employees in service sectors like health (care and nurseries) and education, Cepok for instance argues that workers have the ability to exercise what he termed *manipulative power*, i.e disrupting the ability of other workers to perform their wage-earning work and as such influence other sectors of the economy (Cepok 2013: 322).

Interestingly for migrant security guards, they have the ability to withhold not only their own labour but the labour of other potential employees. This is enhanced by the fact that employers rely heavily on '*snowball recruiting*'<sup>2</sup>. Knowing very well that their employers rely on their networks for accessing new recruits, migrant security guards, who in this case act as intermediaries, capitalise on their position and turn these networks to their benefits. By controlling labour supply, they determine who should be hired and under what conditions. They often use new recruits as leverage for improved working conditions including salaries.

Migrant networks are used as leverage for negotiating better wages and conditions of work. In Fiske's words, migrant security guards capitalise on "cracks that particular conjunctions open in the surveillance of the proprietary powers... (1989:37). This is a clear indication that despite working within an exploitative system, migrant security guards are not passive victims of unseen influences and are, in fact, functioning decision makers and actors in their own lives (Hodson, 2001:50).

The actions of migrant security guards are supported by the network theory which stresses the importance of interpersonal ties among migrants in general and labour migrants in particular in accessing job opportunities on the labour market. According to Massey et al (1993:448), sets of interpersonal ties connect migrants in their origin and destination countries through ties of kinship and shared community origin. It is through these set of connections which are informal, not necessarily formal channels that migrants find their way into the PSI labour market. By law, foreign migrants without permanent residence status are not allowed to work as security guards in South Africa according to the Private Security Industry Regulatory Authority (PSIRA).

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<sup>2</sup>Recruiting from the networks of their employees

Finding employment through social networks, particularly for migrant labourers is not a new phenomenon. In countries like the United States, United Kingdom and China among others, research has also shown that a majority of job seekers secure work through information gathered through their social network ties (Smith and Powell, 2005). Employers also benefit from hiring through these networks. Writing about Mexican migrants in America, Rodriguez observed that employers who hire through social networks of their immigrant workers “save on the costs of managing and maintaining a labour force, as the labour costs are reduced to mainly paying for work performed” (Rodriguez 2004: 454-455 cited in Smith and Powell 2005). Just like in business terms where social networks reduce the complexity of risk taking by providing a structure that matches known investors, snowball recruiting in the PSI is cheap and reduce the risk of hiring criminals and thus most preferred.

It suffices to note that contemporary labour struggles particularly for marginalised workers are less influenced by traditional organising struggles, through unions. Contrasting radical claims that precarious workers devise alternative strategies and sources of power with an attempt to circumvent existing rules and procedures to reconfigure the relations of power; the findings from my study revealed that migrant security guards are less interested in challenging powerful structures (state and capital) that perpetuate their insecurities.

### ***Understanding work***

To understand why migrant security guards do not revolt directly against an existing exploitative structure (capital), one needs to treat struggles over meaning and values as separate and unrelated to struggles over the distribution of power and resources. In the words of Piore (1979), these workers view wage employment ‘purely instrumentally’, serving a crucial means through which the goals of a basic life are achieved. One respondent clearly said;

*The manliness of a man lies in his ability to provide for his family. For a man to be treated with integrity, honor and respect, he has to work (Interview, Arty).*

The idea here is to understand wage employment from the perspective of those who continue to rely on it as a source of livelihood. In as much as wage employment is exploitative and the conditions of employment in the PSI extremely bad, it is unjust to

attach a tag of passivity on low classes as if they cannot act and confront systems that perpetuate their precariousness. For these workers, wage employment provides them an opportunity to meet their varied socio-economic and political objectives. To this effect, fighting these structures is synonymous with tempering with their source of livelihood. As such, the way power is exercised by these workers either individually or collectively is through tactical ways that are convenient enough to overcome everyday precarious situations.

An understanding of migrant security guards' level of consciousness is much closer to the reality of their lived experiences and provides a better understanding of their actions, behaviour and how they interpret situations. To borrow from Weber's notion of *verstehen*, meanings of actions can be understood in terms of the motives that give rise to them.

### ***Conclusion***

This paper has shown that everyday powerless people are active actors who devise different strategies to act within a situation, act by and make do. As workers with absolutely no associational power and collective representation through unions, migrant security guards capitalise on their structural position, as individuals who link employers and potential employees. This unusual position that they occupy give them a leverage towards negotiating for better working conditions and improved wages. Hiring from outside these networks by employers is risky. It is however important to note that the withholding of other people's labour is not a strategy employed with the intention of standing up to institutional powers, but merely to 'turn the tables on the strong' (Crosthwait 2014). Their treatment of wage employment as 'purely instrumental' explains in detail why these workers do not directly confront capital, but instead, identify fissures within the system that they capitalise on.



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