

Labour & Empire Working Group

Precarity and Scale in the History of Colonial Labour

ELHN Conference, University of Barcelona
June 16-19, 2026

Following up on a long-term project on working-class anti-imperialism, explored in publications (Beliard, Kirk 2021) and at conferences (most recently in Bristol 2023 and Uppsala), the ELHN Labour & Empire Working Group moves towards a renewed focus on colonial labour systems for the 2026 ELHN conference in Barcelona.

Colonial labour has played a crucial role in the formation of global capitalism. As historian Robin Blackburn points out, the forced labour of enslaved Africans represented a vital lever to capitalist expansion (2024); other scholars, meanwhile, have drawn links between Marxist theories of primitive accumulation and settler colonial practices of enclosure and land privatisation (Guernsey 2024, Issar 2021). Drawing on a growing body of work, the Labour & Empire Working Group's 2026 panels aim to provide a political economic analysis of colonial labour regimes, and scrutinise how the study of colonial labour conditions aids a deeper understanding of global political economic developments.

We seek papers that provide in-depth analyses of labour in colonial contexts, while also embedding these analyses in a wider context of transnational, intercolonial or colonial-metropole economic relations. **The question of scale, a prevalent topic in global history, is central here:** papers that embed labour in the interplay of global, local, national and transnational dynamics are welcomed. How, we want to ask, did local labour conditions fit into wider divisions of labour? To what extent did changing labour divisions in the metropole affect labour in the colony, and vice-versa? A multi-scalar lens is of particular interest to the working group.

A second topic we aim to explore is *precarity*. Following a broader discussion about structures of precarity for workers around the world (Lesutis 2021, Ba' 2023), the working group seeks papers that apply the - still often Eurocentric - analysis of precarious labour to the colonial world. From chattel slavery to transportation schemes of undocumented labour migrants, colonial labour has long been marked by particularly precarious working conditions. What forms of precarity have been attached to colonial labour practices over time? To what economic ends has colonial labour been 'made' precarious? What methods did colonial, imperial and capitalist regimes introduce to entrap labourers into forms of unfree and capitalised precarious work - and how did social stratification on the basis of race, gender, nationality and geography relate to the disciplining and 'precarising' of colonial labour?

We welcome 250-word proposals for papers which address one or more of the following themes:

- Analyses of colonial labour at different scales: local, national, imperial, global;
- Different modes of precarious labour in colonial contexts;
- (Changing) labour divisions and labour regimes in colonial contexts;
- Ideas of free and unfree labour;
- Colonial labour regimes as embedded within wider global systems and divisions of labour;
- Intersecting social stratifications (i.e. race, gender, class) and their relation to conditions of labour;

- Continuities and breaks between chattel slavery and subsequent regimes of colonial labour;
- Production, circulation and the colonial context;
- The interplay between land and labour in colonial contexts;
- Opposition to unfree and indentured labour both within and across empires;
- Developments in the historiography of colonial labour with regards to issues of scale: how to intersect local and global analyses, how to incorporate the role of the imperial and the national in micro-history analyses, and so on;
- Colonial labour and the debate on the origins of capitalism.

Proposals should be submitted to labourempire.elhn@gmail.com by **June 30 2025**.

For more information about the ELHN Labour&Empire group and its activities, please visit: <https://socialhistoryportal.org/elhn/wq-empire>.

Bibliography

Stefano Ba', 'Precarity and Processes of Classification: Conflictual Concepts of Class, Labour-Power and Caring', *Alternative Routes* 33.1 (2023): 56-68

Yann Béliard, Neville Kirk (eds.), *Workers of the Empire, Unite: Radical and Popular Challenges to British Imperialism, 1910s to 1960s* (Liverpool University Press, 2023)

Robin Blackburn, *The Reckoning: From the Second Slavery to Abolition, 1776–1888* (Verso Books, 2024)

Paul J. Guernsey, "Reframing So-Called Primitive Accumulation for Settler Colonial Contexts: Ancestral Enclosures and Spatial Conceptions of History." *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 35.2 (2024): 138-156.

Siddhant Issar, "Theorising 'racial/colonial primitive accumulation': Settler colonialism, slavery and racial capitalism." *Race & Class* 63.1 (2021): 23-50.

Gediminas Lesutis, *The Politics of Precarity: Spaces of Extractivism, Violence, and Suffering* (Routledge, 2021)