

CALL FOR PAPERS

Special issue on conditions of employment and labor regulation in supply chains – evidence-based and pro-worker perspectives

There has been a plethora of regulatory attempts to address substandard conditions of employment in supply chains that span over several decades and range from unilateral prohibition of goods made by child and slave labor entering the US (Gottwald, 2016); to social clauses in trade agreements, such as in the Generalised Systems of Preferences of the US and the EU (Compa & Vogt, 2001; Frundt 1998; Tsogas, 2001), in NAFTA (Compa 1995, 1997, Cook & Katz 1994, Elliot 2003), and in other Free Trade Agreements (ILO 2015); to International (or Global, as known in North America) Framework Agreements (IFA/GFAs - Lévesque, et al, 2018; McCallum, 2013); and various company-level CSR-inspired efforts.

However, much of the research on conditions of employment in supply chains focuses on procedural and administrative aspects of the agreements, on semantics and technicalities, as well as on power relations between firms and among various stakeholders. Employment relations concerns remain often a secondary issue and much less attention is being given to what are the actual impacts of various interventions and how conditions could actually improve. Moreover, in academic literature the voices of workers in supply chains are seldomly heard, and much less so the voices of women (of color), whom often constitute the vast majority of the workforce. For example, only a handful of studies have considered it worthwhile to interview and hear the experiences of workers in Bangladesh (Kabeer and Mahmud, 2006; Kabeer et al., 2019).

Consequently, for this special issue we wish to elicit submissions that approach work in supply chains in a radically different perspective than in conventional academic literature. We seek work that focuses on evidence, rather than on merely arguing the literature; work that offers empirical content (“from the ground”) and work that searches for and examines evidence of actual improvements (or deterioration) of condition of employment in supply chains. Also, work that brings in pioneering critical, intersectional and philosophical perspectives and does not merely offer an exegesis of capitalism (nor a description of labor processes).

Specifically, we call for papers that address any of the following issues:

1. *New theoretical insights on conditions of employment and labor regulation in supply chains.* Current frameworks used in the study of supply chains – such as the global production network (GPN) and global value chain (GVC) analyses and their immediate predecessor, global commodity chains (GCC) – tend not to focus on the producers of value in supply chains. Reversing this trend and taking a pro-worker perspective, how could we improve our theoretical understanding of supply chain work? In simple words, what theoretical paradigms could we use

that have as their focal point the individual worker (the philosophical subject) and are emancipatory in their origin, in the sense that they are striving for social and economic betterment of the lives of the producers of value in capitalism, globally. For example, how could the intersectionality discourse – the “basement” and the “intersection” metaphors (Hill Collins and Bilge, 2016; Karastathis, 2013) – help us to draw attention to gender, race, social status, and age of workers in supply chains, as these intersected characteristics are stacked into hierarchical power structures of subordination?

2. *Impact on workplaces and perspectives from below.* How do various regulatory interventions impact on conditions of employment? What evidence is there of any actual and verifiable improvements (or deteriorations) in conditions of employment? For example, do ILO work programmes improve livelihoods of workers? Do IFA/GFAs bear any relevance to workplace labor standards? Have social clauses in trade agreements contributed in improving conditions of employment? What evidence there is of company-level CSR interventions that have resulted in better conditions of employment? Furthermore, can we rely on proclamations of improvement from stakeholders and any implicated party? What mechanisms for independent verification should we need to put in place; how and by whom? Moreover, what are the views of the workers themselves? How do they experience regulatory interventions (social clauses, CSR, IFA/GFAs, etc.) and do they perceive them as having any relevance and impact on their working lives? And if not, why? Is there somewhere a missing link between ambitious policies and their application and relevance for workplace conditions?

3. *Novel policy interventions.* Regulatory interventions to address conditions of employment in supply chains, have so far used either “hard” law (e.g. social clauses in trade agreements) or “soft” law (e.g. CSR, IFA/GFAs, etc.). Is there another way? For example, could English common law (the law that governs supply chain contractual relations) be weaponized to provide potentially a new regulatory avenue? (Rühmkorf, 2015; Tsogas, 2020). Specifically: (a) how could the primacy of shareholders’ interests be challenged in company law and be replaced with a legal requirement for social (and environmental) responsibility? (b) How could social clauses be included in commercial contracts? Could the experience of social clauses in public procurement contracts be used as a guide and measure of feasibility? (c) Can transnational tort litigation help victims of corporate abuses to secure justice? How can parent companies be held liable for the conduct of their subsidiaries and subcontractors in supply chains? Do corporations have a legal duty of care for workers making their products down the supply chain? Is there a legal proximity between a label and subcontractors’ employees? Overall, what evidence could be amassed, across various jurisdictions, on efforts to hold corporations legally accountable and what lessons can be learnt?

4. *Conditions of employment in supply chains and the pandemic.* Even though at the time of writing, it is unclear how long the current pandemic will last (and there are worrisome signs that it may last for years), it is nonetheless pertinent to ask - even at a probing level - what its effects will be in the ways supply chains are organised and how people working along them will be

affected. Early signs point to widespread job losses on production sites due to cancellation of orders (e.g. in Bangladesh's garment industry) while seemingly logistics and distribution companies do not have enough staff to cover demand from house-bound consumers. How could these forces shape work in supply chains in the immediate (and arguably the long-term) future? Could whole industries be repatriated closer to home, and away from high-risk (for generating infectious diseases) areas (e.g., China and SE Asia)? Or parallel supply chains – as are reportedly developing now – would provide temporary “relief” for as long as the epidemic persists, but returning to “business as usual” once the threat subsides? And what could the implications be for those in (often low-paid) work in the gig economy, logistics, and of course in production sites?

We welcome contributions from academics, activists, and anyone whom can contribute evidence, ideas and fresh theoretical insights.

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