

XII Global Labour University Conference, 2017. Jawaharlal Nehru University, India

Theme addressed: **3. Changing technology and the world of work**

Title of the paper: “What has changed: a new Farewell to the Working Class?”

The aim of this paper is to discuss the thesis supported by several scholars, institutions and activists according to which capitalist societies have been through sharp shift in the nature of work relations. This perspective has had a huge repercussion on labour studies for more than three decades and is increasingly affecting private and public regulation of labour worldwide. It assumes that social and economic changes in work management and new technologies would have dissolved traditional forms of employment and the consequence would be a decline of the wage labour in the labour markets.

During the 1980's, A. Gorz, C. Offe and other authors have summarized this theoretical position with the famous sentence “farewell to work”. More recently, three new news approaches aim to develop further the thesis of the end of wage society. They put forward what we could call as “the new farewell to work”.

The first approach has a greater prominence in public institutions. Its general claim is that the growth of “self-employment” is replacing wage labour. The second postulates that there is a structural difficulty in making definitions about what is work nowadays, due to its complexity. This complexity is manifested in the “grey areas” where it is impossible to identify types of employment relations. The third line claims to be an update of the progressive position and is well represented by G. Standing's work on the precariat. According to the author, participation of traditional salaried worker is declining in labour markets and the alternative is not linked to forms of regulation, but to universal basic income policies.

Based on empirical research using dozens of case studies and aggregated data from the labour markets in Brazil and in the United Kingdom, we focus our analysis on capital's strategies and how labour has been organized, specifically in regard to how capital has imposed and tried to impose different ways of hiring workers. The use of new technologies plays an important role in this picture. We argue that the “new” ways of work are predominantly wage labour, despite the effort of companies to conceal the content of employment relations.

For companies, denying themselves as employers – and conversely assuming workers as “self-employed”, is currently a key strategy to manage labour power, bringing benefits for accumulation, such as reduction of collective agency, undermining labour rights, increasing management flexibility etc. In sum, it reduces the chances of limiting labour exploitation.

We intend, therefore, to indicate some of the limits and misconceptions of this “new farewell to work”. We do not deny the emergence of changes in labour management by companies, but we will point out that this could conceal strategies of dissimulation of the wage relationship. The “new farewell to work” tends to oversimplify the definition of labour and to neglect the objective subordination of worker by new capitalist arrangements. Subsequently, it contributes to the appearance that it is impossible to protect workers with public regulation; workers that, in fact, are still submitted to wage labour.

This paper is an outcome of a research carried out in the University of Campinas (UNICAMP, São Paulo, Brazil). Beyond the current literature, the methodological approach combines analysis of official data, statistics, documents and reports from the Brazilian and the British government, ethnographic activities; interviews with stakeholders (including workers, employers, labour inspectors).