8.1: Introducing week eight

Welcome back to week eight of our course on precarious labour on the global economy. We're reaching the end of the course, so this week we want to take an opportunity to look at the bigger picture.

If you've been following along you'll have seen that we first considered global supply chains, then migrant workers, and then finally the politics and practice of sex work.

In this session we want to think more systematically about the question of solutions. What types of proposals, interventions, and approaches are most likely to challenge the patterns of labour exploitation which structure the world of work globally?

In the activities section of this course we've asked you to think about what types of solutions are likely to be effective, and then more recently we've paired the conversation about effectiveness with a follow-up conversation about political difficulty. We've asked what level of difficulty a particular solution is likely to generate or provoke.

In this session we want to pick up that thread and think about which solutions are most likely to be effective, most likely to be politically significant, and also which are most likely to be counterproductive or ineffective.

The first of the two videos is going to look at the question of what doesn't work, what types of interventions are likely to do more harm than good, and what types of interventions are unlikely to grapple with the underlying root causes of labour exploitation. That's our focus in this video. In the second video we're going to go on to think about what an alternative might look like.

When it comes to the question of what doesn't work, a really good starting point comes from the Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women and their idea of collateral damage. Collateral damage is the idea that, however well-intentioned you might be, the practical effects of your intervention and the fact that you acted rather than did not act has ended up doing more harm than good. There are a number of examples of anti-trafficking and anti-slavery interventions that have ultimately left things worse off. One of the strongest examples is the popular strategy of 'raid and rescue'. Such 'operations' often end up rescuing people that weren't keen to be rescued and then placing them in situations where the rehabilitation that is provided and the sanctuary that is offered is ultimately more toxic and difficult and unproductive than the circumstances in which they were to begin with. So in this context you can hear people talk about running from their rescuers – the rescue is not welcome and in a lot of cases counterproductive.

We also have examples of laws that end up punishing rather than helping. Two examples have come through in the last year from India and the United States, where laws against trafficking have been
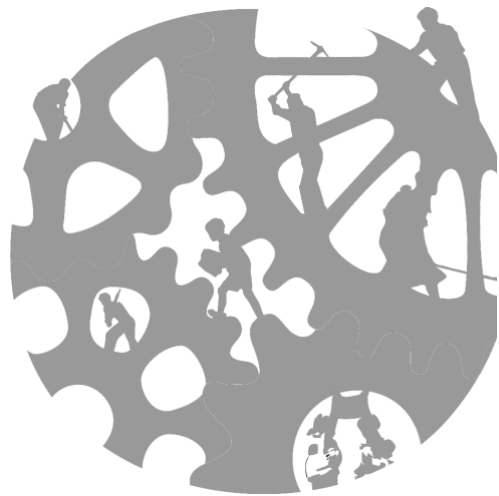
widely celebrated. In the case of the US, you have legislation that prevents the online advertising of sex work. This has had all kinds of flow-on effects in terms of pushing commercial sex work into less open, more hazardous, and more complicated spaces. The law was celebrated. Donald Trump is very keen on it, the Republican Party is very keen on it, even the Democrats are very keen on it. Yet when you look at the practical effects it's likely to have, there's not really much cause for celebration.

A similar type of story applies in India. Now, India has some of the most extensive labour legislation in the world. It has a robust union movement and other forms of collective organising, and while collective organising doesn't always succeed there's still a rich and long history of struggle for better wages and conditions within the Indian subcontinent. More recently, however, this has been overshadowed by the introduction of anti-trafficking legislation that embraces a very different path, a different understanding of the problem, and a different type of remedy – one which prioritises prosecution, supports raid and rescue, and complicates access to rights and protections. Laws are often presented as the next big thing that will have a transformative impact, but in a lot of cases laws end up creating collateral damage. They look like they should be doing one thing but the actual effects are something else entirely.

Another example is investment in public messaging that strongly emphasises the sensational. In a lot of cases, images, statistics, and first-person narratives of extreme suffering and violence have been used to draw attention to various problems and practices. Now there's a calculation being made here that sensationalism, sexualisation, and simplification are worth the price of drawing in an audience. Sensational content is understood to attract energy and investment, and activists and governments have calculated that it's a price worth paying.

The problem with this type of sensationalism is that much of what people think they know about underlying problems is unfounded, inaccurate, and incomplete. As a consequence we are now in a situation where people think they know a great deal about human trafficking and modern slavery, but in a lot of cases their information is simplified, sensational and misleading that they end up creating problems rather than solutions. So there are lots of occasions where the messaging, however well-intentioned, ends up leaving people confused and uninformed. As a consequence we don't have an evidence base that is strong enough to properly guide interventions. There's a lot of light and there's a lot of sound, but the foundation isn't what it should be.

We also have examples of solutions that don't necessarily have strong adverse effects, but at the same time we don't expect much of them either. A classic example of this is corporate social responsibility and supply chain transparency legislation. These are popular in part because they're undemanding and the non-threatening. Much the same applies to issues associated with ethical consumption. Purchasing and consuming your values is widely proposed as an effective solution for combating labour exploitation, but in a lot of cases all it does is create a parallel economic structure which exists alongside normal patterns of exploitation, production, privilege and so on.

So some of the most popular solutions are unlikely to have an effect, and in some kind of paradoxical way that's ultimately why they're popular. Significant interventions challenge systems, challenge borders, and challenge privileges, and any type of solution which poses such a challenge is unlikely to command the type of broad, near-universal support that something like corporate social responsibility of ethical consumption is likely to command. In crucial to realise that some solutions are popular because they're ineffective rather than they because they are effective.

We've looked in this session at what hurts and at what is unlikely to help very much. In the session that follows we're going to think systematically about what some of the alternatives might look like.