

8.2: Challenging the root causes of forced and precarious labour

So welcome back to week eight of our course on forced and precarious labour in the global economy. This second video focuses on the solutions and strategies which might effectively challenge the patterns of labour exploitation that structure so much of how goods are produced and consumed in the world in which we live.

In the previous video we looked at the question of what doesn't work, what types of solutions end up doing more harm than good, and which solutions are popular because they're unthreatening and uncontroversial. In this session, we want to map out some of the ways in which we might think about alternatives that are more likely to be effective in challenging systems of labour exploitation.

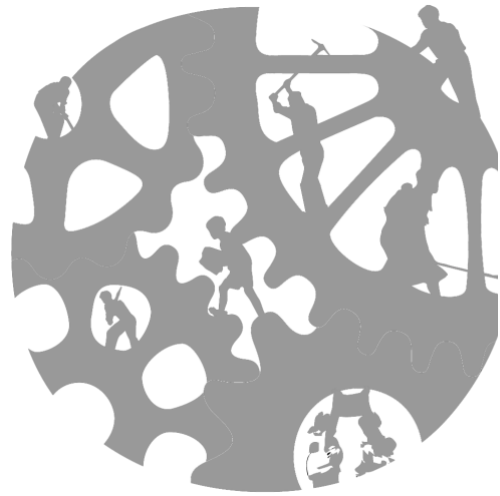
Before we go on to discuss what some of those solutions and strategies might be, it's crucial to emphasise that there's a real danger involved in assuming from the outside what workers and migrants want and, as a consequence, imposing solutions upon peoples who weren't necessarily consulted or engaged. The dangers associated with these types of external impositions are often rooted in paternalism, where there are saviours from the outside, there are supplicants in need of rescue, and the task of intervention is to provide support for people who are unable, or in some cases even unwilling, to help themselves.

It's really important to resist that type of formula. We need to be cautious when thinking about what the alternative might be, because in a lot of cases solutions aren't so much about deciding what people want. They're about providing additional options, rights, and protections so that workers and migrants can articulate, defend and organise their own interests and speak about their own experiences.

Real caution needs to be applied here. The medical profession runs under the injunction to do no harm. Doing no harm means only acting in a context where you feel that you will end up being beneficial rather than counterproductive. A lot of the worst effects that are associated with anti-trafficking and anti-slavery interventions come from people who are well-intentioned, but whose motivations are based upon the assumption that they know what's best. When it comes to solutions, the caution is that you don't decide how things get fixed. You instead think about ways for people to defend and articulate and apply their own interests and experiences.

It's here that we need to think about a longer history, one which is often absent from discussions of anti-trafficking and anti-slavery – that of collective organising, workers' rights and unionisation. Workers as individuals are often isolated and forced to accept terms and conditions that they don't otherwise like. Due to power imbalances, they are obliged to accept these terms and conditions out of necessity, out of a lack of viable alternatives, and so on.

So when it comes to thinking about solutions, there's a bundle of issues around providing additional rights and protections for people who are working. Some of these involve creating capacities for



VIDEO TRANSCRIPT

Forced and Precarious Labour in the Global Economy Online Course

collective bargaining; creating legal rights to form unions and not criminalising unions; creating conditions where workers can effectively seek back pay when they're forced to work more than they otherwise should; and creating channels for people to raise concerns about hazardous and dangerous conditions at work. These solutions are ultimately about providing rights and protections, and about creating the conditions where people can raise grievances without fear of retribution. The result is that they can more effectively articulate and defend their own interests around working conditions, harm and hazard, pay, length of contract, and so on and so forth.

Much the same applies when it comes to questions of migration. In a lot of cases, the problems revolve around how borders and border protection create patterns of vulnerability. These leave people exposed to capricious employers and forced to take wages far below what locals with the rights and prerogatives of citizenship would accept. The solutions must confront these issues as well. That means changing the design of labour and changing the design of migration so rights can be defended and workers can effectively organise in ways that articulate their interests.

Much the same applies in relation to the more specific issue of sex work. In a lot of cases, it's the criminal sanctions and stigma that are associated with commercial sexual activities that create some of the most significant impediments to sex workers articulating and defending their rights to better conditions, better pay, less vulnerability and so on.

So it's the barriers to organising. It's the barriers against people coming together in order to create a better deal in terms of how, when, and on what terms they work. Now, it's crucial to emphasise here that these types of approaches are unlikely to create radical transformation and a quick solution. We need to think in terms of a complex set of struggles which takes place in many different parts of the world, in many different industries, and none of these struggles are likely to be concluded quickly or resolved decisively. There will instead be lots of little gains and sometimes little losses around the terms and conditions under which people work.

There's a lot of rhetoric associated with ending slavery in our lifetime and ending slavery by 2030. These things are extremely unhelpful because they misdiagnose and misunderstand the nature of the struggle. The larger issues that sit behind labour rights – patterns of privilege and inequality, the ways in which borders create vulnerability, the nature of unemployment and underemployment and precarious work – all take place on a canvas that is global. There are also solutions that are proposed on a global scale, things like basic income or reparations for historical injustice, and these larger ideas are associated with the recognition that the way in which our world is currently organised is fundamentally unjust. There's heavy concentration of privilege, often based around ideas of race, ideas of gender, which mean the particular groups within society and between societies occupy highly privileged positions, and those privileges confer benefits that do not extend to people with the wrong passport, the wrong skin colour, or the wrong gender.

As a consequence, challenging forced and precarious labour ultimately means that we have to grapple and engage with the larger structures of inequality and privilege and poverty which sit behind them. Even global supply chains, which is the most significant pattern of labour exploitation that we currently face, is ultimately a symptom of this larger set of problems and stems from how the world is organised and who gets what, when, and how.

Any discussion of solutions which doesn't foreground this underlying reality is unlikely to create a foundation for an effective challenge. Now at this point, it should be evident that this is not a cause that we can or should agree upon. When we asked you to think about what solutions were effective, we then

paired that with the discussion of what solutions were likely to be politically difficult. The types of things that have been introduced in this course, the things we've discussed, aren't going to be things that command consensus. They're not even necessarily things that are going to command majority support. That's partly because the systems that we face create benefits, and in order to challenge them you have to challenge the people who derive benefit from them.

A good sign that something is likely to be effective is the opposition that it generates from people in positions of power. If people in positions of power are comfortable or supportive of a particular course of action, it's generally a good sign that they've calculated that it's unlikely to challenge the privileges that they currently enjoy. So when it comes to solutions, widespread support is generally a sign that it is unlikely to have the bite that it ultimately needs.

This transcript was prepared for the online course [Forced and Precarious Labour in the Global Economy](#) by [Beyond Trafficking and Slavery](#) (openDemocracy). It has been lightly edited for clarity. This course was originally released on the edX.org platform in 2018, where it has now been archived. As of 2021 it is available on [opendemocracy.net](#).

