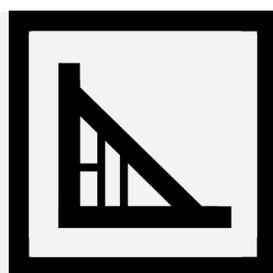


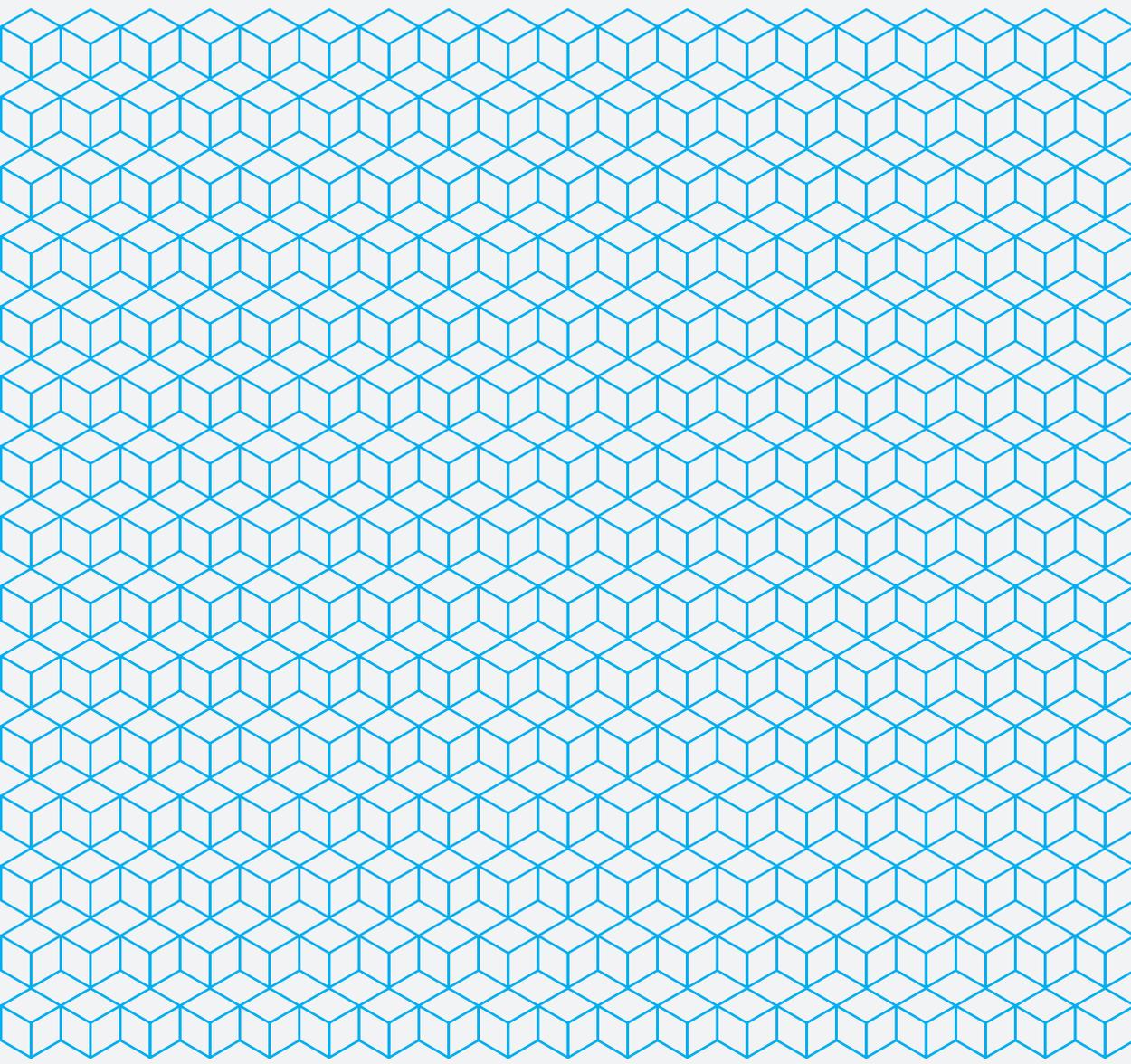
Compiled and written  
by Kyle Lewis

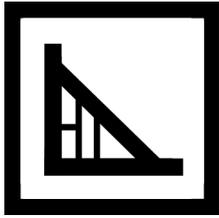
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**Autonomy**

**Precarious Work**





## Autonomy

# Precarious Work

The question of precarity is the question of the relationship between work and life. One of work’s primary functions is to provide an income that enables individuals to meet the economic demands of life – food, rent, pursuit of interests, and so on. If it does not fulfil this role, then as a social institution it is fundamentally broken.

One of the most visible symptoms of precarious work can be seen in the widespread practice of short-term (non-permanent) contracts of employment becoming common practice throughout the North American and UK employment sectors. Contracts of this nature bind the employee concerned into a perpetual state of presentness, due to its inability to provide a stable platform to plan for the future. For example, short-term contracts (usually between nine to twelve months) exclude the individual concerned from being able to obtain social security in the form of a mortgage or rental agreement.

The casualisation of employment is not – as is commonly believed – exclusive to low skilled jobs. For example, It is estimated that over half (53%) of all academic teaching and research staff in UK Universities manage on some form of insecure, non-permanent contract.

**7.1** *Million*

**UK workers now face precarious working conditions**

*(Philpott in: Peat, 2016)*

Zero hour contracts are unstable and unassured – consequently the income (and livelihood) of the individual is equally uncertain. These precarious contracts identify not only an unstable economic existence for the individual concerned, but also point to something far more telling: a loss of civil liberties (e.g. access to housing, access to forms of credit).

**1.7**  
*million* **UK workers are now on zero hour contracts, which offer no fixed income or hours.**

(ONS, 2017)

The rapid expansion of ‘alternative work arrangements’ (non-permanent, unfixed hours of employment) can be attributed, in part, to the rise of the so-called ‘gig economy’. Although this has been heralded by some as a progressive alternative to static forms of permanent, fixed hour employment, it does in fact represent a political process of deregulation in employment laws and employee rights. By recalibrating their employees as self-employed, corporations such as Uber and Hermes can undercut competitors by not having to fulfil employment obligations around minimum hourly pay, annual leave, sickness and maternity leave.

**94%**

**Of net employment growth in the U.S. economy from 2005 to 2015 has occurred in ‘alternative work arrangements.’**

(Katz et al., 2016)

With little or next to no social welfare system to fall back on, gig workers in the US and UK face daily exploitation in their working lives. Without government regulation – or reforms in social welfare support – it appears the gig economy’s employment strategy will go from being an ‘alternative work arrangement’ to the norm.

## Underemployment

Workers who are employed on non-permanent, unfixed hour contracts can find themselves in the unwanted position of being underemployed: the involuntary condition of working part-time due to a lack of full-time employment opportunities.

**32%**

**Around 1 in 3 (32%) UK employees on a zero-hour contract wanted more hours of work with their employer.**

**9%**

**In comparison, only 9% of workers on non zero-hour contracts wanted more hours** (ONS, 2017)

This desire for more hours on the part of precarious employees gives tangible power to employers, who are almost guaranteed a surplus of workers searching for an elusive source of sustainable income.

Most of the recent literature concerning precarious employment has centred on the Western world and its 'economically developed' nations. In contrast, a 2017 report by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) highlights the increasing plight of workers in 'emerging' and 'developing' countries, with regards to vulnerable/ precarious forms of employment.

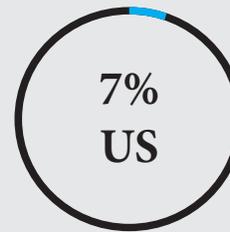
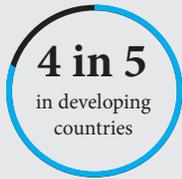
The drastic loss in unionised workers in the US and UK has also coincided with a significant loss in wage growth and living standards in both countries.

**Only 14% of private-sector workers in the UK are unionised, compared with fewer than 7% in the US**



**In 2017 almost 1 in 2 workers in emerging countries are in precarious forms of employment, rising to almost 4 in 5 workers in developing countries.**

(ILS, 2017)



A recent report by the resolution foundation claimed that the 2010s would be the worst decade for wage growth in the UK since the 1780s. Another report by Unpaid Britain states that a reported **£1.2 billion** of wages goes unpaid each year in the UK.

Globalisation has therefore created instability and poorer working conditions for both the economically developed and developing worlds.



**People worldwide are now working in precarious/vulnerable forms of employment.**

(ONS, 2017)

The conclusions to be drawn from these interrelated phenomena speak not only to economic concerns but to political and even existential questions. By becoming the new normal, precarious work is steadily spreading insecure and uncertain modes of living on a global scale. Whether people are underemployed, cannot be assured regular, sustainable incomes or are stuck on the treadmill

of short-term contracts, the worrying phenomena of precarity is a symptom of the crisis of work now upon us. The question is whether the solution is a return to full-time, lifelong employment (as was the post-war ideal), or whether a more viable, sustainable solution lies in alternative ways of organising work and income.

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