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Precarious workers, their power and the ways to realise it: the struggle of Heineken labour broker workers

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Abstract

The dissertation examines the power of precarious workers through the analysis of the campaign of labour brokered workers to be made permanent under equal conditions at Heineken Brewery in Sedibeng, South of Johannesburg. It contributes to the discussion on the growing importance of precarious work in the formal sector in South Africa through externalisation and the effect thereof on the labour movement and the institutions of labour relations. It examines how precarious workers rely on self organisation to mobilise power resources to disrupt the status quo. Taking an engaged approach, the work relies on workplace mapping to co-construct, with workers and organisers, an understanding of how different employers, working conditions and status are used to divide workers and fragment the workplace to enforce low labour costs and control at the Sedibeng Brewery. The map also emphasizes the central role these workers play in the production process. The dissertation then describes how the workers use the law – institutional power –, in particular the amended section 198 of the LRA to try and overcome their divisions. They do so with the help of the Casual Workers Advice Office, a labour NGO. The chapter emphasises the law as a terrain of contestation by showing that this approach is not without problems. In the final chapter, the interdependence of associational, institutional, societal and structural power underlines that the precarious workers at Heineken relied on power resources located outside the shopfloor to start mounting an effective challenge to the workplace order inside the brewery. The dissertation concludes that contrary to the often expressed view, at least in this case study, precarious workers do organise but that they do so outside of the established unions, a phenomenon that is understudied. Although the struggle of these workers is very much about integration, it connects with deeper narratives and struggles against inequality in post-apartheid South Africa. Finally, the case study raises the question of how these dynamics could affect the traditional model of industrial unionism in the future: revitalise or transform it.