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PRECARIOUS WORK: A CASE STUDY OF SECURITY GUARDS IN JOHANNESBURG

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A research report submitted to the Faculty of Humanities, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Economic/Industrial Sociology.

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the nature of working conditions and lived experiences of private security guards in Johannesburg. It draws on the conceptions of precariousness developed by Standing (2011), Barchiesi (2011a) and Candeias (2004) to understand precariousness in post-apartheid South Africa. The study is based on a combined approach using 24 in-depth unstructured interviews with security guards and the Gauteng Decent Work Survey of over 1 200 security guards. An analysis of the findings is framed under the nine themes of decent work identified by the International Labour Organization (ILO). The findings indicate that the nine themes do not capture the meaning of being a security guard. This is illustrated by themes such as boredom, the uniform and public perceptions, and the crisis of recognition. Similar to Ally's (2009:88) argument about domestic workers in post-apartheid South Africa, The study found that outsourced security guards can be regarded as amongst the most exploited, oppressed and vulnerable workers. They experienced work as a precarious activity characterised by tensions, uncertainty, and tremendous insecurity.

The findings also illustrate Barchiesi's (2011a) rejection of the centrality of employment as a way of guaranteeing social inclusion and a decent life. Security guards felt that their participation in the labour market was a main reason for their relative material deprivation and not a way out of poverty. The poor are not only those without work, but also those who earn wages. The findings confirm the radical position on the discourse of decent work whose proponents argue that jobs are utterly precarious and decent work under capitalism is not feasible. The simultaneous reality of insecure work, declining benefits and the escalating costs of social reproduction make the point that security guards in Johannesburg experience work and life as a process of 'double precariousness' (Candeias,

2004:1). However, Security guards cannot be regarded as ‘victimized subjects with compromised capacity’ (Ally, 2009:88). Precariousness does not encourage passivity, but has the potential to promote agency and innovative livelihood strategies. These strategies include: walking long distances, occupying deserted buildings to save money, and participating in community-based social protection schemes.

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DECLARATION

I declare that this report is my own unaided work. It is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the Master of Arts degree in the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination in any other university.

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Thabang Sefalafala (295765)

_____ of April 2012

To Matome and Moremadi Sefalafala

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