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THE POLITICS OF MIGRANT LABOUR
Exit, Voice, and Social Reproduction

Gabriella Alberti and Devi Sacchetto
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Series Editors’ Preface

We are very pleased to introduce the next volume in this book series, Understanding Work and Employment Relations. The Politics of Migrant Labour: Exit, Voice, and Social Reproduction by Gabriella Alberti and Devi Sacchetto is the third text to be published in the series.

This series has been designed as a space for both monographs and edited volumes to highlight the latest research and commentary in the academic field of employment relations. The series is associated with the British Universities Industrial Relations Association (BUIRA), which marked 70 years of existence in 2020. The series seeks to draw on the expertise of the membership of BUIRA and contributions to its annual conference, as well as employment relations academics from around the world. Employment relations is a mature field of study and continues to be of relevance to academic and practitioner audiences alike. BUIRA recognises the broad nature of the field of employment relations, and acknowledges that the field of study is constantly developing and evolving. BUIRA regards employment relations to be the study of the relation, control and governance of work and the employment relationship. It is the study of rules (both formal and informal) regarding job regulation and the ‘reward-effort bargain’. These issues remain relevant today, in an era where the standard employment relationship has become increasingly fragmented due to employers’ pursuit of labour flexibility, and we see the continued expansion of the gig or platform economy. Employment relations (and adjacent research areas including human resource management and the sociology of work) is taught widely in universities around the world, most commonly in business and management schools and departments. The field of study is multidisciplinary, encompassing law, politics, history, geography, sociology and economics. HRM has a tendency to focus uncritically on management objectives, without exploring issues of work and employment in their wider socio-economic context, and has its disciplinary roots in psychology, whereas employment relations retains a strong critical social science tradition. As scholars in this area we feel that there is a need for regular, up-to-date, research focused books that reflect current work in the field and go further than standard introductory texts. Through this book series, we aim to take an inter-disciplinary approach to
understanding work and employment relations, and we welcome proposals from academics across this range of disciplines. We also welcome ideas and proposals from a broad range of international and comparative perspectives in order to reflect the increasingly diverse and internationalised nature of the field both in the UK and globally.

This monograph makes a major contribution to our knowledge of labour mobility and work, adopting an innovative historical and multi-locational perspective that goes beyond the temporally and spatially fixed methodologies seen more frequently. The theoretical themes of the book, in relation to debates on migrant labour, labour turnover, enclaves of differentiated labour, social reproduction and worker power, are drawn out in relation to four ‘vignettes’ of migration regimes in different parts of the world and different time periods, including the contemporary kafala system in the Persian Gulf, internal migration in China, Ford in the 1910s and migrant women in 1970s Germany.

We hope you enjoy reading this book. If you would like to discuss a proposal of your own, then email the series editors. We look forward to hearing from you.

*Andy Hodder and Stephen Mustchin*
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Acknowledgements

This volume is the outcome of a long-standing collaboration and intellectual exchange. Although we have never conducted fieldwork together, our common passion for investigating contemporary and historical forms of migrant labour and its politics have put us in continuous dialogue on the basis of our results and reflections, finding several points of contact.

Our empirical research, mostly developed in Europe, has certainly helped us to understand the ‘bastard place’ (Bourdieu, 2004) in which migrant workers find themselves, but with this volume we wish to go beyond a Eurocentric approach to the question of migrant labour, looking at both labour and industrial relations transnationally and across world regions. This book brings together at least a couple of decades of research on migrant workers’ experiences as they confront exploitation, precarity, and the effects of state policies across their workplaces and communities. Gabriella Alberti spent four months during the academic year 2016–17 as visiting scholar at the University of Padova (Department of Philosophy, Sociology, Education, and Applied Psychology), where she further developed her research on migrant hospitality work, unions’ engagement with migration, and the politics of intersectionality with Devi Sacchetto and his doctoral students. The visit provided a unique opportunity to expand our theoretical debate on the effects of migrant labour turnover as relatively problematic for management, which both of us had already explored in separate papers (Alberti, 2014; Gambino and Sacchetto, 2014).

A critical step for our collaborative research for this volume took place at the International Institute of Social History (IISH) in Amsterdam in February 2020, just a few weeks before the COVID-19 pandemic forced us to withdraw to our homes and work remotely during the subsequent lockdowns. We thank librarians at IISH for their help with accessing the archives, as well as librarians at the Ettore Anchieri Library at the University of Padova, and the Leeds University libraries. We are grateful to Marcel van der Linden, whose encounter at the IISH helped illuminate critical aspects of our reflections, especially regarding our theoretical chapter and the relationship between migration and the welfare state.

A first paper, ‘Theorizing Labour Mobility Power Through the Lenses of Migration’ was presented in 2019 at the Global Labor Migration: Past and
Present Conference in Amsterdam (20–2 June). Subsequently, we presented our work at the symposium Giornata di Studi sul lavoro imbrigliato, about the legacy of the work of Moulier-Boutang on the continuum of free and unfree labour in capitalism, held at the University of Bologna in dialogue with Sandro Mezzadra, Irene Peano, Martino Sacchi, and others (April 2022). Devi Sacchetto has also presented some of our book chapters at the Labour Transfer Summer School: ‘Establishing links between research and labour activism’, held in Buggerru, Sardinia, in June 2022 organized by Maurizio Atzeni and Sabrina Perra. We thank all participants at these events for their comments that stimulated deep reflections.

Ongoing discussions with colleagues at the International Labour Process Conference (ILPC), that we both attend every year, have critically contributed to developing our thinking around the everyday practices of control and resistance of migrant workers inside and outside the transnational labour process and dormitory regimes. We are particularly grateful to Chris Smith for being an ongoing source of inspiration and critical reflection in and beyond the ILPC annual conferences.

For the important contributions to our intellectual journey that led to this book we would like to thank Ferruccio Gambino, Valeria Piro, Maurizio Ricciardi, and Francesca Alice Vianello, who have also carefully read some of our draft chapters and provided critical and helpful suggestions. The Labour Mobility in Transition (LIMITS) project team at the Centre for Employment Relations, Innovation and Change (CERIC), University of Leeds, who are working with Gabriella Alberti on the effects of the end of free movement of workers post-Brexit, have also provided critical food for thought on the limits and potential of migrant worker agency vis-à-vis management and state practices. Special thanks go to Chris Forde, who provided earlier comments to the book proposal and introduction, Marketa Dolezalova, Zyama Ciupijus, and Jo Cutter for their ongoing input and support during the making of this book. Thanks to Simon Joyce who has provided helpful and critical feedback to our conceptual tables.

Marek Čaněk has been an ever-helpful interlocutor and in-depth expert on migrant workers, in particular, but not exclusively, in Eastern Europe. Ongoing discussions with Marek about what is happening on a daily basis in critical regions of Europe and his long-standing knowledge were invaluable in the writing of various parts of this volume. Ľubica Kobová participated in and sometimes endured our discussions and time spent into the research field of Eastern Europe. The many practitioners in the trade union movement and anti-racist campaigners who we met in these past 20 years have given an immense contribution to our thinking for this book.

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We have certainly forgotten someone and remain indebted to anyone who has contributed to our decade-long reflections on the politics of migrant labour, and especially those who in the trade unions and other social movements work tirelessly to improve the working lives of our fellow workers by fighting everyday racism, xenophobia, and precariousness.

Finally, we want to thank the reviewers and the team at BUP for bearing with us during the different phases of our work and for the smooth and helpful editorial process they facilitated. We are grateful, of course, to our families who help us keep a sense of place, including baby Etna, who did not kick too hard during the drafting of the final chapter.