



August 2022

Supply Chains and Organizing Against Precarity

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Recommended Citation

McKean, Benjamin (2022) "Supply Chains and Organizing Against Precarity," *Emancipations: A Journal of Critical Social Analysis*: Vol. 1: Iss. 3, Article 7.

Available at: <https://scholarsjunction.msstate.edu/emancipations/vol1/iss3/7>

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On February 20, 2022, the cover of the *New York Times Magazine* was dramatically blank but for two Post-It notes. One read “Coverline: The Future of Work When No One Wants to Work,” the other “Photograph of Exploding Desk” – the conceit being that a lack of desire for work was so widespread that the *New York Times* couldn’t even get its design staff to show up. Of course, the art department had in fact done their job and done it well; the cover photo was credited to Jamie Chung and the overall design was acclaimed as “stunning” and “inspired.”¹

This ironized effacing of actual labor was telling and thematically appropriate, capturing something important about the status of workers at this moment – rendered invisible yet endowed with latent and threatening power, perhaps even rendered invisible as a way of denying this potential agency. The cover suggests a recognition that contemporary work is self-evidently undesirable while also expressing exasperation that people refuse to accept the status quo anyway. This uncanny worker, absent yet present, sympathetic yet irresponsible, indexes the paradoxical economic effects of the disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic. The past two years dramatically deepened the precarity of workers by requiring many to expose themselves to a deadly virus, causing millions of others to lose their jobs, and throwing so much else into deep uncertainty. Yet the pandemic also temporarily empowered U.S. workers through new forms of government assistance like enhanced unemployment benefits and expanded child tax credits that supported them while businesses were closed; as businesses reopened, the sudden demand for labor led to real wage gains for the poorest third of workers.² If employers are having a hard time finding workers, it likely reflects a tight labor market giving some workers more leverage and choice about when and where they work as much as a simple refusal of unsatisfactory wage labor. This is surely part of what has powered the confidence of those now organizing and winning union elections at

¹ Daniel Piper, “This stunning magazine cover is one of the most inspired designs we’ve seen” *Creative Bloq* February 28, 2022; <https://www.creativebloq.com/news/nytimes-magazine-cover>

² Katie Johnston, “Earnings Rising Faster for Lower-Wage Workers” *Boston Globe* December 9, 2021 <https://www.bostonglobe.com/2021/12/09/business/first-time-decades-earnings-are-rising-faster-lower-wage-workers/>

corporate behemoths like Amazon and Starbucks that had seemed unbeatable before the pandemic.

But the trends that undermined the power of U.S. workers over the past decades of neoliberalism – the destruction of labor unions, the ending of regulations protecting worker rights, the evisceration of the welfare state – have not reversed themselves over the past two years. Despite some exciting gains, union membership in the U.S. still declined by almost 250,000 workers in 2021.³ Yet if aggregate statistics do not uniformly reflect a “Great Resignation” from work, the managerial anxiety about this expressed by the *New York Times* Magazine cover reflects an awareness of how the experience of expanded possibilities – combined with the relentless grind of caring for oneself and others amid a pandemic – has left a lasting mark on workers’ subjectivity. The question is: have these pandemic years jarred loose new possibilities for building working class power and ending precarity?

We can begin to answer this question and make sense of these disparate interpretations of the economy by considering our dual experience as both sellers of labor power and consumers of goods produced by labor. Most people play both roles and they can lead us to very different orientations to the world. To take one currently salient example, as a worker, rising pay is an obvious good; as a consumer, higher pay looks like inflation and higher expenses. Media attention to inflation as a threat can prime people to identify more as consumers than as workers even though other factors, like Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and pandemic-induced supply chain disruptions, are driving inflation.⁴ Even the phrase “supply chain disruptions” can itself function as a kind of effacement of labor that reflects and reinforces a consumer orientation. During the worst periods of the pandemic, often the “disruption” was that workers got sick or died, but describing this as the malfunction of an impersonal chain allows consumers to

³ Bureau of Labor Statistics, “Union Members – 2021” USDL-22-0779, January 20, 2022, <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/union2.pdf>

⁴ Emily Stewart, “America’s inflation problem is weirdly hard to fix” *Vox* March 28, 2022 <https://www.vox.com/the-goods/22994731/inflation-rate-russia-gas-prices-jerome-powell>

foreground the inconvenience they experienced when, e.g., stores were out of hamburger meat rather than acknowledging these harms to others.⁵

A habitual orientation to the consumer perspective is an understandable way of navigating our world not least because of how it is encouraged and cultivated by dominant political and social arrangements. Most people rarely have opportunities to exercise political power in U.S. institutions while they are routinely called upon to make decisions as consumers. By disposing us to overlook working conditions and even identify our interests in ways that are inimical to improving them, this habitual orientation as a consumer poses an obstacle to building working class power and a political coalition to end precarity, understood in the particular ways that I suggest in this article.

In the rest of this paper, I explore both how the pandemic-induced failings of transnational supply chains illuminate these contradictions of work and consumption and how we might reorient ourselves to these circumstances so that a broad coalition can more readily identify shared interests in changing them and ending precarity. As the hegemonic form of international trade, transnational supply chains are potent symbols of global interdependence that can appear as both a cause of precarity, when oriented to them as a worker subjected to capital mobility and corporate domination, and as a welcome cushion to precarity, when oriented to them as a consumer seeking low prices and convenience. Through unexpected shortages and inflation, pandemic-induced supply chain disruptions have now interrupted those benefits, offering an opportune moment for reorientation away from forms of identification that set worker and consumer interests against each other. A reorientation to shared interests is possible because, in the words of Paul Apostolidis, “precaritization constitutes social populations bivalently, such that even as it singles out certain despised and exploited groups for peculiarly harsh treatment, it extends its reach throughout the working world.”⁶ While people with insecure and contingent employment experience precarity most harshly, the material

⁵ See, for example, Leslie Patton and Michael Hirtzer, “Meat Prices Will Continue to Surge If Meatpackers Can’t Find Workers Fast” *Bloomberg* November 4, 2021 <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-11-04/meat-prices-higher-in-u-s-as-3-000-bonuses-fail-to-end-worker-shortage>

⁶ Apostolidis, “Desperate Responsibility: Precarity and Right-Wing Populism” *Political Theory* Vol. 50, No. 1 (2022): 114-141 at 126.

circumstances produced by neoliberal policies like austerity and capital mobility reliably generate feelings of precarity for better-off workers too, creating new opportunities for organizing in coalition.

While precarity is “the norm of capitalism rather than an exception,” the production, function, and meaning of precarity changes over time.⁷ Importantly, while I focus on precarity under neoliberalism generally and the pandemic particularly, these circumstances are deeply shaped by and continuous with the long histories of racial capitalism, imperialism, settler colonialism, and patriarchy that have been pivotal to creating the current distribution of wealth.⁸ Among other things, these systems enable some workers to reach for racial, national, and gendered hierarchies as a bulwark against their own precarity, seeking relief through the knowledge they can never fall to the level of some others. One cannot understand precarity and how it is experienced without understanding these systems, yet neoliberalism and the consumer orientation fostered by it dispose people to overlook structures in favor of individual choices and to overlook the constraints of history in favor of anticipating future returns. Such neoliberal ways of seeing increasingly work together with reactionary populisms that dispose adherents to reinforce hierarchical divisions rather than look to shared interests across them. An analysis of transnational supply chains can help illuminate both how individuals are habituated to these orientations and how they can be reoriented to the systemic production of precarity in a way that facilitates solidarity and resistance.

As currently structured, transnational supply chains are pervasive ways of making workers precarious and rendering them invisible in the global economy, both materially and discursively. Roughly 80 percent of global trade is linked to transnational

⁷ Quoting page 57, Brett Neilson and Ned Rossiter. “Precarity as a Political Concept, or, Fordism as Exception.” *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 25, no. 7–8 (Dec. 2008): 51–72.

⁸ See Siddhant Issar, “Listening to Black Lives Matter: Racial Capitalism and the Critique of Neoliberalism” *Contemporary Political Theory* Vol. 20, No. 1 (2020): 48–71; Inés Valdez, “Empire, Popular Sovereignty, and the Problem of Self-and-Other-Determination” *Perspectives on Politics*, First View 2022, 1–17. doi:10.1017/S1537592721003674; Melinda Cooper, *Family Values: Between Neoliberalism and the New Social Conservatism* (Brooklyn, NY: Zone Books, 2017).

supply chains.⁹ Through these chains, production is dispersed across the globe, albeit unevenly, so many workers we rely on are literally out of sight.¹⁰ While both critics and cheerleaders of globalization in the 1990s thought of it as a homogenizing force, these chains are better understood to operate through the optimization of difference.¹¹ Officially, as it were, they are simply the latest example of market efficiency; rather than having big corporations try to do everything, supply chains allow different firms in different parts of the world to focus on different parts of the production and logistics process, creating gains from trade through comparative advantage on a new scale. That's a story about how everyone ultimately benefits, legitimizing neoliberalism. But supply chains also optimize difference in the sense that they produce and take advantage of race, nationality, and gender differences as a way of creating and maintaining divisions and hierarchies that enable exploitation.¹² Processes of racialization and feminization – not to mention the violent enforcement of national borders – create subjects whose purportedly inferior status justifies and naturalizes lower wages and poor working conditions which then also shape and put competitive pressure on the status of others.¹³ There is thus an obvious and sometimes viscerally felt sense in which these groups come to have opposed interests, as when workers in Ohio blame the closing of their factory on workers in Mexico and China for “taking their jobs.” In addition to being harmful in its own right, such racial resentment legitimates the structures that produce bivalent precarity and exploitation and does nothing to identify the more deeply antagonistic interests that workers have in opposition to the economic elites who unambiguously benefit from these structures.

⁹ United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), *Global Value Chains and Development: Investment and Value Added Trade in the Global Economy* (Geneva: United Nations Publications, 2013), page 16.

¹⁰ Cf. Erik Loomis, *Out of Sight: The Long and Disturbing Story of Corporations Outsourcing Catastrophe* (New York: New Press, 2015).

¹¹ Anna Tsing, “Supply Chains and the Human Condition” *Rethinking Marxism* Vol 21, No 2 (2009): 148-176.

¹² On how capitalism exploits sustains and exploits racial difference, see Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

¹³ On “the feminization of the global labor force,” see Alison M. Jaggar, “Transnational Cycles of Gendered Vulnerability: A Prologue to a Theory of Global Gender Justice” *Philosophical Topics* Vol. 37 No. 2 (Fall 2009): 33-52.

I want to suggest four broad ways in which thinking about supply chains can reorient those subject to them to shared interests in opposing neoliberal capitalism and contribute to building a coalition against precarity. If successful, the chains that today link us globally through exploitation and domination might ironically provide the grounds for new forms of transnational solidarity and, ultimately, movements that restructure these links to create more equitable forms of global interdependence and cooperation. First, as they structure work today, supply chains systematically depress wages and worsen working conditions for workers, both those who are employed in the chain and otherwise. Just-in-time manufacturing makes chains efficient but creates devastating precarity for workers, as they cannot count on long-term employment or even consistent hours on a week-to-week basis. Second, the same just-in-time manufacturing that creates precarity for workers also entails massive surveillance and governance of consumers themselves, which constrains their freedom. Third, this intensification of exploitation ultimately redounds on the consumer of supply chain goods. When consumers use conveniences like one-click ordering and one-day delivery of supply chain goods, it's often because they themselves have so little time outside work. Rather than making free time available to consumers, these goods are also often tools of their own exploitation, as devices like iPhones become additional ways of keeping them on the clock as workers and monetizing their leisure time. In these ways, the time made available by the efficiencies of consuming supply chain goods simply becomes more time that benefits capital. Fourth, supply chains are a key component of a broader neoliberal political economic settlement in which low prices on goods have in effect served as a substitute for income gains, as real wages have largely remained flat for decades. This has meant corporations and the wealthy have reaped the lion's share of benefits from economic growth, greatly increasing economic inequality both within and between countries, which itself deepens precarity.

Recognizing these features of supply chains makes it easier to see how national borders, processes of racialization and feminization, and other forms of hierarchical differentiation operate to the detriment of all workers and how workers subject to the socially bivalent precarity entwined with those differences can accordingly come to share interests and even identities. We can think of ourselves as *supply chain subjects*,

including those who provide care at home and do the work of social reproduction while others perform wage labor outside the home. Firms claim to have the authority to define the boundaries of their chains and this collective identity contests that. Together, supply chain subjects can make transformative demands that illuminate and bring us closer to ending precarity in the global economy – demands for long-term employment with shorter and predictable hours; for living wages for all supply chain subjects; for an end to work that destroys bodies and the planet that nourishes them; for an end to corporate surveillance; for the freedom of people to move transnationally and associate with each other as easily as goods move along the supply chain.

In what remains of the essay, I'll lay out this argument in somewhat greater detail. In the next section, I elaborate some ways that the pandemic has shaped precarity today. In the following section, I specifically consider how global just-in-time supply chains produce and reinforce precarity and exploitation. In the conclusion, I return to these demands and suggest how they can help build worker power.

Pandemic Precarities

The past two years of the COVID-19 pandemic have had significant effects on the material conditions and subjectivity of workers, both opening and foreclosing political possibilities. In the U.S., the pandemic intensified the already precarious situation of workers, which the federal government then temporarily alleviated – only for state support to be revoked when it seemed to be more of a threat to existing hierarchies than a way to preserve them. In March 2020, the staggering disruption of the pandemic's early weeks led to more than 3 million Americans filing for unemployment in a single week, interrupting prevailing political logics and prompting Congress to debate and eventually pass the CARES Act and other related legislation.¹⁴ The public provision of financial assistance to individuals went from being an object of scorn to a matter of urgent necessity, with negotiations concerning primarily how unprecedented sums of money should be disbursed. For a time, paying people not to

¹⁴ Kelsey Snell, "What's Inside The Senate's \$2 Trillion Coronavirus Aid Package" *NPR* March 26, 2020 <https://www.npr.org/2020/03/26/821457551/whats-inside-the-senate-s-2-trillion-coronavirus-aid-package>

work was transformed from an aspiration of autonomist Marxists into a political reality in a way few anticipated. Longstanding demands to abolish student debt also moved closer to reality as the government implemented a pause on loan repayments – one that the Biden administration has found it difficult to end, even while it officially disavowed its capacity to abolish these debts.¹⁵

This opening up of political possibilities unnerved many elected officials and others accustomed to the status quo, who acted quickly to shut them down. Within months, rightwing protests against pandemic restrictions were demanding that businesses be allowed to reopen so that people could be forced back to work, a backlash that intensified after the enormous popular protests for Black lives that followed the murder of George Floyd. The more generous unemployment benefits from the CARES Act were demonized and eventually rescinded, even though there was little evidence that they were slowing a return to work.¹⁶ Even the popular expansion of the child tax credit that kept 3.7 million children above the poverty line ended.¹⁷

The provision and then revocation of widespread direct payments is thus a double-edged phenomenon. The provision reminds people of what is possible and the contingency of the status quo, but its revocation deepens their experience of precarity. It might seem like state support could end precarity, but when that is revoked, then it may seem like any security other than amassing personal wealth is an illusion. In such circumstances, the sovereign state power that some want to counterpose as a solution to the uncertainty of the market can itself be a source of precarity – not just for those whom the state dominates directly, like undocumented immigrants, but also for others

¹⁵ Jeanna Smialek “Biden White House Keeps Student Loan Payments at Bay Amid Inflation” *New York Times* April 6, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/06/business/economy/student-loan-pause-inflation.html>

¹⁶ Sarah Chaney Cambon and Danny Dougherty, “States That Cut Unemployment Benefits Saw Limited Impact on Job Growth” *Wall Street Journal* Sept. 1, 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/states-that-cut-unemployment-benefits-saw-limited-impact-on-job-growth-11630488601>

¹⁷ Sarah McCammon, Lauren Hodges, and Sarah Handel, “The child tax credit was a lifeline. Now some families are falling back into poverty” *NPR* April 8, 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/04/08/1091418380/child-tax-credit-return-inflation-food-gas-prices>

who stand in a more mediated relationship to state violence.¹⁸ People have been reminded that things could be different, that policies making their lives better are feasible, *and* that those in power prefer things as they are. Consider the situation of renters, who were briefly protected by a federal eviction moratorium during the pandemic.¹⁹ Now median rents in the U.S. have never been higher. In 2022, the median cost of a one-bedroom unit in the 50 largest cities in the US is \$1,652 a month. At that cost, for rent to take up no more than 30% of one's income – the level above which the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development considers people unduly burdened by rent – one would need to earn more than \$30 an hour, a wage level that is a dream for millions of households.²⁰

Pandemic precarity thus represents an intensified variation on a long trend. For decades, workers have had to bear increasing economic risks in order to insulate firms from potential losses, shifting costs and responsibilities onto workers and their families. What felt to some editors and readers of the *New York Times Magazine* like an abandonment of work could also be described as a superabundance of work – not just waged work but also uncompensated housework and childcare. Indeed, the magnitude and importance of such work was greatly magnified by the pandemic, which shut schools and daycare centers while also forcing many to turn their homes into workplaces. These burdens were predictably distributed in line with differential hierarchies: the employment of women and mothers was most affected by the pandemic, as many left the labor force rather than work jobs without being able to send

¹⁸ Nancy Ettliger, "Precarity at the Nexus of Governmentality and Sovereignty: Entangled Fields of Power and Political Subjectivities" *Precarity and International Relations* Eds. Ritu Vij, Tahseen Kazi, and Elisa Wynne-Hughes (Palgrave Macmillan: New York, 2020): 93-125.

¹⁹ Sarah Ewall-Wice, "Flood of evictions predicted with end of pandemic moratorium never happened, but COVID rental relief is running out" *CBS News* March 30, 2022, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/covid-rental-assistance-running-out-biden-administration-expand-housing-efforts/>

²⁰ Celine-Marie Pascale, "Affordable housing in the US is increasingly scarce, making renters ask: Where do we go?" *The Conversation* March 14, 2022 <https://theconversation.com/affordable-housing-in-the-us-is-increasingly-scarce-making-renters-ask-where-do-we-go-176778>

children to childcare.²¹ These effects were continuous with neoliberalism's exploitative reliance on the nuclear family.²² Strikingly, women's labor force participation in the U.S. peaked in the year 2000, illustrating how the pandemic exacerbated pre-existing structural inequality.

Before they were discontinued, enhanced unemployment benefits and the child tax credit arguably provided something akin to wages for housework for the first time in the U.S.²³ This highlights how meaningful, emancipatory opposition to precarity today cannot entail simply returning to an older model of security. Neo-Polanyian models that counterpose a disembedded market to the solidity and solidarity of customs, traditions, and social norms are at particular risk of overlooking both how reinforcing customary norms can itself be oppressive and how markets rely on hierarchies of race and gender. Attending to the continuity of neoliberal precarity with histories of racial capitalism and patriarchy illuminates how forms of security for some historically meant precarity and oppression for others. Many white men experienced the Fordist family wage as security but those arrangements entailed limited freedom for women and marginal employment for most workers of color. What's more, homeownership in the U.S. has always been racialized, as redlining directed federal support for mortgages to white families while the government underfunded public housing and affordable housing construction,

²¹ Alexander Monge Naranjo and Qiuhan Sun, "Women Affected Most by COVID-19 Disruptions in the Labor Market" *Regional Economist* March 23, 2021, <https://www.stlouisfed.org/publications/regional-economist/first-quarter-2021/women-affected-most-covid-19-disruptions-labor-market> ; Daniel Aaronson, Luojia Hu and Aastha Rajan, "Did Covid-19 Disproportionately Affect Mothers' Labor Market Activity?" *Chicago Fed Letter*, No. 450, January 2021, <https://www.chicagofed.org/publications/chicago-fed-letter/2021/450>

²² On women's labor force participation, see <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2022/03/female-labor-force-participation-gender-gap-pandemic/> ; on neoliberalism's reliance on the family, see Melinda Cooper, *Family Values*

²³ See Kathi Weeks, *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011); Melissa Gira Grant, "The Beginning of the End of Meaningless Work" *The New Republic* January 21, 2021; <https://newrepublic.com/article/160836/beginning-end-meaningless-work>

contributing to today's rent crisis.²⁴ Consequently, while it is tempting to grasp for any kind of solidity and particularity against the destabilizing precarity and abstract domination of neoliberal capitalism, many politics of order and security that arise in response will only reinforce unjust hierarchies; white men have long experienced demands for racial and gender equality as forms of disorder that imperil their privileged status.²⁵ A movement that genuinely seeks to end precarity for all must directly address how hierarchies of race and gender are implicated in the production of precarity. In the next section, I explain how transnational supply chains are structured to exploit these hierarchies of difference and how those of us subject to supply chains can nevertheless be oriented to solidarity and a shared interest in resisting and replacing these structures.

Supply Chain Challenges

Supply chains serve as useful figures that make concrete the global production of precarity and illuminate how many different people are connected. These connections became vivid for many during the pandemic as unexpected shortages occurred due to surprising links in chains. Yet everyday I am inescapably enmeshed in these connections whenever I wear clothes, use my phone, or engage in innumerable other activities. As a privileged consumer, I may experience myself as interacting with supply chains only at the point of purchase while imagining those engaged in the assembly of these goods as sweatshop workers dominated by these chains all the time. As I will argue, this appearance is crucially misleading – consumers' connections to chains are not as fleeting as firms make them appear – but it does reflect an important difference in how chains connect us. Like precarity generally, the precarity produced by supply chains is bivalent, with those working in manufacturing and logistics for just-in-time

²⁴ Richard Rothstein, *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Government Segregated America* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2017).

²⁵ For the call to order and security as a response to precarity, see Albena Azmanova, *Capitalism on Edge: How Fighting Precarity Can Achieve Radical Change Without Crisis or Utopia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020). On the drift of security to hierarchy, see Joseph Lowndes, "From New Class Critique to White Nationalism: Telos, the Alt Right, and the Origins of Trumpism." *Konturen* Vol. 9 (Aug 2017): 8-12.

chains experiencing grueling and insecure employment while others experience chain-produced precarity through their role intensifying exploitation throughout the economy. In the rest of this section, I'll detail the ways that transnational supply chains exploit and govern us and explain why we should accordingly see ourselves as supply chain subjects who share an interest in resisting their power and building a coalition against precarity.

First, supply chains structure work in ways that systematically depress wages and worsen working conditions for workers, whether or not they are directly employed in a chain. Supply chains do this through how they relate both firms and workers to each other. Consider the infamous collapse of the eight-story Rana Plaza building, which contained five garment factories, in Dhaka, Bangladesh in 2013; the disaster killed 1,134 workers and injured more than 2,500.²⁶ These workers, mostly earning what was then the legal minimum wage of roughly \$38 a month, were producing clothes for large, profitable transnational corporations like Walmart, Children's Place, and Benetton.²⁷ Yet these corporations claimed to have no idea their clothes were produced there, despite their labels being found in the wreckage. That was possible because of how they have structured transnational supply chains. These brands own no factories themselves but outsource all production; production itself is then often further outsourced by intermediate firms to additional factories and from there often into the home, where workers perform piece work.²⁸ This chain of short term contracts means production can move if workers press for higher wages or safer working conditions; workers in Bangladesh have struggled and won a pay increase since the Rana Plaza collapse but their pay remains so low that it makes up less than 2 percent of the final retail cost of a

²⁶ Jennifer Bair, Mark Anner, and Jeremy Blasi. "The Political Economy of Private and Public Regulation in Post-Rana Plaza Bangladesh." *ILR Review* 73, no. 4 (August 2020): 969–94.

²⁷ Rashedur Chowdhury, "The Rana Plaza Disaster and the Complicit Behavior of Elite NGOs." *Organization* 24, no. 6 (November 2017): 938–49.

²⁸ Chris Tilly, Rina Agarwala, Sarah Mosoetsa, Pun Ngai, Carlos Salas, and Hina Sheikh. "Final Report: Informal Worker Organizing as a Strategy for Improving Subcontracted Work in the Textile and Apparel Industries of Brazil, South Africa, India and China." (Los Angeles: UCLA, Institute for Research on Labour and Employment, 2013). <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4f48040t>

garment.²⁹ This affects the wages and working conditions of garment workers the world over, as the industry has moved relentlessly in search of lower wages – with firms selling to U.S. consumers migrating production first to the U.S. South to avoid unions, then to Mexico to take advantage of NAFTA, to Central America and the Caribbean to take advantage of free trade zones, and to China, Vietnam, and Bangladesh as textile import quotas were phased out in 2005.³⁰ What's more, factories must work on very short time horizons since brands are rarely bound to produce there beyond the current order. Just-in-time logistics mean that those orders can vary hugely depending on consumer demand; in some factories, production can vary by as much as 80 percent from week to week.³¹ The global pandemic exacerbated this precarity. In 2020, as retailers and then factories closed, 30 percent of garment workers in many countries lost their jobs.³² In Asia, that meant 1.6 million workers lost almost \$12 billion in wages and severance pay they were owed.³³

²⁹ Tara Donaldson, “New Report Says Just 4% of a Garment’s Cost Goes to the Workers Who Make Them” *Sourcing Journal*, October 31, 2017; <https://sourcingjournal.com/topics/labor/garment-workers-living-wage-supply-chain-74069/>

³⁰ Christoph Ernst, Alfons Hernández Ferrer and Daan Zult “The end of the Multi-Fibre Arrangement and its implication for trade and employment” *International Labor Organization Employment Strategy Papers* 2005/16; http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/@ed_emp/@emp_elm/documents/publication/wcms_114030.pdf; Nathan Wilmers, “Wage Stagnation and Buyer Power: How Buyer-Supplier Relations Affect U.S. Workers’ Wages, 1978 to 2014,” *American Sociological Review* 83, no. 2 (2018): 213– 242; Cristopher Adolph, Vanessa Quince, and Aseem Prakash, “The Shanghai Effect: Do Exports to China Affect Labor Practices in Africa?,” *World Development* 89, no. 1 (2017): 1– 18.

³¹ Tim Bartley, Sebastian Koos, Hiram Samel, Gustavo Setrini, and Nik Summers. *Looking Behind the Label: Global Industries and the Conscientious Consumer* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2015), 144.

³² James Lowell Jackson, Jason Judd, and Christian Viegelahn “The supply chain ripple effect: How COVID-19 is affecting garment workers and factories in Asia and the Pacific” *ILO Research Brief* (Bangkok: ILO Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific, 2020); https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---asia/---ro-bangkok/documents/briefingnote/wcms_758626.pdf

³³ Patricia Nilsson, “Pandemic deprives Asia’s garment workers of almost \$12bn in wages” *Financial Times* July 18, 2021; <https://www.ft.com/content/22007eb9-440d-48c7-b3dc-fce62c735e1e>

These unjust wages and working conditions are normalized parts of racial capitalism, as particular populations are treated as disposable and deserving of exploitation. Neoliberalism weaponizes national and racial differences, treating tragedies like the Rana Plaza collapse as the natural state of affairs for certain groups since, in the words of one self-described neoliberal pundit, “Different Places Have Different Safety Rules and That’s OK.”³⁴ Supply chains both take advantage of differences created by other systems and produce their own. For example, most workers in apparel production are women – a longstanding strategy in the industry to exploit workers who are regarded not as self-supporting or heads of households but as earning supplementary income. This sexist myth is maintained by making the performance of it a condition of employment. As Leslie Salzinger puts it, “The notion of an ‘always-already’ docile, dexterous, and cheap woman, that is, of a potential worker whose productive femininity requires not creation but recognition, is thus a transnationally produced fantasy.”³⁵ The low wages paid to women workers reproduces and deepens this oppression as they are unable to accumulate savings, rendering them vulnerable to verbal abuse and sexual violence from factory supervisors, landlords, and others with power that they cannot escape.³⁶

Nor is it only in production that transnational supply chains create precarity. The experience of Amazon workers shows how just-in-time chains also make logistics work precarious. Amazon’s relentless surveillance of its employees and its punishing physical demands mean that the turnover of its workforce was estimated at an astounding 150 percent annually even before the pandemic led to a huge increase in online sales.³⁷

³⁴ Matthew Yglesias, “Different Places Have Different Safety Rules and That’s OK,” *Slate*, April 24, 2013,

http://www.slate.com/blogs/moneybox/2013/04/24/international_factory_safety.html

³⁵ Leslie Salzinger, *Genders in Production: Making Workers in Mexico’s Global Factories* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 10.

³⁶ Tansy Hoskins, “Violence against women garment workers increased during pandemic” *OpenDemocracy*, February 18, 2022, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/violence-against-women-garment-workers-increased-during-pandemic/>

³⁷ Jodi Kantor, Karen Weise and Grace Ashford “The Amazon That Customers Don’t See” *New York Times* June 15, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/06/15/us/amazon-workers.html>

Injury rates in Amazon warehouses are more than twice the rates at competitors like Walmart.³⁸ And when it comes time to deliver those goods from the warehouse to a home, Amazon employs delivery drivers who work for small subcontractors governed by delivery quotas so strict drivers report having to urinate in bottles and defecate in bags since they aren't allowed time to stop to use the bathroom.³⁹ Amazon's impact on working conditions is significant; it is predicted to overtake Walmart as the largest employer in the U.S. in the near future. So Amazon's exploitative business practices don't just affect those who work for Amazon and its subcontractors but set a precedent many firms seek to emulate.⁴⁰ Supply chains are thus connected in multiple ways to the rise of part-time work, the gig economy, and the fissured workplace, which have both deepened and generalized precarity over recent decades.⁴¹

For consumers, these cruel business practices can be phenomenologically obscured by an experience of astounding convenience. Products from around the world delivered to your door within a day, often within hours, can seem miraculous and contemplating the complicated chains that come together to bring us clothes, electronics, and other goods can be vertiginous. While I know on some level that exploitation and injustice are inextricably intertwined with the operation of these networks, that remains a form of knowledge that feels abstract rather than practical, at least in comparison to the hands-on experience of one-click convenience. Yet while that click feels like my initiating a connection with supply chains, just-in-time logistics actually rely on massive on-going corporate surveillance that long precedes the consumer's choice to buy something. These chains are structured to keep inventory as low as

³⁸ Jay Greene and Chris Alcantara, "Amazon warehouse workers suffer serious injuries at higher rates than other firms" *Washington Post* June 1, 2021,

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2021/06/01/amazon-osa-injury-rate/>

³⁹ Ken Klippenstein, "Documents Show Amazon is Aware Drivers Pee in Bottles and Even Defecate En Route, Despite Company Denial" *The Intercept*, March 25, 2021,

<https://theintercept.com/2021/03/25/amazon-drivers-pee-bottles-union/>

⁴⁰ Jason Del Rey, "The Amazonification of the American workforce" *Vox* April 21, 2022; <https://www.vox.com/the-highlight/22977660/amazon-warehouses-work-injuries-retail-labor>

⁴¹ Noam Scheiber, "Despite Labor Shortages, Workers See Few Gains in Economic Security" *New York Times* February 1, 2022;

<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/01/business/economy/part-time-work.html>

possible; product sitting in warehouses costs money. That means firms have sought to become very good at predicting what consumers are likely to want to buy as well as seeking to govern their behavior directly.

All our actions with our phones and internet browsers are collected with the aim of tracking and influencing us, both by supply chain brands and information brokers who sell to them. Anonymous companies with names like Anomaly Six and Acxiom can track billions of devices at a time, following people from work to home – a capacity they’ve demonstrated by showing off their ability to geolocate and identify even CIA and NSA agents.⁴² By combining that information with public records that they scrape, they can build detailed profiles and sell microtargeted ads. Think depressed people might be especially vulnerable to your sales pitch? Skydeo claims they have access to 28,396,472 mobile devices being used by depressed people in the U.S.; narrow that down by specifying if they’re recently divorced, a homeowner, and drive a Kia and you can reach that group for just \$2.50 per thousand users.⁴³ Retailers buy this data and combine it with their own location tracking using WiFi and Bluetooth beacons in stores to measure how long people stand in front of particular displays.⁴⁴ Firms are not investing in all of this just to passively observe us either. While they may exaggerate their capacities in the interest of attracting investors, they are explicit about their aim of “retraining” consumers to become accustomed to willingly share their personal information and to respond to cues about what to buy and when.⁴⁵ And all this is facilitated by social media companies designed to be addictive means of sharing data.⁴⁶

⁴² Sam Biddle and Jack Poulson “American Phone-Tracking Firm Demo’d Surveillance Powers by Spying on CIA and NSA” *The Intercept* April 22, 2022; <https://theintercept.com/2022/04/22/anomaly-six-phone-tracking-signal-surveillance-cia-nsa/>

⁴³ See “Adstra Data Depression Diagnosis: Skydeo Data Marketing Platform,” <https://skydeo.com/segment/adstra-data-depression-diagnosis/>, accessed May 3, 2022

⁴⁴ Joseph Turow, *The Aisles Have Eyes: How Retailers Track Your Shopping, Strip Your Privacy, and Define Your Power* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017), 116-123 and 134-136.

⁴⁵ Turow, *The Aisles Have Eyes*, 219.

⁴⁶ Bernard E. Harcourt, *Exposed: Desire and Disobedience in the Digital Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).

While carefully cultivated by brands, the impression that consumers only intersect with supply chains at the moment of purchase is thus deeply misleading. These firms are thoroughly enmeshed in surveillance capitalism, staking property rights over our intimate information.⁴⁷ Surveillance has always been central to racial capitalism but new technologies have made possible new kinds of domination and exploitation.⁴⁸ Without any meaningful chance of opting out, these firms are collecting data about everything from your credit rating to your menstrual cycle and shaping the economic opportunities available to you as a result. They aim to generate revenue from data about you when, structurally, you are unable to do so. As Shoshanna Zuboff puts it, “Unequal knowledge about us produces unequal power over us, and so epistemic inequality widens to include the distance between what we can do and what can be done to us.”⁴⁹ All of this sustains and reproduces other inequalities; algorithms predict future actions based on current patterns shaped by race and gender hierarchies and are then used to guide people to act as anticipated.⁵⁰ The scope of surveillance is only growing as more devices become sources of data and more firms decide they have to make use of this data to compete. These are meaningful constraints on freedom presented as conveniences. From the perspective of supply chains that seek profit and power, the surveillance of workers and consumers form a continuum, which should trouble any effort to construct these categories as separate.

This illuminates a third way in which supply chains harm those who may be oriented to them primarily as consumers: the efficiencies that supply chains produce rarely generate free time for consumers but rather simply expand the time in which they themselves are expected to work. For example, iPhones are not only exemplary products of just-in-time supply chains but also enable many consumers to effectively

⁴⁷ Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2019).

⁴⁸ Simone Browne, *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015); Nicholas Mirzoeff, “Artificial vision, white space and racial surveillance capitalism” *AI & Society* (2021) 36:1295–1305.

⁴⁹ Zuboff, “You Are Now Remotely Controlled” *New York Times* January 24, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/24/opinion/sunday/surveillance-capitalism.html>

⁵⁰ Safiya Umoja Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism* (New York: NYU Press, 2018).

always be available to their own bosses. As Paul Apostolidis observes, “Even working people fortunate enough to hold full-time, long-term jobs increasingly face management techniques, ideological inducements, and technical interventions that intensify the productivity for capital of each moment of their day...the activity of work has saturated people’s everyday lives.”⁵¹ People turn to the convenience of just-in-time logistics in part because they feel like they have to. One might think the salaried workers who make up about a third of the U.S. workforce would be the ones who benefit most from the conveniences afforded by the exploitation of logistics and manufacturing workers, but their experience has instead been one of increasing pressures to work more than 40 or 45 hours a week. As Heather Boushey and Bridget Ansel observe, our contemporary political economy exhibits “a polarization in working time. While one segment of U.S. workers is spending much more time in paid employment, another is having trouble getting enough work to make ends meet.”⁵² This inequality reinforces itself both domestically and transnationally, as the gig work and care work that serves professionals is often insecure and part time. Long hours in the office for professionals means non-traditional shifts for the service workers who clean up after them.⁵³ The work of social reproduction also becomes insecure wage labor as child care and housework for professionals is often performed by migrant laborers who have themselves traveled from their families, creating additional care needs at home.⁵⁴ And when these overworked professionals do stop working, their time still is surveilled and made productive for capital.⁵⁵

This is the bivalence of supply chain precarity. While supply chain employment is directly and intensely precarious, constant surveillance and the intensification of work

⁵¹ Apostolidis, *The Fight for Time: Migrant Day Laborers and the Politics of Precarity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

⁵² Boushey and Ansel, *Overworked America: The economic causes and consequences of long work hours* (Washington, DC: Washington Center for Equitable Growth, 2016), 13.

⁵³ Dan Clawson and Naomi Gerstel, *Unequal Time: Gender, Class, and Family in Employment Schedules* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2014).

⁵⁴ Saskia Sassen “Women’s Burden: Counter-Geographies of Globalization and the Feminization of Survival.” *Nordic Journal of International Law* 71 No 2 (2002): 255–74.

⁵⁵ Ajay Singh Chaudhary “The Extractive Circuit” *The Baffler* No. 60, November 2021. <https://thebaffler.com/salvos/the-extractive-circuit-singh-chaudhary>

contribute to the production of a more generalized experience of precarity, the feeling one needs to work incessantly in order to not to lose what one has amid great inequality and powerful political and economic institutions accountable only to those at the very top. Looked at together, we can see how these different harms can create a widely shared interest in resisting these arrangements. While there remain consequential differences between the professional working from home and the Amazon driver delivering their goods, we can envision a political coalition against supply chain precarity that benefits both. Supply chains are of a piece with and a driver of long-term trends that make it urgent to be oriented to these practices as workers, even for those who don't experience precarity primarily in the form of insecure, hazardous low-wage employment.

A practical lynchpin of an unjust status quo, supply chains thus condense neoliberal hegemony into a potent and intelligible synecdoche. Beginning in 1979, the U.S. Federal Reserve under the leadership of Paul Volcker raised interest rates to unprecedented heights to stop inflation and wage growth; the resulting recession helped elect Ronald Reagan as president, in which role he slashed taxes for the rich and wielded the power of the federal government to bust labor unions. The resulting political economic settlement has generally featured low inflation, low interest rates, virtually no real wage increases for workers, increasing consumer indebtedness, and widening inequality as the rich capture an inordinate share of economic growth.⁵⁶ This staggering growth of the wealth of the world's richest generates precarity for other classes. First, the wealthy have so much money that they don't know what to do with it, creating bubbles that cause financial crises. With defined-benefit pensions for workers virtually eliminated by neoliberal austerity policies, such crises cause both general immiseration and particular precarity for workers whose retirement plans have been forced into the stock market. Second, venture capital funds like SoftBank Vision Fund and sovereign wealth funds like Saudi Arabia's, both together and separately, fund platform companies

⁵⁶ Yakov Feygin, "The Deflationary Bloc" *Phenomenal World* January 9, 2021, <https://www.phenomenalworld.org/analysis/deflation-inflation/>

like Uber which are producing gig work precarity.⁵⁷ Third, this enormous wealth enables capricious domination in all kinds of direct ways, including massive political spending to turn their power into law, as when Uber finances campaigns to enshrine their workers' legal status as independent contractors.⁵⁸

Given the way transnational supply chains discursively symbolize and practically link so many of these phenomena, I propose that we think of ourselves as *supply chain subjects*. We stand in diverse relations to these chains but are potentially united by a shared interest in resisting and replacing them. Understanding ourselves as supply chain subjects both identifies a common focal point that touches each of our lives and offers a form of shared identification that crosses hierarchical differences without erasing them. Rather than being effaced, these differences form a basis for coalition because chains are understood to produce precarity through the exploitation of such differences. In the conclusion, I will suggest how demands we make from this perspective can link and amplify existing struggles.

CONCLUSION

The pandemic's disruption of supply chains also disrupted the political economic circumstances that make them possible. Supply chain shortages have interrupted their convenience; the resulting inflation – coupled with Russia's invasion of Ukraine, financed by oil and natural gas sales – has also interrupted the neoliberal political economic settlement that compensated for diminished worker power with low prices. We thus face a potential crossroads. One group calls for responding to pandemic disruptions by deepening neoliberal precarity to make supply chains ever more “flexible” and “resilient.”⁵⁹ This would serve the interests of corporations but does nothing to address the underlying problems of the status quo. Meanwhile, political leaders in the U.S. propose various kinds of nationalist solutions that in some ways break with the

⁵⁷ Matthew Zeitlin, “Then We Came to the End” *n+1* October 30, 2019

<https://www.nplusonemag.com/online-only/online-only/then-wecame-to-the-end/>

⁵⁸ Veena Dubal, “Essentially Dispossessed” *South Atlantic Quarterly* Vol 121, No 2 (April 2022): 285-296.

⁵⁹ Davide Malacrino, Adil Mohommad, and Andrea Presbitero, “Global Trade Needs More Supply Diversity, Not Less” *IMFBlog*, April 12, 2022;

<https://blogs.imf.org/2022/04/12/global-trade-needs-more-supply-diversity-not-less/>

economic logic of supply chains only to replace it with the security logic of great power politics. This approach continues to pit precarious workers in, e.g., the U.S. and China against each other, either as economic or political competitors, with no way of envisioning solidarity against the supply chains that dominate them both.

Both strategies continue to obscure the crucial ways that chains implicate both those who produce and consume supply chain goods in shared predicaments of powerlessness, exploitation and precarity. What's needed instead is something like a revolt of supply chain subjects, who share a common interest in ending the on-going harms that the status quo inflicts. As I've argued, supply chains use national, racial, and gender differences to divide workers and create precarity. Recognizing the harms caused by supply chains facilitates coalition-building across the lines of differences sustained by them without erasing the on-going significance of those differences. How can those common interests be articulated? To help answer this question, I conclude by considering some demands such a movement could make, building upon demands being pressed against this system. This is not to skirt difficult questions about how to organize across borders and promote widespread reorientation to supply chains, but to contribute to imagining an appealing future that supply chain subjects could share by further articulating what is incipient in existing demands.⁶⁰

Consider, for example, the Amazon Labor Union's recent election victory at an enormous warehouse on Staten Island and the demands continually made by Bangladesh garment workers in the years since the Rana Plaza collapse.⁶¹ We consistently see demands for long-term employment with predictable hours; for living wages; and for an end to work that destroys bodies. These are demands that supply chains under neoliberal capitalism are constitutively unable to meet; the efficiency and profitability of supply chains as they are currently constituted depends on paying low wages, making work hours unpredictable, and treating workers as disposable bodies.

⁶⁰ On this function, see Weeks, *The Problem with Work*, 175-225.

⁶¹ Lauren Kaori Gurley, "Amazon Labor Union Is Inspiring Amazon Workers Around the Country to Unionize" *Vice* April 14, 2022; <https://www.vice.com/en/article/m7vday/amazon-labor-union-is-inspiring-amazon-workers-around-the-country-to-unionize>; Chowdhury, "The Rana Plaza Disaster and the Complicit Behavior of Elite NGOs."

Despite this, workers have won important local victories that improve wages and working conditions in particular workplaces and even entire firms. Supporting these struggles is urgent for all supply chain subjects because they weaken corporate power, build popular power, and improve the lives of exploited people. But leaving demands at that won't be enough.

Katrina Forrester recently argued that we should think of demand-making as having three key functions: “disclosure, constituency-creation, and horizon-setting.”⁶² Wage laborers employed in supply chains publicly demanding living wages, regular hours, and safe workplaces for themselves do disclose the brutal functioning of supply chains but may not on their own illuminate the logic that makes that brutality inevitable, with varying negative consequences for different parts of society. However, we can see in the “bargaining for the common good” movement a different kind of demand-making that imagines a broader constituency.⁶³ Making demands on behalf of this larger group I've called supply chain subjects – which also includes those rendered unemployed by the operations of supply chains and capital mobility; the unwaged workers performing the housework and carework that makes formal employment in supply chains possible; and the workers consuming supply chain goods – transforms the disclosive function. Demanding living wages, fewer and more regular working hours, and healthy work for *all* supply chain subjects can illuminate how supply chains render precarious and otherwise harm many more people than work for them directly. Similarly, when they encompass the continuum of workers and consumers, the workplace and elsewhere, demands for digital privacy and the right to disconnect can also illuminate the power supply chains wield over us.⁶⁴

⁶² Forrester, “Feminist Demands and the Problem of Housework” *American Political Science Review* FirstView March 3, 2022, pages 1-15 at page 10.

doi:10.1017/S0003055422000053

⁶³ Joseph A. McCartin, “Bargaining for the Common Good” *Dissent* (Spring 2016) <https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/bargaining-common-good-community-union-alignment>

⁶⁴ James Muldoon, *Platform Socialism: How to Reclaim our Digital Future from Big Tech* (London: Pluto Press, 2022).

In these cases, supply chain subjects are making demands that articulate the horizon of a radically different future. In their current form, supply chains function because goods can move freely where workers cannot. Firms source production in poor countries so they can exploit workers there who are denied other options; when those workers do try to leave and earn an income in a more prosperous country (or just a more prosperous part of the same country, as in the case of China's hukou system, which divides rural and urban areas), they are often denied legal status and made even more precarious. Supply chain subjects disclose and imagine an alternative when they demand the freedom of people to move transnationally and associate with each other as easily as goods now move along the supply chain. Instead, the U.S. has weaponized public health and used the pandemic as a pretext to keep out refugees. This suggests a final horizon that supply chain subjects must be oriented towards. COVID-19 has often been called a dress rehearsal for climate change in the way it requires a globally coordinated response to avoid catastrophic outcomes and manage disruptions. The environmental impact of supply chains is considerable and the logic of supply chains that renders populations disposable does the same to the planet. As Gargi Bhattacharyya puts it, "The myth of expendability—of expendable peoples and expendable regions—haunts our time and is a key motor of the forms of capitalist development that operate on the assumption that some populations will never be included and will never reach viability or sustainability."⁶⁵ A coalition of supply chain subjects that revolts against being treated as disposable, exploitable, fungible, predictable means to profit must also be a demand for a world in which nothing is treated that way.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Gargi Bhattacharyya, *Rethinking Racial Capitalism: Questions of Reproduction and Survival* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), page x.

⁶⁶ The author thanks Paul Apostolidis and Thea Riofrancos for their feedback.