

LABOURFLOWS: Infrastructures of Labour Power Flows through Warehouses in Europe

Over the last 50 years, the idea of a steady job providing a decent living has eroded for many Europeans. The promise of a ‘living wage’ – sufficient to support workers and their families – has faded, leaving an increasing number of people struggling to make ends meet, even while employed. Jobs have become more precarious and insecure, wages have stagnated or declined, and inequality has grown. Major economic disruptions, such as the 2008 financial crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic, have exacerbated these challenges. The consequences extend beyond the workforce, impacting society as a whole. Declining birth rates, aging populations, and acute labour shortages across Europe reflect the far-reaching effects of these ongoing trends.

To better understand the emerging reality of precarious work, the LabourFlows project introduces a novel perspective. Rather than viewing work as a static relationship between employer and employee, we conceptualize workers as a flow of ‘labour power’ moving through workplaces, and examine the infrastructure that facilitates this movement. Just as roads and bridges enable the flow of goods and the internet powers the flow of data, we aim to uncover the overlooked and partially hidden systems that sustain the constant movement of people into and out of insecure, precarious jobs. This approach investigates the foundational systems that make such labour flows possible, including brokers that connect workers to employers, but also other non-human elements, such as (supra)national regulations, physical infrastructures that support the cheap circulation of people. By focusing on these interconnected elements and their relations, we can better grasp the systems driving the precarious nature of work and life today. Understanding these infrastructures is both innovative and essential. Traditional frameworks for analyzing jobs tend to focus narrowly on the employer-employee relationship and fail to account for the complex interplay of human actors and non-human elements that perpetuate insecurity in the labour market. By shifting the focus to infrastructures, we can reveal the critical roles played by temporary work agencies, community organizations, local governments, policy frameworks, and social networks in shaping the precarious conditions under which people work.

This project aims to develop an infrastructural understanding of how precarious wage work is produced and maintained under contemporary global capitalism. We investigate three major European logistics hubs across Poland, Belgium, and Austria. We reconstruct the socio-material infrastructures facilitating the flow of diverse and precarious labour power based on data collected in warehouses, the labour market, and the surrounding communities with key actors and their social practices. LabourFlows examines labour power flows in three logistics hubs - countries with significant logistics sectors but distinct labour markets, institutional frameworks (e.g., labour laws and union structures), workforce demographics, and positions within global supply chains. Comparing these contexts allows for a deeper understanding of the diverse infrastructures enabling precarious work and the variations in how they operate. By doing so, the project aspires to contribute new theoretical frameworks, innovative methodologies, and empirical insights, shedding light on how these infrastructures can be challenged, re-appropriated, or transformed to envision alternative futures for labour and work.

The logistics industry offers a valuable lens for uncovering infrastructures, as it has experienced significant growth in recent decades while heavily relying on insecure jobs that often employ marginalized groups, including migrants, minorities, individuals with disabilities, and formerly convicted. Globally, logistics operates through hubs - strategic locations where goods are stored in warehouses before distribution. These hubs not only reveal the flow of goods but also how people are channeled in and out of low-paid, precarious jobs. Currently, many European warehouses face labour shortages, suggesting that existing infrastructures of labour flows are at least partially failing. This makes them more easily observable, as they are most noticeable when they break down and disrupt the flow they support. By analyzing who and what maintains these systems - and how they are resisted or transformed - this project seeks to uncover the hidden foundations of precarious work. It aims to highlight how they shape precarious work for a diverse workforce and their broader implications for their livelihood.