

# Editorial

## 2011 – the "Precarian spring"

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Over the last twelve months, the political vocabulary of our societies has added new adjectives, places and names. Who now could not be aware of the *indignados* of Madrid's Puerta del Sol, or the *aganaktismenoi* on the streets of Greece? Tahrir Square has overflowed Cairo's borders and seems to stretch to Damascus and Tel Aviv. The self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi in Sidi Bouzid in Tunisia in December 2010 sparked a wave of uprisings. In the southern Mediterranean, they have already caused huge political turmoil. Concerted action in European countries has been patchier. But their common feature is a new generation bursting onto the political scene with a clear distrust of traditional forms of representation.

Looking beyond the deep-seated differences that characterize developments between countries, there is no ignoring that most of the millions of people who have brought this movement into the world are young and urban. They are what some sociologists are calling the "precariat", connected by facing increasingly precarious employment prospects in a context of widening social inequalities.

The experience of precarious work is a potential focal point, although work has seldom been a central issue. That in itself is an interesting paradox: precarious employment both contributes to the formation of a social and political identity, yet its precarious – possibly sporadic – nature does not explicitly feature as central to that identity. It embraces a wide range of employment situations with a number of common features.

Nearly 80% of Europe's workers are employed under permanent contracts. This figure falls to about 50% for employees aged under 25, for whom, the probability of having no employment contract at all is 10.6% (against 5.6% for all employees), that of having a temporary contract is 25% (against 12% for all employees), that of working for a temp agency is 3.8% (against 1.5%). These figures lift only a corner of the veil of precariousness, describing employment in terms of specific legal forms. Other facets of precariousness can be at least as important: the threat of unemployment, deskilling (being overqualified for a first job or a new job after time unemployed), poor collective rights, etc. Experiencing this sort of insecurity impacts on people's lives in

ways that go beyond the material aspects of an insufficient or irregular pay packet.

The current protests scotch the idea that precariousness saps any form of grass-roots expressionism, and inevitably produces apathetic or callously resigned acceptance and a withdrawal into individualism. They also go to show that traditional forms of organization will be buffeted and must dig deep to renew themselves in order to survive. They challenge the norms of political representation in a society increasingly riven by social inequalities.

It would be rash to second-guess the outcome of these new waves of grassroots action. But it would be fair to say that they will put a new and pressing question mark over working conditions. ●

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