

Insecurity in the Age of Labour Formalisation: Informal Work in Europe, ca. 1870–1970

International Conference, University of Bern, Switzerland, 31 August – 2 September 2023

Organisers:

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Free wage labour is commonly presented as the focus, if not the very core, of the history of labour in Europe in the 19th and 20th centuries. Emphasis is typically placed both on the rise of free wage labour in the 19th century and on the first labour and social legislation of the late 19th century, which laid the foundations in various European nation states for the regulation of formal labour that is still in force today. We also hear much about how these legal and social models of gainful employment were consolidated throughout Europe over the course of the 20th century until they were thrown into prolonged crisis: in Western Europe in the 1970s; in Eastern Europe somewhat later. The overriding impression is thus of an era of labour formalisation and protection lasting roughly from 1870 to at least 1970.

The conference aims to challenge this narrative by focusing on multiple forms and fields of *informal work*. Although this term in its current sense emerged only around 1970, there is nothing new about informal gainful employment: types of unregulated or feebly regulated work persisted in European countries during this period (ca. 1870–1970) alongside emerging non-formalised or barely formalised occupations and in parallel with the rise of formally regulated wage labour. Informal work activities are generally considered insecure inasmuch as they fall short of certain labour and social standards of formal work or employment.

The conference will explore the *insecurity of informal work*. It will ask how widespread in Europe was the unregulated employment that can be described as insecure in the very century generally regarded as the era of increasingly formalised labour, and will consider which factors were thereby decisive. Thus, the focus will not be on the hard-won rise and safeguarding of free-wage labour, already so frequently examined in labour history. Rather, the spotlight will be on how the insecurity associated with informal work was not only tacitly but also quite

openly accepted, or even actively promoted. The conference will also investigate the social and political conflicts that accompanied this recurrent phenomenon.

Cases studies investigating the history of informal work in all parts of Europe throughout the period from about 1870 to 1970 (and, in the case of Eastern Europe, rather longer) will be debated. Papers should address one or more of the following questions:

- *Informal Forms of Work and Informal Workers*: Which forms and fields of work were excluded from formal labour regulation, and why? What role in this was played by specific social categories such as sex, race, class, migration background, and physical and mental ability (among other possible factors ...). How, if at all, did informal work activities interact with occupations and modes of production in the formalised labour sector, and with unpaid reproductive and subsistence labour?
- *Actors and Interests*: How did actors in politics, administration, the economy, scientific fields, and civil society, including trade unions and social movements, shape the contested borders and grey zones between formal and informal work, as well as the character of informal work, and how did they endeavour to forward their own specific interests? What role was played in this by nation states on the one hand, and international organisations and transnational networks on the other?
- *Historical Phases and Constellations*: Under which historical conditions did projects aiming to formalise, restructure, and regulate informal work fail? In which historical constellations did initiatives to deregulate labour find support? How did wars and crises, economic boom periods, and shifts in production modes and processes influence these developments? To what extent can the interrogation of informal work be linked with analyses of global capitalism, processes of territorialisation and deterritorialisation, and the history of political and social conflicts respectively?

Case studies should shed light on informal work and insecurity as integral and constitutive factors of labour and labour politics in European history; this is in keeping with the aim of the conference, which is both to redraw the contours of labour history in 19th- and 20th-century Europe and to review the field against the backdrop of a de-provincialised global history of work.

The conference, funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation, will take place **from 31 August to 2 September 2023** at the University of Bern, Switzerland. All travel and

accommodation expenses will be covered by the organisers. We foresee a hybrid format, so that any speakers unable or unwilling to travel may participate via Zoom. At the conference we will discuss pre-circulated papers. Plans are underway for the post-conference publication of selected papers. Interested scholars should send their abstracts for papers (max. 300 words), as well as a short biographical note (max. 100 words), to Sibylle Marti (sibylle.marti@unibe.ch) no later than **30 September 2022**.