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FREELANCE

Proud precariat

HOW DO WE understand and respond to the growing pressure on freelance workers? Those questions led London Freelance Branch to hold a high-level event on 11 March. Branch Co-Chair Pennie Quinton introduced our mission: to “protect and survive”. Our keynote speaker was Guy Standing, researcher at SOAS and author of *The Precariat* and *The Precariat Charter*.

People are being forced into insecure labour, with increasing restrictions on our autonomy about how and when we work. Those of us who choose to be freelance are under pressure. The Trades Union Congress reported 3.2 million in precarious work in 2016.

We’re sold “the gig economy” – which, says Guy, “romanticises it, as though you’re in rock band going from gig to gig”. The reality is that “more and more people are habituated to internalise a life of unstable and insecure work,” their working lives often directed by apps via smartphones. For millions there’s no paid sick leave, no non-wage benefits,

only “money wages”. In this environment, “most people don’t know the optimum use of their time – should I network more?” This, says Guy, creates “immense psychological stress, mental health problems, the precarified mind.” Sound familiar?

Precarious workers now no longer have “an occupational narrative, an identity you can write on a visa”. Many journalists who interview Guy don’t think they’ll be journalists when they next meet. We’re losing rights-based state benefits too.

Guy related how the word “precarious” has its origin in “obtaining by prayer”: you’re in a dependent situation, you have to be obsequious.

But the precariat are not all victims. Guy quoted Aristotle: “the insecure man is the free man”; we freelancers are at least spared “the grind of a job for 30 years.” There is, he notes, a “progressive part” of the precariat – people who were promised a future, careers, stability, “sold a lottery ticket which is worth less and less”. Before around 2011, precariat folk saw themselves as failures;

after the Occupy movement and the Arab Spring, people writing to Guy self-identify as “proud precariat.” Guy’s had 400 invitations to speak in 37 countries. He now strongly believes the precariat are trying to mobilise.

Old labour union leaders seem to want to convert “atypical workers” into typical workers. Guy feels they “don’t get it,” and until they get it they won’t succeed.

What is to be done? To understand what’s going on, Guy proposes that we think about the emergence of new classes, including the precariat at the beck and call of a shrinking secure “salarariat”.

There needs to be a re-



Guy Standing (standing) and (below) some of the attendees who put questions **Photos © David Hoffman**

distribution, not so much of money but of security and control of our time. And Guy is involved in pilot basic income schemes, where everyone gets some sort of unconditional income from the state or a charitable institution.

These work in Finland, in India, they improve health, welfare, people who have it work more productively, are “more altruistic... they don’t walk around terrified.” In January India’s government adopted a report backing basic income.

Guy says of basic income, “we could do it in India”: the only obstacle is “political.”

The successful meeting also heard from Ursula Huws, professor of labour at the University of Hertfordshire (see page 3), John Toner, NUJ Freelance Organiser, Nicola Hawkins of actors’ union Equity’s Executive Council and Mags Dewhurst, chair of the Independent Workers Union of Great Britain Couriers and Logistics Branch, a bicycle courier who won the right to paid holidays and minimum pay (see page 4).

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Fighting tax and NI woes, and winning some battles

FREELANCE members *probably* no longer need to write to MPs urgently about National Insurance Contribution (NIC) rises, after the government’s U-turn. But there’s much around tax we still need to act on.

Chancellor Philip Hammond’s Budget announced Class 4 NICs for the self-employed would rise from 9 per cent to 10 per cent in April 2018, with another rise in 2020. There followed a Tory backlash, with Hammond apparently alerted to a “manifesto breach” shortly afterwards. On 15 March Hammond told the Com-

mons, “There will be no increase in NI rates in this Parliament.”

“Class 4s” are paid by those earning over £5965 a year in self-employment. The BBC estimate that’s some 3.6 million people.

The prospect of NIC hikes for the self-employed is seen off, for now. But there’s a £2 billion hole left by the screeching U-turn and “this Parliament” has to end in 2020.

The tax woes of the self-employed aren’t over. Louise Bolotin alerts members to errors by Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs (HMRC) over

Class 2 NICs. These have in some cases been “removed” from tax calculations for the most recent tax year, which could affect your pension. Contact HMRC now. See what we know so far at www.londonfreelance.org/fil/1703ni.html

Then there’s the threat of Making Tax Digital – a new “quarterly reporting” requirement for the self-employed. Rather than the couple of lines of data we were at first led to believe, it may well mean sending in four full tax returns a year from tax year 2018. Watch this space.

LFB meetings

Mon 8 May

Rory Peck Trust helps journalists in crisis

Mon 12 Jun

Fighting tax and NI woes and winning

See back page & twitter.com/NUJ_LFB