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Speaking of Contradiction

Abstract

Whereas McGovern (2014) calls for a moratorium on the ever increasing (ab)use of the word 'contradiction', principally because scholars of work and employment fail to connect different levels of analysis and/or demonstrate how and why contradiction(s) lead to widespread instability and upheaval, we demonstrate how we can achieve both through the 'system, society, dominance' framework proposed by Smith and Meiksins (1995). Our empirical focus is the safety-critical work of airport ground service providers (GSPs), where key elements of the employment relationship embody contradictions that can be traced to the (sub-)system (mode of production) of a Single European Aviation Market (SEAM) that is now dominated by low fares airlines (LFAs). Instead of a moratorium we call on scholars of work and employment to reconnect with society and theoretically ground their analysis in a (capitalist) system beset with contradictions between the forces and relations of production.

Introduction

If students of work and employment ignore society, then a case can be made for a moratorium on the word 'contradiction', an analytical term for tensions within the employment relationship of capitalist firms and in relation to the control of labour (McGovern, 2014: 24). To be sure, all capitalist societies are characterised by a contradiction between the forces and relations of production, but we cannot simply 'read [contradiction] into the evidence' at the workplace level (ibid: 30). Instead, we need to demonstrate how contradictions operating at the level of the mode of production are manifest at more concrete

levels of empirical inquiry, where the test is not simply whether there are competing demands on workers (e.g. cost *vs*. quality, management *vs*. consumers, agency *vs*. client) but whether a 'fundamental weakness' or 'fatal flaw' is built into the very fabric of the (employment) relationship (Edwards, 2014: 9). This is not to call for a (futile) search for the contradictions of capitalism that 'sow the seeds of its own destruction' – capitalism has proven to be an incredibly resilient mode of production that can accommodate myriad tensions and conflicts of interest between different social actors – but rather to echo the call for a model that embodies common capitalist principles ('system effects') with particular 'societal effects' and 'dominance effects', where the latter are driven increasingly by trans-national corporations (TNCs) (Smith and Meiksins, 1995; and Edwards, 2014: 16-17).

Over time, the 'system' (capitalist mode of production) has taken different (predominant) forms. The system that preoccupied Braverman (1974) was 'monopoly capitalism' whereas today there is much greater focus on the contradictions of 'consumer capitalism' or the neo-liberal brand of 'free market capitalism' that is driving globalization. Systemic contradictions are variously magnified, or mitigated, by different social institutions ('societal effects'), while 'dominance effects' may override or combine with societal effects to reshape institutions. Dominance effects, in turn, are conditioned by the system, 'by the tendency for ongoing re-alignment of economic powers within global capitalism' (Smith and Meiksins, 1995: 261). Thus, instead of a moratorium, it is possible to conceptualise how contradictions 'play out' from the (abstract) level of a mode of production to the (concrete) level of a particular organization or workplace (Edwards et al, 2013). As different industrial sectors can be considered distinct economic 'sub-systems', with their own identities, histories and interests (Smith and Meiksins, 1995: 253; and Russell et al, 2017), the contradictions of

capitalism are most readily identified and empirically analysed at this intermediate level of inquiry (i.e. between the workplace and society/global economy).

When the contradictions of capitalism play out in a safety-critical work environment, we need to pay careful attention to what might (literally) be a 'fatal flaw' in the system. Contrast the potential consequences of airline cabin crew failing to smile at customers with ground service providers (GSPs) who might load insufficient or contaminated fuel, fail to properly de-ice the aircraft prior to take-off, dispatch a flight with a passenger's luggage when the passenger fails to board, ignore damage to packages of dangerous goods, or allow passengers to walk across the ramp unsupervised.[1] The work of airport GSPs has been identified as one of the 'Significant Seven' areas of risk in the UK Civil Aviation Authority's (CAA) Safety Plan, not least because only 50 per cent of ground-handling related errors are currently reported to the CAA through the Mandatory Occurrence Reporting (MOR) scheme introduced in 2007.[2] Reporting of safety incidents varies from one EU Member State to the next and there have been (unsuccessful) attempts to mitigate these societal effects through an EU Directive (2003/42/EC) on occurrence reporting in civil aviation and a Regulation (EU 376/2014) to promote a 'just safety culture'.[3]

The root problem, as we demonstrate in the following section, is not societal but systemic, and the 'solution' is certainly not organizational (e.g. a requirement under Article 16-11 of Regulation 376/2014 for every GSP to adopt internal rules describing how 'just culture' principles are 'guaranteed and implemented within that organization'). At the organizational level, where contradictions are most readily observed, the evidence we present in a subsequent section, based on two major studies of recent developments in the European civil aviation section (Author A and Author B, 2012 and 2014),[4] indicates that most GSPs are

'just about' safe. Of greatest concern is that instead of routine reporting of safety incidents, near misses or other safety issues, the system means that 'silence is the safest bet' for workers more concerned about their own (precarious) employment than the reporting requirements of national law or EU Regulations. For too many GSP workers, silence is not so much a conscious decision to withhold voice as a fundamental inability to raise safety concerns because they have 'just no voice'.

For McGovern (2014: 33), 'nothing is so damaging to those who insist on the significance of contradictions than the massively awkward fact that they have not generated the kind of workplace instability and change that the concept originally implied'. If by instability we mean resistance and strikes there is extensive evidence of conflict from primary (hub) airports across Europe where trade unions are well-organised and workers have a (confident) voice. If by instability we mean the constant reorganization of contracts and control, and a system that is 'just about safe', we need look no further than the many secondary airports where the new generation of low fares airlines (LFAs) have opened (and closed) routes at an alarming rate in recent years but where overt resistance or even 'voicing concerns' is more notable by its absence.

'It's capitalism, stupid' – contradictions of the aviation sub-system
Civil aviation in Europe has been transformed by the creation of a Single European Aviation Market (SEAM), consolidated by the mid-1990s through a series of 'market-opening' reforms (Dobson, 2010). Whereas competition was previously restricted to 'legacy' (national flag) airlines, with routes between airport pairs populated by the respective national airlines under bilateral air service agreements (BASAs) negotiated by sovereign states, there is now

an 'open market' system that has paved the way for LFAs to dominate the intra-European market (Author A and Author B, 2014).

LFAs compete on the basis of high utilization of their capital assets (aircraft), which depends critically on rapid airport turnaround – typically around 25 minutes – as aircraft accumulate cost and earn no revenue when on the ground. LFAs minimise costs by sub-contracting all ancillary services (e.g. airport check-in, gate services, baggage handling, fuelling) and even 'core activities' such as flight and cabin crew are managed via commercial contracts rather than employment contracts in the 'ultra-low-cost airlines' (e.g. over 70 per cent of Ryanair pilots are 'self-employed') (Author A and Author B, 2015). Although most LFAs fly mainly to secondary airports, providing an alternative route for passengers rather than direct competition with the legacy airlines that fly to primary (hub) airports, the latter have been sucked into the cost-cutting vortex created by the former. Herein lies the root of restructuring and conflict between management and labour at legacy airlines in recent years (Author A and Author B, 2014; Taylor and Moore, 2015).

Once the SEAM had been established, attention turned to airports and ground-handling services, with a new Directive (96/67/EC) that 'enforced competition' (a minimum of two service providers) at all European airports with at least 2 million passengers or 50,000 tonnes of cargo per annum. 'Prior to this, monopolies were the norm for ground-handling services at EU airports and many airlines complained about high prices and poor-quality services'.[5] Between 1996 and 2007, the number of GSPs in Europe increased by almost 100 per cent for baggage handling (Author A and Author B, 2012: 34). In contract negotiations between airlines and GSPs, the former hold far more cards than the latter, especially LFAs who contract with GSPs at secondary airports (Malighetti et al, 2016: 234). Almost three-

quarters of all routes in Europe are 'single-carrier', largely because of LFAs offering alternative routes to secondary airports, and it is much easier to open, and close, a point-to-point route compared to primary (base/hub) airport services.[6] In fact, while approximately 2,000 new routes are now opened every year in Europe, around 15-20 per cent of all routes are closed each year (Copenhagen Economics, 2012: 4). Ryanair, the world's most profitable airline, is also the most 'foot-loose', being responsible for the highest number of airport downsizing and base abandonments in the world (Malighetti et al, 2016: 240). At all European airports, there is now a higher proportion of 'foot-loose' routes under the new system of open competition (Copenhagen Economics, 2012: 25).

These developments reflect a critical shift in the sub-system of European civil aviation from 'structural regulation' (under BASAs) to 'conduct regulation' (under the SEAM). The former concerns the way the market is organized, such as rules on market entry, single capacity rules and the like (basically, which firms are allowed to engage in particular activities) whereas the latter concerns behaviour in the market, such as measures to guard against anti-competitive behaviour, price controls, rules against certain forms of advertising and other restrictions on competitive activity (basically, how firms behave in their chosen activities). *Ex ante* regulation is often more effective than *ex post* regulation, especially where anti-competitive forms of behaviour are difficult to define, let alone enforce. In particular, 'social dumping' – the lowering of wage or social standards by organizations 'for the sake of enhanced competitiveness … indirectly involving their employees and/or home or host country governments' (Bernaciak, 2012) – often goes 'undetected', or more precisely is now built into the very fabric of the system and is 'permitted', if not facilitated, in some Member States (i.e. systemic contradictions are magnified by societal effects). Cost is the determining factor when dominant airlines, especially LFAs, tender for ground-handling services at

secondary airports, and they will accept quotes from GSPs 'even if they know that you cannot make it at that [low] price' (GSP manager quoted by Rubery et al, 2003: 276). As labour is the single largest and most pliable cost for any GSP, accounting for as much as 80 per cent of total operating costs, any initiatives to satisfy the contractual requirements imposed by the client, whether LFA or legacy airline, invariably focus on labour. Thus, it is the intensified and highly cost-competitive system of 'free market capitalism' that is driving the increasing rate of exploitation of GSP workers. To rephrase McGovern (2014: 33), the 'massively awkward outcome' for these workers is instability and change, manifest in the constant demand for higher productivity and rapid aircraft turnaround that compromises the safety of ground-handling services.

'Just about safe' – safety-critical service work in European airports

In any triangular relationship – whether management-worker-customer (front-stage service work) or management-worker-client (back-stage service work) – there will be competing demands on workers. These demands create tensions that are accommodated in different ways by the parties to the employment relationship. For example, in many front-line service jobs, 'the worker is employed to meet the goals specified by management and satisfying the customer is a means to this end' (Bélanger and Edwards, 2013: 436). In contrast, in many back-stage jobs, including GSPs, safety rather than customer service is the critical outcome of the service interaction. Triangular relationships colour, and often cloud, the competing demands on workers, but they cannot condone the actions of management. Put differently, we cannot let management off the culpability hook (Brook, 2007: 370). This is not to gainsay that some firms lose at the expense of others, rather to emphasise that capitalist firms, especially the dominant TNCs, are the architects and beneficiaries of changes to the system (mode of production) (ibid: 372).

While competing demands on the worker, and their *temporary* resolution, are not, *ipso facto*, evidence of contradictions in work and employment – it is 'not the immediate nature of the job but rather the economic and social relations in which it is located, that is critical' (Bélanger and Edwards, 2013: 447) – there will always be key elements of any employment relationship that open an analytical window to fundamental weaknesses and fatal flaws in the (sub-)system. In civil aviation, three elements of the employment relationship, namely training, the nature of work (specifically work intensity and job insecurity), and employee involvement and participation, are identified as 'safety-critical' by leading national and international organizations such as the CAA[7] and the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO).[8] Contradictions in the mode of production are manifest, and more readily analysed, through a focus on these safety-critical elements.

Training is perhaps the element most intuitively, and indeed most evidently required to ensure (procedural) safety. If nothing else, training is necessary to raise workers' awareness of potential hazards, how to deal with those hazards, and most importantly how to respond in emergency situations. However, training standards vary from one society to the next, there is no legal minimum threshold for training in the Directive (96/67/EC) that opened the European ground handling market to competition (it is conduct, not structure, that is regulated), and training is a 'soft target' when GSPs come under pressure to cut costs. This fundamental flaw in the system is readily acknowledged: 'One of the most effective solutions to reduce the risk of the human factor in safety is training. Although this is widely accepted, it is also true that when cost reductions must be made, the first thing to be reduced is often the training budget'.[9] Our own data supports this observation, with case study evidence indicating that both the duration and content of GSP staff training has been diminished and

diluted as a result of cost-competition. In one case, for example, with contracts under threat, the time spent training for GSP recruits was reduced from 2 weeks to just 1 week, with 'classroom teaching' replacing the previous system of 'shadowing' (on-the-job training). Airport security rules were also broken when new recruits were issued a visitor's pass to enable them to work airside prior to being certified (fully trained) (Author A and Author B, 2012: 39-40).

Under-investment in human capital, and the consequent (in)ability of GSP workers to fully comply with prescribed safety procedures, is compounded by work intensification. Working harder and faster erodes the ability of workers to follow safety procedures in the time available for aircraft turnaround. In the words of one ground handler, 'dodging the rules in order to get the turnaround'[10]. Time constraints on the ground cannot be under-estimated – the cost per minute of any delay, based on an A320 aircraft, is over €80 (Cook and Tanner 2010), which is more than the average ticket price per passenger on LFAs. GSP workers are acutely aware of the consequences of delay for themselves (ranging from reprimand and financial penalties to dismissal) and their clients (financial losses on the flight in question and possible route closure or even airport abandonment). During focus group discussions, GSP workers articulated not only their reluctance to report immediate safety concerns (e.g. near misses) but also to engage in the more time-consuming process of resolving underlying safety risks (Author A and Author B 2012: 40). Thus, instead of contradiction being 'read into' the data, it emerged directly from the views expressed by employees (cf. McGovern, 2014: 30).

Doing more (servicing increasing numbers of aircraft) with less (fewer staff and less time) means that flight dispatchers face the daily challenge of allocating limited human resources to aircraft at different airport gates, often some distance apart. It is the

responsibility of the dispatcher to confirm that everything is in order before flights depart, but with more flights and more passengers on-board LFAs, one outcome of being 'in a hurry [is] you forget things. You can't afford to make mistakes, but you do!' (dispatcher, quoted in Author A and Author B, 2012: 39). This is not to suggest that safety and security are not paramount in the minds of GSP workers, rather to highlight the primacy of punctuality. As one GSP worker remarked, 'Security is important, but punctuality is most important. Punctuality is money' (ibid). During one focus group discussion, another GSP worker answered his own (rhetorical) question on this potentially fatal flaw in the current system: 'Safety first? What a joke!' (Ibid).

Work intensification combined with precarious employment contracts is no laughing matter. Research has shown that workers' perception of job (in)security is correlated with a reluctance to comply with safety protocols (Probst and Brubaker, 2001) and report accidents (Probst et al., 2013). Work in many areas of civil aviation is increasingly insecure and precarious (Bamber et al., 2009), which tends to focus workers' attention on those factors most likely to enhance their prospects of job retention, such as turn-around time, rather than safety (cf. Probst, 2004). Short-term contracts are common to cover peak periods of demand (e.g. winter ski season and summer holiday periods), but new forms of temporal flexibility have been introduced such as 'split-shifts' whereby the working day is divided between morning and evening peak periods when most aircraft depart and then return. At one airport, a shop steward noted that it was not uncommon to find temporary workers sleeping in their vehicles in the airport car park between (split) shifts, rather than travelling home to recuperate, because of the limited 'turnaround time' between morning and evening shifts (Author A and Author B, 2012: 40). Another feature of precarious contracts is a higher

hourly rate of pay in exchange for sickness benefits, leading to reluctance on the part of GSP staff to report in sick when genuinely ill (ibid).

Insecure workers fail to engage with health and safety initiatives often because they feel that their views are marginalised (Aronsson, 1999). Employee involvement and participation play a critical role in raising workers' awareness of, and their ability and willingness to follow safety procedures. Consultation and communication is in fact the fulcrum of the 'just safety culture' recently embraced by the European Aviation Safety Agency (EASA) and the European civil aviation social partners.[11]

Essentially, a just safety culture proceeds from the supposition that whereas human factors play a major role in accidents, a very small proportion of human actions that lead to accidents are deliberate. Most are not the result of recklessness or sabotage and so do not warrant sanction. This does not mean that workers who engage in recklessness or sabotage should be immune from punishment, but that a just safety culture ensures genuine mistakes are identified so that processes and consequently safety might be continuously improved. Thus, a just safety culture is predicated on 'an organisational climate in which people are prepared to report their errors and near misses' (ESARR, 2006: 10). However, instead of a culture of voice, many GSPs have created a 'culture of silence' (Barry and Wilkinson, 2016: 263) through a combination of fear (managers 'shoot the messenger'), futility (concerns will fall on management 'deaf ears') and fundamental mistrust (managers 'put the blame on workers, not the system'). In our recent survey of European civil aviation workers (see endnote 4), when asked if they 'feel comfortable reporting safety concerns to management', less than half (42 per cent) of the GSP respondents agreed with this statement while more than one-in-four disagreed.[12] Direct (downward) communication between management and

staff happens 'not very often' in the experience of most GSP workers (52 per cent), while a further 12 per cent claimed this 'never happens'. Managements' reluctance to engage with trade unions[13] in the civil aviation sector is further evidence of how workers can be 'organized out' of the voice process (Donaghey et al, 2011). Despite the frequent juxtaposition of 'contradiction and conflict', or more accurately the conflation of one with the other (McGoven, 2014: 29), structured antagonism in the employment relationship does not always lead to overt resistance on the part of workers.

Is it safe to resist?

Although union density levels in civil aviation vary from one EU Member State to the next, overall density levels are relatively high compared to other industrial sectors in the same society. Domain membership – the ratio of total membership to potential membership, as demarcated by the membership domain – tends to be lower in ground handling compared to other domains (e.g. flight crew) (Eurofound, 2010: 11-24). At primary airports where ground handling was traditionally a monopoly (airport authority) or duopoly (airport and the dominant airline) there is still a legacy of strong trade union organization. Ground staff at these airports identify themselves as safety professionals and have resisted the increasing rate of exploitation built into the new system (mode of production) created by the SEAM. Put differently, workers are not passive victims of liberalization and intensified competition, but social actors who, through mobilization, can mitigate some of the worst effects of the contradictions that impact on the employment relationship. This is especially the case where societal effects curb some of the worst excesses (dominance effects) of LFAs and the demands they place on GSPs. Recent disputes include strikes in protest against work intensification and its impact on safety at Berlin airports (March 2017) and against 'lack of respect, bad management and under-staffing' at Brussels airport (November 2016). As the

European organization of the Airports Council International (ACI) recently highlighted, 'In a liberalised ground handling market, working conditions and the social protection of staff are at the core of many conflicts' (ACI-Europe, 2011: 4). That said, industrial action to defend existing conditions from any further erosion is indicative of a 'just defence' tactic rather than contributing to a proactive 'just safety' strategy.

At secondary airports, especially those only recently brought into service by the growth of LFAs, union organization is often weak or non-existent, especially at the sub-subcontractors who are subject to even greater pressure to reduce costs and increase work intensity (ACI-Europe, 2011: 4). GSP workers on precarious contracts are acutely aware of how the system works – if LFAs cannot achieve high utilization (rapid turnaround) and make a profit, they will readily close the route or even abandon the airport altogether. As GSP work is safety critical, individual forms of resistance such as sabotage or ca'canny – the 'slowing down of work and a deterioration of quality', or 'poor work for poor pay' (Dubois, 1976: 45) – is rarely countenanced. As for collective action, even if they had the associational resources to organize a strike, such resistance would more likely hasten the transfer of service contracts to rival GSPs and/or result in route closures or airport abandonment.[14] Where there is no challenge to management, either because workers are complicit in unsafe practices or unions are not present or fail to raise safety concerns, then unsafe working practices are 'allowed' (Carter and Kline, 2017: 233) by a toxic interaction of system, society and dominance effects. The outcome is just silence rather than just safety.

Conclusion – the (flight) path to contradiction

Calling for a moratorium on the term 'contradiction' at a time of crisis for capitalism might seem perverse, but scholars of work and employment are often all too quick to equate

'conflict' with 'contradiction'. To be sure, conflict at work is often the most direct route to identifying how contradictions in the mode of production 'play out' in the employment relationship, but we cannot expect contradiction to emerge 'directly from the views expressed by employees' as McGovern (2014: 30) suggests. Contradiction leads to 'the expectation of widespread instability and upheaval within capitalist workplaces' (ibid: 33), but it can also silence the workforce through a combination of dominance effects and societal forces that suffocate, rather than support, employee voice. Consequently, when we enter what Marx called the 'hidden abode' of production, we need to focus on the critical elements of the labour process and the employment relationship that might expose any 'fundamental flaw' or 'fatal weakness' in the (sub-)system.

This task is arguably more straightforward in the case of safety-critical service work where dominant firms (LFAs) have imposed new contractual terms on GSPs and their workers that intensifies the rate of exploitation. The fundamental weakness of the SEAM is clearly not 'fatal' if measured by accidents and deaths – civil aviation is in fact the safest mode of transport on this metric – but the (sub-)system privileges cost and celerity over a just safety culture and GSP workers must deal with this contradiction on a daily basis. The fundamental weaknesses of other labour processes may be rather opaque, but the search for contradiction has served social scientists rather well. The forces and relations of production of every sub-sector are embedded in concrete social formations with specific, often unique, histories, institutional rules, labour organizations and the like (Russell et al, 2017: 430). As such, they are no less amenable to empirical research informed by a focus on dominance effects (the most accessible and tractable level of empirical inquiry), societal effects (the fundamental maxim of industrial sociology that to understand what happens inside the

factory gate, behind the office door or on the airport ramp we also need to look outside), and the more abstract level of the capitalist (sub-)system.

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[1] The *Aviation Herald* (www.avherald.com) reports daily on incidents such as these.

[2] https://www.caa.co.uk/Safety-initiatives-and-resources/Safety-projects/GHOST/Human-Factors-Subgroup/

[3] According to Article 2 (12) of the Regulation: '"just culture" means a culture in which front-line operators or other persons are not punished for actions, omissions or decisions taken by them that are commensurate with their experience and training, but in which gross negligence, wilful violations and destructive acts are not tolerated.'

[4] These studies involved case studies of LFAs and GSPs, a survey of civil aviation workers, focus group discussion and one-to-one (semi-structured) interviews with managers and union representatives. All quotations from GSP workers are taken from the fieldwork for these two projects.

[5] https://ec.europa.eu/transport/modes/air/airports/ground_handling_market_en

[6] Around 40 per cent of intra-EU scheduled capacity in 2011 was point-to-point. At smaller airports with less than 10 million passengers per annum, point-to-point (P2P) services accounted for almost 60 per cent of all traffic in 2011 (compared to just over 40 per cent in 2002). At larger airports with 10 to 25 million passengers the P2P share is less than 26 per cent, at airports with more than 25 million passengers the P2P share is less than 14 per cent (Copenhagen Economics, 2012: 28).

[7] http://publicapps.caa.co.uk/docs/33/CAP%201209%20HF%20Action%20Plan%20V3%201%20Jan2016.pdf

[8] https://www.icao.int/safety/scan/Documents/GLOBAL%20SAFETY%20AVIATION%20PLAN%202013.pdf

[9] International Air Transport Association (IATA) spokesperson responsible for ground handling, http://www.internationalairportreview.com/advent-calendar/7-december-2014/

[10] focus groups notes taken during study for Author A and Author B (2012)

[11] https://ec.europa.eu/transport/modes/air/news/2015-10-01-just-culture-declaration_en

[12] The study included a large-scale survey of civil aviation workers that generated over 2,700 responses (see endnote 4). The data presented here is based on the responses of 228 GSP workers within this larger sample.

[13] When asked if management communicated with workers via a trade union, 60 per cent selected 'not very often' and a further 15 per cent opted for 'never'.

[14] Ryanair's recent decision to abandon its plans for a base in Copenhagen following industrial action by GSPs is a case in point.