

When working conditions are harsh, workers are more likely to find satisfaction through small acts of deviant behaviour instead of banding together or joining a union, my research shows.

I interviewed 30 unskilled workers from five different sites in the greater Brisbane region. The workers came from large, centralised retail, automotive and food wholesaler workplaces and were under strict instruction and surveillance. I asked them about how they manage and organise their shifts.

The people working in these precarious conditions often concealed anxieties or insecurities about the role that work performs in their life. Their insecurities, however, emerged through deviant practices and cynical or apathetic behaviours to work.

Deviant actions involved cutting corners, avoiding paperwork and often avoiding health and safety procedures. Workers operated subtly in order to avoid detection from management.

These activities proved useful to workers because they allowed deadlines and quotas to be met more easily, while simultaneously allowing them avenues to socialise and enjoy aspects of their work day. While workers readily acknowledged deviating from management directives, they also recognised the importance of being perceived as a “valuable” worker.

My analysis suggests that deviant practices were often implemented in order to achieve more existential security at work. Deviant practices were important to workers who felt exhausted, stressed, or who had limited social interaction at work.

Other research shows that merely the threat of precarious employment has [negative effects of workers’ health](#)

. This can manifest in physical and physiological forms: heightened risk of depression, stress, exhaustion, sleeping disorders, headaches, and high blood pressure.

Workers in precarious environments can also become “[urban nomads](#)” as they are stripped of

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Written by PJ Holtum, PhD Candidate in Sociology of Work, The University of Queensland

traditional community benefits that come with regular salaried work; benefits such as a sense of community and a loss of work-based identity. It's the loss of this community that leaves precarious workers not just financially, but socially unstable.

The study suggests that workers were far more likely to game the system rather than slack off. So rather than resist work entirely, workers were resisting the negative and precarious aspects of work.

This resistance allowed workers more social time and benefits they wouldn't otherwise receive. While this distinction is subtle, it is important; it suggests that work is still a valuable social experience for these workers even though their relationship to it is precariously positioned.

Precarious work can involve [any number of environmental uncertainties](#) that arise in work; however, the most significant appear to be a loss of paid leave entitlements and work benefits that occur with temporary employment.

[Statistics from the United Kingdom](#) suggest that one in five workers is employed under precarious work conditions. The statistics are much the same in Australia; the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) lists casual or temporary employment at [19%](#) (equivalent to one in five workers).

However, unlike the UK, Australian rates of unionisation are much lower. [OECD figures](#) suggest that trade union density (as of 2014) in the UK was 25.1%, compared with Australia's 15.5%.

This disparity suggests that while Australian workers are just as likely as UK workers to be without secure employment, Australian workers were less likely to have the social support that unions and other organisations can offer.

Although deviant behaviour appears to be a problem for management, it's important to recognise its social and psychological effects on workers. In an economic space that offers

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temporary contracts and little to no social support, it seems logical for workers to seek social-security through other avenues in the workplace. Consequently, even small acts of resistance provide valuable mechanisms for employees.

The data from this research suggests that while workers create existential security, they often fail to address the precarious working conditions that give rise to insecure mindsets. So while workers today partake in the ageless ritual of working-class resistance, the absence of collective organisation (like in unions) appears to be particularly problematic.

The effects of precarious work and the construction of insecure workers is particularly important in our global age. Without collective action between workers, the re-integration of unions into the workforce or intervention from national governments, it seems that any localised resistance to precarious work will never be more than just what it is: localised.

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