

BLOG

A Conversation with Arne Kalleberg about the RSF Journal Issue on Changing Job Quality

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Over the last forty years, U.S. workers have experienced stagnant or falling wages, growing wage inequality, and an increasing incidence of low and poverty-wage jobs. Young workers who lack advanced degrees and workers of color have been the hardest hit. In **the September 2019 issue** of *RSF*, cofunded by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation and edited by economist David R. Howell

and sociologist Arne L. Kalleberg, an interdisciplinary group of contributors analyze the state of job quality, especially for low-wage workers and those in nonstandard work arrangements. This interview probes some of the questions raised by the journal issue with one of its co-editors, Arne Kalleberg.

Arne Kalleberg, the Kenan Distinguished Professor of Sociology at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, is the author of *Good Jobs, Bad Jobs*, published by the Russell Sage Foundation in 2011. *Good Jobs, Bad Jobs*, a volume in the American Sociological Association's Rose Series in Sociology, went on to win the 2012 Academy of Management's George R. Terry Book Award and the 2013 Outstanding Book Award from the American Sociological Association's Section on Inequality, Poverty, and Mobility. A former **visiting scholar**, Kalleberg previously co-edited *Fighting for Time*, which examined the social construction of time and its importance in American culture.

Q: *Can you explain the concept of “precarious work” and address how the stability of employment and job quality has shifted for American workers over the last 40 years?*

Kalleberg: Precarious work refers to work that is *uncertain, unstable and insecure* and in which *employees bear the risks of work* (as opposed to businesses or the government) and *receive limited social benefits and statutory entitlements*. The term has gained in popularity in the United States as well as in Europe and Asia in recent years, as the normative form of employment relations have been transformed from the post-World War II custom of standard employment relations involving permanent, full-time work directed by an employer at the employer's place of business and with regular pay and benefits to nonstandard work arrangements such as temporary work, contract work, irregular and casual work and independent contracting. Moreover, the shifting of risks from employers to workers has reduced protections for standard employees as well, leading to a stagnation or deterioration of wages for many who are employed on a “permanent” basis.

Q: *What were some of the standout articles and themes that emerged from the recent journal issue on changing job quality?*

Kalleberg: The article by Cathy Yang Liu and Luísa Nazareno demonstrates that workers in nonstandard employment arrangements earn less and work fewer hours than full-time workers. Susan Lambert, Julia Henly, and Jaesung Kim show that in addition to the financial insecurity caused by precarious work schedules, those who experience shortfalls in hours are increasingly

distrustful of societal institutions. Other contributors examine job quality for women and people of color. David S. Pedulla and Katariina Mueller-Gastell find that black and Hispanic workers are overrepresented in such positions. Michael Schultz examines mobility out of low-wage work and finds that women and nonwhites are the most entrenched in such jobs. He shows that there is greater mobility out of low-wage work where unions foster the use of job ladders and pay scales.

Q: How might increased union density improve job quality for American workers?

Kalleberg: A major reason for the decline in job quality in the United States is the reduction in the bargaining power of workers, which is directly tied to the long-term decay in union density. It is well established that unions provide workers with greater voice and power to obtain a more equitable share of the fruits of economic growth from employers as well as to influence public policy so as to provide higher minimum wages and favorable labor laws. The recent strike by UAW workers against GM is a hopeful sign that workers are now in a strong enough position in the auto industry to demand a greater share of the high profits enjoyed by GM in the past few years. In addition, strikes by public sector workers in the Midwest and elsewhere suggests that public sector workers are beginning to fight back against political attacks from the right on collective bargaining and labor organizing that have accelerated since the Great Recession.

Q: Can you highlight some promising social policies and/or political strategies to improve job quality that emerged from the journal issue or your other research?

Kalleberg: In order to address the decline of job quality and its negative consequences, we need to separate basic social and economic protections (health care, for example) from the labor market and type of work arrangement. Labor laws are needed that recognize that full-time, full year employment for a particular employer has become less of a norm as more people are working as independent contractors, temporary workers and employees of contract companies. Greater availability of, and access to, education and training, including retraining and lifelong learning, is necessary for people to acquire the skills and knowledge to succeed in a changing economy. And managers' organizational policies need to recognize that the labor force is becoming increasingly more diverse with respect to gender, race, age, family status, and immigration status.

Enacting and implementing these kinds of policies require the coordinated efforts of government, business and labor. While there are of course many obstacles to such endeavors, the current weakness of the labor movement is the main factor preventing workers from exercising voice and pressuring businesses and the government to create good jobs and enact worker-friendly

policies. The revitalization of unions is essential to this goal and hinges on the ability to reverse the anti-union climate in America and to build a more hospitable environment for workers to join unions and benefit from their presence. Labor laws also need to be more supportive of collective bargaining, such as ending forced arbitration in employment contracts.

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