

R E S E R V E A R M Y O F L A B O U R



Similar to all other sectors of a capitalist economy the building industry is subject to fits and starts, booms and slumps, sudden expansions and contractions. The industry lives in fear of economic downturn. For good reason. A slump can develop into a major recession as in the late nineteen twenties and seventies. The immediate impacts of fluctuations in building activity are seen in employment levels. Boom time in the construction industry and employment levels can rise. When orders are abundant architects are in work. When recession hits, the office shrinks and the Christmas bonus is cut. Such instability and cycles of boom and slump demands an elastic workforce that is shed with technological innovation and can be abandoned by the flight of capital to another army of cheaper and hungrier workers. When business is good a convoy of vans circulate around early morning intersections picking up the ready army of labour ready, waiting for the labour only sub-contractors cash in hand, laid off at a moments notice when orders dry up. At the bottom off the chain of labour command, the reservists can never be sure when they will be called to the front or demobbed to the dole queue. To cope with capitalisms inherent tendency to slumps and crisis a casualised workforce is seen by some to be the ideal social form of labour. To camouflage the creeping insecurity and casualisation of labour,

linguistic tricksters invented the concept of 'flexibility'. But for most low paid workers this has meant the abandonment of secure employment, a deterioration in working conditions, holiday and sick pay, and in some workplaces bans on Trade Unions. The building industry in particular has been notorious for casualised working conditions. It has also been one of the principal sponges for unemployed labour historically recruited for infrastructural works by state and capital. Slaves and prisoners laid roads in antiquity and twentieth century Europe, unemployed workers recruited into the National Workshops dug the foundations of Napoleonic Paris, poverty stricken peasants arrived in carts to construct Brasilia, immigrant Irish labour built Georgian London and the modern motorway system. In brief capitalism and the modern capitalist building industry requires a reserve army of unemployed labour and a casualised employed workforce so as to cope with the economic instability caused by "violent fluctuations" in the movements of capital.

See **Marx**, Karl, Capital, Volume One, The General Law of Capitalist Accumulation, Section III, Progressive Production of a relative surplus-population or Reserve Army of Labour, 1867. See **Mandel**, Ernest, Late Capitalism, The Permanent Arms Economy, Verso, 1999 (1972)



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