The Precariat in the Sport Industry: A Discussion of the Sport Management Academy’s Role in Sport Labor Precarity

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Socio-Cultural - Other (Other)
60-minute symposium, roundtable, or workshop
Abstract 2019-173

Friday, May 31, 2019
10:35 AM
Room: Oakley

The sport labor market is subject to the dominant neoliberal ideology in the globalized labor market that is marked by a surge in precarious labor, individuals on the periphery of the economy. The rise of the sharing economy, dependence on independent contractor labor, and use of on-demand workers has led to the so-called the gig economy, relying on flexible workers or workers willing to work for a lower wage via on-demand jobs (Melian-Gonzalez, 2018). Political and social forces such as deregulation of markets, the decline of unions, and the continued emergence of the service sector, have contributed to increased precarious employment (Kalleberg, 2012; Roderick, 2017).

Suggesting that their situation constitutes a socio-economic class, some precarious workers identify themselves as the precariat (Bodnar, 2006; Boutang 2003; Foti, 2017; Standing 2014). This class of people live in a continued state of unpredictability and lack the security needed for material or psychological wellbeing (Foti, 2017; Standing, 2014; Tward & Hildebrandt, 2015). They have become essential to the contemporary economy, but have no say in economic policy or labor relations (Foti, 2017).

Precarious labor also has become essential for the sports industry. Sport is delivered in large part through people working in precarious employment situations whether as athletes or in other organizational support roles. However, the precarity of these populations are largely ignored in labor literature and no statistics exist on how many employees in the sports industry are part-time or in a state of precarity.

Olympic and professional athletes are considered among the precariat of sport due to their short careers and their vulnerability in speaking out against abuse and corruption due to restrictions placed by sponsor or team contracts (Donnelly, 2015). Much of the precarious labor in sport literature focuses on the lack of agency players possess in their labor migration (Agergaard & Ungruhe, 2016; Darby & Akindes, Kirwin, 2007).

The scarce literature on labor precarity and sport has focused on athletes, not those involved in the management and delivery of sport organizations and events. McLeod, Holden, Hawzen, & Chahardovali (2018) focused on issues related to sport event labor, but did not explicitly focus on precarity. They identified thirteen types of event labor in the sports industry including various types of part-time employees, independent contractors, interns, prison labor, volunteers and several other forms of precarious labor.

This roundtable discussion will introduce the origin of precarious labor and the precariat and discuss whether the sport management academy has a responsibility to address its contribution to the precarious nature of sport industry labor. We conclude that much of the precarious labor employed in the global sport industry is fostered due to the emotional attachment that people have to sport. The panel will discuss and debate the role of the precariat, labor movements, the duty of sport management faculty to lead and mentor students into steady and fair employment, and the ethical and legal duties that sport organizations should provide fair wages and working conditions to employees in all facets of the sports enterprise.