

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# The chronos of class conflict. The relevance of the temporal dimension in conflicts related to labour migration

Anne Lisa Carstensen 

University of Kassel, Faculty of Social Sciences, Kassel, Germany  
Email: [lisa.carstensen@uni-kassel.de](mailto:lisa.carstensen@uni-kassel.de)

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## Abstract

In recent migration research temporality has become a prominent figure. Focussing on temporality allows to shed light on some aspects of labour mobility that enlighten our understanding of work-related conflicts. Especially with view to labour market inclusion, migrants often experience the (assumed) temporal limitation and unpredictability of migration projects, work and residence permits, as well as employment relationships. Correspondingly, labour policies, sector-specific company structures and management techniques also have a temporal dimension (time limits, seasonality, outsourcing schemes), which have effects on conflicts in and around work. Furthermore, one has to situate labour and labour migration within its context of social reproduction in order to better understand, how paid wage labour is embedded in social activities and networks such as households, families and communities, and shaped by the social, developmental and migratory policies that condition workers' labour market inclusion. This conceptual paper argues that for migrants in particular, the (assumed) temporal limitation and unpredictability of migration projects, work/residence permits, and employment relationships is of great importance when it comes to analysing conflict-ridden negotiations over labour relations and working conditions.

**Keywords:** labour rights; migration; migrant workers; social reproduction; vulnerable workers

## Introduction

Migration researchers frequently underline that migration is not a linear and coherent process and point out the role of time and temporariness of migration (Cwerner 2001; Barber & Lem 2018; Griffiths 2021). Furthermore, it is well documented that migration often creates situations that are conceived as temporary or transitional phases by both migrants and authorities. Dealing with uncertainty and unpredictability, therefore, plays a central role in the life of many migrants (Anderson 2010; Eule et al 2019). Based on this, the study of temporality allows to shed light on some aspects of labour mobility that contribute to better understand work-related conflicts. This paper argues that for migrants, in particular, the (assumed) temporal limitation and unpredictability of migration projects, work and residence permit and employment relationships is of great importance when it comes to analysing conflict-ridden negotiations over labour relations and working conditions.<sup>1</sup> But of course, temporality does not only affect migrants. Indeed, labour studies can learn from the 'temporal turn' in migration studies when examining

experiences, strategies, and claims of precarious workforces. In order to avoid essentialising migrants' experiences, it is crucial to better understand what differentiates their experiences from those of citizen workers. To this end, first, attention is drawn to the regulative context of migrant labour through the analysis of the temporalities of migration regime. Second, I want to make a case for situating labour migration within its context of social reproduction (Bakker & Gill 2003; Bhattacharya 2017; Mezzadri 2020) in order to highlight how paid wage labour is embedded in social activities and networks such as households, families, and communities and shaped by the social, developmental, and migratory policies that condition workers' labour market inclusion. While the organisation of social reproduction is complicated for all workers, migrant workers face particular spatial and temporal challenges, since their reproductive activities often need to be coordinated transnationally (Apostolova 2021).

Analytically, it makes sense to reconstruct the temporal implications of migration regime and social reproduction in order to map out a field of conflict and better trace the presence or absence of conflict at work. Assuming that temporal arrangements within migration processes influence the experiences, claims, and strategies of workers, studying temporality might guide us towards a better understanding of where, why, and how migrant workers organise. This approach sheds light on the limits and possibilities of labour struggles, trade union strategies, and class conflict in the sectors shaped by labour migration.

This conceptual paper illuminates the migration-work nexus and contributes to the debate on labour market policies within migration regime. While presenting the theoretical debate and research literature on the topic, I introduce the conceptual framework for my current research project that focuses on the temporal dimension to labour migration, working conditions, and conflict in different sectors.<sup>2</sup> The project aims at going beyond (national) migration and labour regulations and draws attention to the concrete design of working conditions and conflict at the local level by raising the questions if and how time horizons of employees with and without migration experience influence labour struggles. In order to do so, I seek to analyse temporality in several regards. First, I find it important to examine the temporal rationalities beyond migration and labour policies. Such rationalities inform regulations and draw on assumptions and normative ideas about migration and work, such as the distinction between temporal and permanent migration, or the idea about a linear process of integration. Studying them allows us to assess the specific labour market position of migrants and to contextualise their experiences and strategies. Temporal rationalities also inform – but in no way determine – the temporal horizons of workers and employers. Temporal horizons link past, present, and future from a subjective viewpoint and are a reference for planning and subjective expectations. Temporal horizons are based on situated knowledge about the current and future state of things. They are highly mediated, contested, and under current revision. From the side of employers, they may entail the idea to manage a specific production peak, deal with labour shortage, or determine the endurance of contracts. For migrants, they might be informed by the idea to stay only for a certain period of time. Individual temporal horizons might also centre around subjective ideas about the right moment to do certain things, such as to work, to form a family and to retire. Workers also need to anticipate future events such as ageing or the need to provide care for family members (Apostolova 2021, pp. 174).

Relating the notion of temporality in labour migration to the field of conflict, this paper discusses how the temporal rationalities of migration and labour policies condition the temporal horizons of workers and employers. But for an analysis of labour conflict, we need to study yet another aspect of temporality. Since time is not just experienced in a passive way, it is important to understand how people engage in 'time work' (Flaherty 2020), or in other words, how they wield agency over temporal aspects of their

experiences. When looking at the world of work, especially with view to labour migration, it becomes clear that time work occurs under conditions that are shaped by pronounced power relations and inequalities. But time can also be a resource; one could imagine temporal strategies of workers that consist of waiting, ‘sitting out’, or speeding up/slowing down certain processes. This view strengthens the understanding of how the specific temporalities of migration contribute to fragmentations within the working class – and how workers deal with them.

In this article, I will first introduce recent migration research on temporality. In doing so, I sketch out the debate concerning the role of time in governance and as a subjective experience. Then, I relate this debate to the field of labour and social reproduction and discuss its temporal dimension. Based on this, I discuss how the referred perspectives can inform an advanced understanding of labour conflict in times of migration.

### Time and temporality: insights from migration studies

This section reconstructs the ‘temporal turn’ (Adams 1995) in migration research by introducing perspectives and findings on migration and temporality that will eventually prove useful for the study of labour struggles and conflicts. I discuss the findings from two perspectives: first, temporality as an aspect of the governance of migration (Griffiths 2021) and secondly, as a subjective experience.

Regarding the first perspective, Moritz Altenried and his co-authors observed that migration policies increasingly tend to follow logistical ideals (Altenried et al 2018). These resemble a kind of “‘delivery” rationality’ that aims at providing the right amount of labour power with the right quality (e.g. qualification) at the right moment to the right place. In other words: ‘To-the-point and Just-in-time-Migration’ (Altenried et al 2018, pp. 299). Obviously, this rationality remains a steering phantasy in the minds of policymakers, especially since migrants, politicians, and employers all follow their own interests and motivations. And of course, the rationalities and temporal horizons of migrants themselves are an important part of the picture too. Addressing a similar question, Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson argue that the role of borders is important in mediating these differences. Therefore, ‘the border acquires a temporal thickness and diversity’ (Mezzadra & Neilson 2013, pp. 133). With this statement, the authors not only establish the border as a geographical fact but also underline its temporal aspects. They also highlight the role of border facilities such as camps and prisons for custody pending deportation. These function as ‘zones and experiences of waiting, holding and interruption’ (Mezzadra & Neilson 2013, pp. 143). In this regard, Ruben Andersson identifies a ‘landscape of time’ manifested, for example, in the Spanish exclaves Ceuta and Melilla (Andersson 2014, pp. 800). Here, a ‘time of control’ is opposed to a ‘time of migration’ with both contesting each other in a constant ‘battle over time’ (Andersson 2014, pp. 803). Andersson writes: ‘Temporality [...] has become a multifaceted tool and vehicle – even a weapon of sorts – in the “fight against illegal migration”’ (Andersson 2014, pp. 796), while Melanie Griffiths observes an increasing relevance of so-called ‘temporal technologies of governance’ in contemporary migration regime (Griffiths 2021, pp. 324). Bridget Anderson goes even one step further and points out that the category of a ‘migrant’ is itself related to temporal aspects, since one is perceived as a migrant only after a certain time of presence in a certain place. But what really matters is that a migrant is not (yet) a citizen and therefore ‘subject to temporal controls that can have devastating consequences for their life’ (Anderson 2020, pp. 53). This strand of migration research therefore does not focus on alleged characteristics and behavioural patterns of migrants, but on the way in which migration regimes shape the subject figure of a migrant, and thereby the expectations, possibilities, and problems actual migrants are confronted with.

Migrant temporalities are therefore not *per se* different from those of non-migrants, but they reflect a very particular bureaucratic temporal logic imposed upon them.

These temporal aspects of migration regimes are relevant to our argument because they not only shape the conditions for crossing borders and residence permits, but by doing so, they also impact the conditions under which migrants work and live. An ethnographic study by Tobias Eule, Anna Wyss, Annika Lindberg, and Lisa Marie Borrelli focuses on the disciplining effects of time and traces how the migration regime produces phases of insecurity and waiting (Eule et al 2019). Migrants then run into danger to end up in ‘time traps’ due to the ‘unreadability’ of the bureaucratic procedures. But these authors also demonstrate that this unpredictability allows migrants to develop temporal agency through strategies such as elapsing deadlines, which might increase their chances to stay in Europe. This shows that migration regimes do not produce linear processes (border crossing, asylum procedure, recognition, or rejection) but (against their alleged intention) rather create temporal cycles, in which phases of recognition and legalisation alternate with those of rejection and illegalisation (see also Andersson 2014; Griffiths 2021, pp. 320). In this sense, Melanie Griffiths, Ali Rogers, and Bridget Anderson argue that, paradoxically, one would have to claim both an acceleration and a deceleration of asylum procedures. This is because on the one hand, acceleration is necessary to reduce insecurity and ‘empty time’, and on the other hand, migrants need enough time to gather information, access legal means, and comply with integration requests (Griffiths et al 2013, pp. 19).

In a nutshell, border and migration policies have a temporal dimension. In the current Western European migration regime, they come along with complex sequences and particular rhythms of events and requirements. Taking these into account allows light to be shed on the question of how specific vulnerabilities of migrants emerge and reproduce (Griffiths 2021, pp. 321). This is also highly relevant for understanding current labour markets, because in many sectors, the question of who is working under which conditions strongly depends on migration and residence policies. At the same time, one has to bear in mind that labour and migration policies are usually not connected to each other in a functional manner but rather produce different and contradicting temporalities that migrants have to deal with. At the same time, it has also become clear how important it is not to essentialise migrants’ experiences but to see them related to political and bureaucratic logics that come along with the governance of migration. Based on this, I will now turn to the subjective experiences of time in the context of migration.

Saulo Cwerner speaks of ‘temporal experiences’ (Cwerner 2001, pp. 14) because the question of how time is experienced not only depends on the current situation but also on cultural views on time, rhythm, and the supposed proper duration of things. He states that ‘times migrate with people’ (Cwerner 2001, pp. 7), since migration entails a rupture with former temporal experiences and at the same time provides the opportunity to further develop one’s own view on cultural temporal practices. Anyway, ‘social life must be seen as consisting of an intersection of various times’ (Cwerner 2001, pp. 14), and migration itself is shaped by an enormous temporal heterogeneity (Griffiths et al 2013, pp. 16).

The experience of time is subject to change and contestation and is related to migration regimes. In order to deepen the understanding on this, Shanti Robertson suggests to investigate ‘migration time tracks’, which she defines as a succession of decisions, acts, and events that condition mobility and its consequences (Robertson 2014, pp. 4). These time tracks are related to ‘timescales’ which consist of temporal orders at different levels that are interwoven and linked to each other. This view on the interrelations of different rhythms and rationalities at the macro-, meso-, and micro-levels breaks down to the question of how migration policies shape the experiences and decisions of migrants – but also how migrants cope with the requirements and how they challenge and sometimes also alter them.

Based on this, we can get back to the definition of a migrant and discuss at which point ‘migration’ turns into residence or how to draw the line between temporary and permanent arrangements (Griffiths et al 2013, pp. 12; Robertson 2014, pp. 5). While from the governance perspective, this question is mediated through complex (and contested) paperwork, different status and, eventually, citizenship (Anderson 2020; Kirchoff 2020), these boundaries are less clear at the level of everyday lives and subjective perceptions. Often, migration is intended to cover only a determined period, for example, when young people are up to earning quick money or open for an interesting experience before settling down back home. But intentions and plans change over time and temporary arrangements quite often become long-term or even permanent. With view to a typical constellation in the context of migration, Abdelmalek Sayad speaks of a ‘temporary that lasts’ (Sayad 2004, pp. 74). A prominent example for such an arrangement can be found in the so-called ‘guest worker’ programmes. Originally aiming at the mitigation of labour shortages, many of those programmes turned out to change migration patterns and the receiving societies in the long run (Wiesbrock 2013). This means that instead of distinguishing between temporary and permanent migration (or between return and re-migration, see Apostolova 2021), it might be more useful to focus on the ambiguities and passages between different arrangements.

Like all other social experiences, migration implies the need to navigate between the past, present, and future. But while the field of migration studies has a lot to say about the (imagined) future as a starting point for research (Griffiths et al 2013; Axelsson et al 2017; Brux et al 2019), there is less attention drawn to the past and how it informs the present and the future. This bias might be based on empirical observations, since ‘many aspects of migration have inherent in them an idea about the future’ (Griffiths et al 2013, pp. 7). Debt, for example, comes along with a future commitment. Often, migration is also informed by positive expectations and hopes for the future. But there are also negative perspectives, such as the idea of ‘deportability’ (De Genova 2002) that arises from asylum procedures. Deportability comes along with a very problematic temporality, since the possible rejection of the right to stay presents a continuous threat and: ‘A threat is an intensely temporal phenomenon through which the future perverts the present’ (Brux et al 2019, pp. 1450). Despite this overemphasis on the future, the past also matters, since the assumed linearity of time is the result of active practices of remembering, narrating, and shaping of temporal experiences. This becomes clear when looking at the notion of ‘chronos’ (abstract time, quantity) and ‘kairos’ (quality of time, doing the right things at the right moment) (Brux et al 2019, pp. 1431). Christina Brux and her co-researchers describe how rejected asylum seekers restructured their biographies and thereby attributed meaning to the time they had been spending within the asylum procedure. In other words, they were able to ‘kairofy time’ (Brux et al 2019, pp. 1447). These insights enable a better understanding of the notion of ‘temporal horizons’ introduced above. Temporal horizons link past, present, and future from a subjective viewpoint but not in a linear way, since experiences in the past and present might be re-signified and re-evaluated according to present and future expectations. Furthermore, the relation between chronos and kairos remains fragile, especially when migrants report that they experience an ‘endless and punishing doing of time’ in the asylum procedure (Brux et al 2019, pp. 1454).

The idea of ‘doing time’ is typical for periods of waiting at different points of the migration regime (e.g. visa, border crossing, and family reunion). It was already mentioned that such periods of waiting may also constitute a resource for migrants when it comes to improving their opportunities to stay. At the same time, research also points to the psychological and social hardships of these situations (Andersson 2014; Eule et al 2019; Drangslund 2020). In addition to this, Brux et al show that in the Norwegian case, the asylum procedure is characterised by a high diversity of speed. Therefore, it is very difficult for migrants to preview the duration of one’s own procedure and so to develop an

appropriate strategy (Brux et al 2019, pp. 1440). Other researchers highlight that there are phases in which migrants have too little or too much time and face difficulties in using their time adequately (Griffiths et al 2013, pp. 22). However, waiting is not only a passive experience, but it is also 'lived time' (Drangslund 2020, pp. 4) and can be filled with sense and activities (Bryan 2018).

In sum, it becomes clear that migrants, like everybody else, not only experience time as passive victims but also actively relate to it by planning, adapting, or challenging the bureaucratic and disciplining effects of time. One can also conclude that there is not one experience of time shared by all migrants. Moreover, the temporal perspective allows to explore a variety of different experiences. This leads to an epistemological dilemma, because on the one hand, research needs to point out the specific temporalities of irregular migration (Andersson 2014; Brux et al 2019), to name the implications and problems of migration regimes, and to recognise the resultant suffering. On the other hand, research runs in danger of overemphasising the peculiarities of migrants' temporal experiences, thereby contributing to an 'othering' of their temporalities (Ramsay 2020). A solution lies in the contextualisation of the experiences of migrants within migration regime and a detailed description of how temporal rationalities of migration regimes shape experiences and coping strategies of migrants. In sum, migration goes along with a strong diversification of time, both among migrants and in difference to non-migrants. A better understanding of the ways of how labour markets and access to social welfare are shaped by the temporal governance of migration might also help to overcome essentialising views on migrant workers and to draw attention to emerging fields of labour struggle and conflict. In the next section, I will therefore turn to the relevance of the temporal dimension in the field of labour migration and social reproduction before turning to a discussion of conflict and workers movements' perspectives.

### Labour and migration seen from a temporality perspective

Unlike migration research, labour studies have not yet experienced a 'temporal turn'. Therefore, this section takes findings from migration studies as a starting point not only to discuss the implications of migration for labour but also to make a case for further research on temporality and labour more broadly. Speaking of labour, one must bear in mind that temporality is a central feature of labour policies in general, since they regulate the conditions, duration, and extent of work, both in relation to the labour market and within the workplaces. But in the case of migrants, these policies and practices intersect with the temporal rationalities of migration governance. It also needs to be clarified that most research on labour migration deals with precarious and informal labour. Due to the legal framing of the labour market inclusion of migrants as well as racist and sexist discriminations, migrants are particularly vulnerable to labour right violations, exploitation, and informalisation (Anderson 2010). This must be seen against the background of a broader tendency of precarisation and flexibilisation of labour at a global scale.

The study of how migration regimes shape the management and experiences of migrant labour would not be complete without taking into account the conditions of social reproduction and its particularities in the field of migration (e.g. Bryan 2018; Apostolova 2021). The concept of social reproduction highlights how paid wage labour is embedded in social activities and networks such as households, families, and communities and is shaped by the social, developmental, and migratory policies that condition workers' labour market inclusion (Bakker & Gill 2003; Bhattacharya 2017). Research on social reproduction is interested in understanding how the 'reproductive' and the 'productive sphere' condition each other (Bhattacharya 2017, pp. 14). It therefore draws attention to the access to social welfare, relations of care and care work, and social networks and communities

(Bakker & Gill 2003, pp. 18). Migration poses severe challenges in these areas, since social reproduction may be spatially and temporally separated from the productive sphere. Taking this as a starting point, in this section I will discuss how the complex interplay between the governance of migrant labour, social reproduction, and the labour process can be described from a temporal lens.

Looking at the temporal rationalities of labour and migration policies, one can pinpoint a paradoxical relation between time and space, since the movement of people in space (especially the crossing of borders) contributes to the generation of a temporally hyperflexible workforce, especially regarding working hours, durations of contracts, and perspectives. This becomes understandable when considering how regulations of labour market access and residence permits influence the labour market situation and experiences of migrants, since '[the] exploitation of precarious migrant workers may occur primarily through the medium of time' (Axelsson et al 2017, pp. 171).

From this perspective, the working class not only appears as a fragmented group situated in space but also as a fluid succession of different labour market positions and experiences, or even a temporal phenomenon. This might be clarified by looking at the idea of the industrial reserve army, often cited when it comes to labour migration (Duggan 2013; Mezzadra & Neilson 2013, pp. 149; Neuhauser 2018). Marx described the industrial reserve army as a part of the working class consisting of those who do not work but would like to do so and those who work far below standards concerning payment and working conditions (Duggan 2013). The industrial reserve army then functions as a labour force reservoir and at the same time has a disciplining effect on the regularly employed. The temporal dimension adds another layer to this argument, because it shows that the industrial reserve army does not comprise a determined group of people who share a common experience, but rather a permanently shifting sequence of different labour market positions. From a subjective perspective, it describes a temporally determined phase, while from the employers' perspective, it marks an inexhaustible permeable reservoir of labour power. The making and unmaking of an industrial reserve army understood in this way can be explained (amongst other factors) by drawing attention to the governance of migration, labour market integration, and access to social welfare.

Access to social rights and welfare is often highly complicated, not only, but especially to migrants. In her research, Raia Apostolova (2021) discusses the situation of labour migrants in the European Union. Being entitled to freedom of movement, these workers are caught between different social welfare systems and often fail to transfer claims from one country to the other. With regard to the temporal dimension, attention might be drawn to the institutional logics that regulate in- and exclusion to national welfare systems, for example, one has to be employed for a certain period of time in order to gain access to unemployment benefits, and applications need to occur in due time while approval might be delayed. Such institutional-bureaucratic procedures produce obstacles for migrants' access to social welfare. While workers with citizenship might also face hardships in this regard, migrants are often situated between welfare regimes. Such migrants therefore find themselves in a particularly unprotected labour market situation and might resort to informal labour or permanent circular migration (Apostolova 2021).

The access to social welfare is often regulated along the lines of different residence permits. John Allen and Linn Axelsson describe the diversification of residence permits by distinguishing two forms of exclusion: the first one is 'indefinite exclusion', typical of temporary labour migration programmes or the situation of 'expats'. These migrants usually have no perspective of social inclusion, as their stay is understood as only temporary. They grew up and might retire elsewhere and would not need access to social welfare. For example, seasonal workers are imagined to be healthy adults who could return 'home' if they became unable to work. The situation is different in the case of 'suspended inclusion', which encompasses the period in which migrants are waiting for a future right

to stay, for example, through recognition of the asylum application or deferral of the residence and work permit (Allen & Axelsson 2019, pp. 11 f.). It should be added that the suspension or cancellation of formal labour market access can also lead to a (temporary) informalisation of labour (Mezzadri 2020). The temporality of working/residence permits then constitutes an important factor for individual temporal horizons of migrants (Axelsson et al 2017; Bryan 2018). Using the case of a temporary recruitment scheme for hospitality workers in Manitoba, Catherine Bryan discusses the disciplinary effect exerted on the workforce by the promise of an undetermined residence permit. Through the prospect of a permanent stay, migrants are ‘positioned along a continuum of temporary, potentially permanent, almost-permanent, nominated and permanent’ (Bryan 2018, pp. 129 f.).

Intersections between migration regime, labour policies, and social reproduction become also evident with regard to the topic of working hours. While working time is an issue for all workers, migrants often need to take into account specific regulations, because residence permits may also determine the minimum hours that shall be worked (e.g. in order to secure the means to live) or the maximum hours allowed, especially in the case of international students (Maury 2022). Migrants need to make sure that they do not work ‘too much’ or ‘too little’ in order to comply with the formal requirements, and their own financial needs, but also their physical recovery (Axelsson et al 2017). Another question is, when and in which time slots work is carried out, especially in the case of unregular working hours, overtime or ‘Zero-Hour-Contracts’ (Duus et al 2023). From the employers’ perspective, the flexibilisation of worktime enables a ready response to varying orders and seasonal production peaks while outsourcing the risk to the workers. Since migrants often lack access to stable employment relations while needing to work very urgently, they are frequently channelled into particularly precarious and flexible labour market segments (Anderson 2010; Axelsson et al 2017).

The issue of working time also relates to the realities of care work and unpaid reproductive tasks. These are shaped by a particular temporal logic which is tied to the life course. It is characterised by the linearity of the biography marked by irreversible events and processes such as birth, ageing, and death. Care work cannot be postponed to a later moment but usually must be performed immediately and is highly embodied. Also, the biography is a cultural institution overloaded with norms and ideas about the ‘right moment’ (*kairos*) for certain events and achievements.

While there have always been forms of separating wage labour from social reproduction (e.g. through the male breadwinner model), migrant workers are often perceived as temporally detached from social ties and responsibilities. This finds its extreme expressions in the dormitory labour regime (Pun 2012; Mezzadri 2020; Andrijasevic 2021). Based on research in Eastern Europe, Rutvica Andrijasevic identifies a ‘just-in-time labour’ model (Andrijasevic 2021) that aims at eliminating unproductive working time from the production process. To achieve this, workers are accommodated in dormitories close to the workplaces so that they can easily be sent to unpaid breaks in times of low operating grades and called in to work spontaneously according to the acute workload at the plant. Apart from the flexibilisation effect, workers are tied to the employers through hour banks since they have to make up for idle periods for which they have already been paid. In the words of Andrijasevic: ‘reserving workers’ availability [...] is achieved by separating potential labor from paid labor [...] in the temporal dimension’ (Andrijasevic 2021, pp. 46). Ngai Pun observed similar patterns in Chinese factories. She further situates this management technique in the wider context of social reproduction:

‘Being extraordinarily dislocated in the cities, migrant labor is distinguished by its transient nature. A worker, especially a female worker, will usually spend three to five years working as a wage laborer in an industrial city before getting married. In



order to get married, most of the women have to return home because of their difficulty in searching for a marriage partner in the city. The reproduction of labor of the next generation is hence left to the rural villages, which bear the costs of industrial development in urban areas'. (Pun 2012, pp. 180)

This example shows that the geographical categories 'place of origin' (here: rural villages) and 'place of arrival' (cities) are connected through a temporal succession within the biography. In this case, migration is supposed to be followed by marriage; in other cases, it might be the upbringing of children or the care for elderly parents, siblings, or friends that mark typical reasons for the (temporary) 'return' of migrants (Apostolova 2021, pp. 174). The transient nature of labour migration is here explained by the social reproduction arrangements in and between places of arrival and origin. Alessandra Mezzadri discusses the externalisation of social costs of shaping and maintaining the workforce, mostly through unpaid care work. She writes 'Reproduction is, at once, a site of labour regeneration as well as the foundation of exploitation' (Mezzadri 2020, pp. 157 f.) and puts special emphasis on circular migration where the workers' villages of origin function as repositories that 'release' workers to the urban production hubs (Mezzadri 2020, pp. 159). This relation requires a high level of anticipation and synchronisation of reproductive labour, which is often carried out by migrants in an individualised way. Seen from this perspective, migration is not so much an individual experience of disengagement from one social context and arrival in another, but rather the synchronisation of a shared life between different places (Brux et al 2019, pp. 1452; Drangland 2020, pp. 331–333).

In sum, the temporal lens has proven fruitful when it comes to analysing the intersections between migration regime, labour regulation, and social reproduction. Current research in the field of labour migration describes constellations that illustrate the particular challenges that migrants (and their organisations) face and also raises new questions within the overall agenda of labour studies. In the next section, I will discuss how the temporal horizons of migrants and the temporal rationalities of migration regime affect how migrant workers perceive, and act within, labour conflicts.

### **The temporalities of conflict and labour struggles**

In this section, I want to relate labour migration and temporality to a perspective of conflict. Generally speaking, time is relevant in regard to conflict in several senses. First, time itself might be a contentious issue, for example, when it comes to working time, length of working periods and contracts, and the role of work in the lifespan. Secondly, time might become a resource in conflict over work. Understood as temporal strategies or 'time work' (Flaherty 2020), new strategies for workers' movements might arise. These can relate not only to (both institutionalised and informal) collective structures of interest representation but also to very local, self-organised, and less visible contestations and resistances. Thirdly, it is important to understand how temporal rationalities of migration regimes and temporal horizons of migrant workers inform their strategies and their willingness to engage in workers' movements. From an activist perspective, this also raises the question of how an understanding of migrants' temporal horizons might inspire alternative strategies for trade unions and the broader labour movement. In this section, I will deepen on these aspects of temporality and conflict by discussing the relevant literature and laying out ideas for potential future research. I hope that this discussion contributes to overcoming the widespread view of migrants as 'difficult-to-organize' workers whose behaviour and aims deviate from other workers' interests. Instead, I argue that the temporal perspective contributes to better understanding of the diversity of experiences, claims, and strategies of contemporary workers.

With regard to time as a contentious issue, it became already clear in the previous sections that working time and the relation between wage work and reproductive tasks are important for all workers, but they affect migrant workers in a particular way. Some contradictions become particularly visible when looking at new forms of employment, as observed in the platform economy. Katrine Duus, Maja Hojer Bruun, and Anne Line Dalsgård observed how bicycle food delivery riders in Brussels related to temporal issues in their everyday work life in several ways. First, these workers, who were mostly young, male, and migrant workers, made an effort to maintain their own flexibility and to 'plan their work around their lives' (Duus et al 2023, pp. 14). Secondly, they engaged with the algorithm that distributed work tasks in different ways so that they could allocate worktime more efficiently and eliminate delays and waiting time that would reduce their income. Thirdly, they also engaged in activities to make 'unwanted time' such as waiting time between the orders pass quicker through distractions (Duus et al 2023, pp. 18).

As already mentioned previously, time is not experienced passively, but rather people engage in temporal work or employ temporal strategies in order to adjust temporal circumstances to their needs. Migrant workers, as everybody else, might 'sit out' conflicts, speed up or slow down certain processes, for example, when this increases their chances for a right to stay or better working conditions. Temporal strategies also apply at the workplaces as Maren Boersma points out. She provides an example of Philippine domestic workers in Hong Kong who organise short and informal breaks (e.g. toilet breaks used to send text messages) in a highly accelerated working routine (Boersma 2016). With view to an Inuit community in northern Canada, Lisa-Jo K. van den Scott describes similar acts of carving out time for own activities as 'agentive time work to resist the structure of an imposed time regime by enacting and protecting temporal back stages' (van den Scott 2020, pp. 84). Since labour relations always entail an imposition of a time regime, such temporal back stages are important sites not only for workers' organisations but also for dealing with difficult situations in general. It is important to assess in concrete cases whether such strategies count as disobedient or resistant practices, or rather as self-organised coping strategies that uphold exploitative and degrading working conditions. Also, it is important to keep in mind that temporality cannot really be seen as an own kind of strategy, but it is rather an aspect of individual and collective action that might also be combined with other aspects such as mobility (Andrijasevic & Sacchetto 2016), for example, if workers decide to wait for improvements until a certain point in time or set up an ultimatum in case their claims are not met. Understood this way, time work might be a useful resource for workers' organisations, especially in areas with a high level of informality and precarisation, where trade unions are forced to develop new strategies.

But also, the questions of whether, when, and in relation to what topics conflicts arise can be considered from a temporal perspective. On the one hand, one could assume that temporary migrants such as seasonal workers would not develop far-reaching claims regarding their working conditions since they do not have to endure the situations for a long time. But they might also be particularly dependent on the support of the employer, for example, while waiting for a permanent residence title or due to visa being bound to a specific employment contract. The lack of a long-term perspective at work might also encourage workers even more, to enter into conflicts since they might have 'nothing to lose' (Andrijasevic & Sacchetto 2016). Another temporal rationality is conditioned by transitional situations or waiting periods. Migrants may have no interest in criticising structural conditions or engaging in conflicts around issues that are seen as temporary, or as a necessary intermediate step on the way towards another employment perspective.

It is also relevant what happens while people adjust their perspectives and temporal horizons, for example, as recent 'newcomers' who need to figure out basic information about local structures, norms, and routines. From an individual perspective, this might be transient and may be even 'lost' time, while from a labour market perspective this counts

as worktime during which workers accept the given conditions and thereby shape local standards. This also includes the time span until workers realise that their current strategy is not advantageous or that no improvement will occur. And of course, given the temporal rationalities of migration and residence policies, it makes a huge difference whether and under what conditions workers can change employers. Job-switching is made difficult if residence is tied (temporarily) to a specific employment relationship (Axelsson et al 2017; Bryan 2018), or if the granting or extension of work permits depend on set deadlines and approval periods, which in the worst case can lead to lost wages or the rupture of continuous employment (Maury 2022, pp. 10). In these cases, research should not only focus on conflict but also its absence. Axelsson et al state that: ‘The decision *not* to act in order to improve salaries or employment conditions, but to wait [ . . . ] may be understood as strategies aimed at improving overall life conditions – not necessarily in the present but in the longer term’ (Axelsson et al 2017, pp. 170, emphasis in original).

The discussion on interest representation of migrants is often based on the impression that migrants were bad activists since they lacked interest to engage in long-term organisations. But an understanding of the temporalities of labour migration explains why classical long-term-oriented strategies such as trade union membership, legal cases, or campaigns may seem less suitable to mobile workers. Rather, a more encompassing understanding of organisations, networks, and communities draws attention to short-termed or fluid alternatives such as the organisation among migrant ‘gangs’ or co-workership at a specific workplace. In this sense, Ngai Pun emphasises how workers’ accommodation in dormitories creates new spaces for innovative forms of organising. She states that: ‘The compression of time that, in the dormitory labour regime, is necessary for production in turn works in favour of collective worker organization by accelerating consensus building and strategy development therein’ (Pun 2012: pp. 181).

Another approach lies in the identification of long-term networks and organisations that are situated at different places or a different spatial level, for example, in transnational networks, or suspended memberships and alliances or orientation towards collective action at a different site and a future point in time. One could then research how different communities and networks are maintained or even intersect. The studies cited here point to complex negotiations and multiple potential conflicts at different levels that require further attention. Discussing temporality and time work allows for a deeper understanding of different time spans, temporal references, and strategies within labour struggles.

## Conclusion

The aim of this article was to scrutinise the relevance of the temporal dimension on labour migration and conflict, based on research in migration and labour studies. It became clear that temporality is relevant when examining both the governance of labour migration and the subjective experiences and agency of migrants. Temporality is an important dimension in the production and management of a (vulnerable) migrant workforce in segmented labour markets. Here, one must bear in mind that temporal rationalities of migration and labour policies intersect with each other – but not necessarily in a coherent way. Migration regulations may be beneficial to employers, for example, when seasonal workers are exempted from labour legislation or when specific recruitment programmes are set up. But there might also be a tension between the rationalities of both fields, such as when workers need to wait for working permits or the recognition of qualification. In general, work-migration arrangements can be seen as temporal fixes within the broader reproductive context of the migrant workers. However, it is important to note that the flexibilisation of labour relations also affects workers without migration experience. Therefore, it is critical not to essentialise migrants’ temporalities while also considering

differences between migrants, both individually and between different groups of migrants (women/men, refugees/labour migration, and level of qualification). The social reproduction lens was introduced to offer yet another view on the temporality of labour conflict and migration. It became clear that social reproduction and production are linked both in a spatial and in a temporal way, and that the task of synchronisation between the different spheres and spaces is mostly carried out by migrants themselves who also bear the risks and costs that come along with transnational care work arrangements.

With a view to conflict around labour, it was proposed to draw attention to subjective time horizons of migrant workers that are strongly shaped by regulations but also by cultural and biographical narratives. Temporal horizons of workers inform their strategies towards conflict. In terms of institutional interest representation, the consideration of time horizons challenges existing assumptions over workers' participation in the labour movement which usually aim at stable long-term organisations, institutional processes, or long-lasting legal procedures. From a temporal lens, different alliances, such as transnational networks, and strategies that might orient future strategies become visible.

## Notes

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**Anne Lisa Carstensen** is a professor for Global Political Economy of Labour at the University of Kassel. She holds a PhD in Sociology. Her research areas are unfree labour, trade unions and migration, migrant labour, global production networks and gender issues.

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