



# Making labour mobile: Borders, precarity, and the competitive state in Finnish migration politics



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## ABSTRACT

This article explores how the multiplication of labour migration categories relies upon strategic territorialisations of borders to differentiate between workers' nationalities, worksites, and skills in Finland. We argue that for certain categories of workers, migration policies encourage workers to become mobile in ways that make them more precarious. We analyse worksites that show the different ways that labour is made mobile: the internationalization of higher education; Finnair's labour outsourcing and offshoring practices; and the recruitment of forest berry-pickers from Thailand. We first trace contentious migration politics in Finland, revealing conflicts over labour protections, universal labour rights, the state's obligations to create employment, economic competitiveness, national identity, and the precarisation of work. We show how practices of legal, procedural, and spatial differentiation particularise the conditions of work and argue that, even for skilled workers, the strategic territorialisation of borders works to differentiate between workers and work sites. This differentiation works to make labour mobile in multiple ways and, due to the selective territorialisation of labour protections, the political geographies of migration in Finland tend towards the precarisation of labour for skilled and unskilled workers alike.

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## 1. Introduction

In 2012, the Finnish Parliament interrogated Finnair Airlines (a majority state-owned firm) over human rights violations of its Chinese cabin crew: dismissal for pregnancy, participation in industrial action, and marriage to a foreign citizen. In the two years following, Finnair laid off Finnish cabin crew, placed remaining workers on unpaid furloughs, and outsourced international cabin crew services, leading MPs, unions, and the media to call for greater protection of workers by the state majority shareholder. In 2013, around 50 Thai berry-pickers sued Finnish berry processor Ber-Ex Oy for human trafficking violations of fraudulent recruitment practices and debt bondage (Seppälä & Thuren, 2013). Low berry yields meant that workers paid by volume, rather than hourly wages, were left without enough money to return to Thailand. Both of these cases drew media, Parliamentary, and international human rights observers' attention, leading to public debates about the role of Third Country Nationals (TCNs) in Finnish workplaces, economy,

and national culture. These struggles show how labour is increasingly *made mobile*, differentiated and relocated to across borders. Moreover, these struggles over labour rights, mobility, and citizenship status have unfolded alongside broader struggles over neoliberal economic restructuring, work conditions on construction sites (Lillie, 2010), the internationalization of Finnish higher education (Moisio & Kangas, 2016; Paasi, 2015), and mass layoffs in Finland's industrial sector.

In this article, we trace struggles amongst state ministries, state-owned firms, labour unions, MPs, courts, and migrant workers in Finland to show how borders and labour have been reworked across the spectrum of skilled work, producing multiple forms of mobile labour, borders, and precarity. In doing so, we bring together previously isolated research on the multiplication of borders and labour, migrant precarity, and Nordic state restructuring to show how the political geographies of migration are a critical, but often overlooked, site for respatialisation of territory, law, and labour rights. Analysing low-skilled berry-pickers, skilled unionized state-owned Finnair cabin crew, and highly skilled international researchers, we trace how international mobility has become a precondition for work. In other words, we analyse how different actors use national borders to produce labourers in various ways.

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We argue that while migrants and asylum-seekers are often deskilled, made to work in exploitative conditions, and suffer exclusion from labour markets (see Lewis, Dyer, Hodkinson, & Waite, 2015) in ways that render them immobile, work sometimes requires mobility and relocation.

As Mezzadra and Neilson (2013) argue, borders are a key site of articulation for capital, especially as a means of differentiating between labourers according to skill level, nationality, race, gender, and class. For them, both borders and labour have been multiplied, precisely in relation to one another, as a range of state and economic actors use borders to create territories of regulatory exception (see also Peck, 2017) and workers dependent on employers for visa status. Borders have also become spaces of struggle over the conditions of work, the right to mobility, asylum, and identity (Belcher, Martin, & Tazzioli, 2015; Garelli & Tazzioli, 2017) in addition to the proliferation of walls, detention centres, and non-state immigration policing (Jones et al., 2017). While we resist the tendency to generalize borders and overstretch their analytic purchase, we must grapple with borders as complex institutions performatively produced by everyday bureaucratic practices, cultural institutions, and workplaces (Anderson, Klatt, & Sandberg, 2012; Paasi & Prokkola, 2008; Mountz, 2004; Rajaram & Grundy-War, 2007). Changing border, asylum, and migration regimes also signal changes in the spatiality of sovereignty (Jones et al., 2017; Mountz, 2011). For Mezzadra and Neilson (2013), these changes have made global space heterogeneous: a single point on the map will be criss-crossed by international, regional, and national regulations. In other words, territory has been “debordered” (Sassen, 2013), revealing not a static state space but a “flexible territoriality” (Novak, 2011). These scholars have, in short, problematized the presumed coherence between territory, legal jurisdiction, immigration status, and rights, and argued that they are in fact political technologies (Coleman, 2008; Elden, 2010; Paasi, 2009). In this article, we advance this work by showing *how* these technologies of government are made to work through banal administrative visa decisions, ministry policy-making, and labourer litigation strategies.

For knowledge workers, berry-pickers and cabin crew, labour is increasingly made mobile precisely through recruitment, visa regimes, and short term work contracts: a strategic mobilization of labour and fixing of workplaces to ensure fewer employer responsibilities to workers. We show that, in addition to the demobilization of precarious migrants (Waite, 2009), the multiplication of borders and labour are predicated on the *mobilization of labour*. We analyse struggles over three different workplaces in Finland to show both the context-specific ways in which borders and labour are multiplied and to show how international mobility has become essential to the “differential inclusion” of workers across the skill spectrum. Debates over the multiplication of borders and labour have focused on the exclusion of migrants from labour protection regimes altogether, while research on migration control, detention, and emerging geographies of sovereignty (Jones et al., 2017; Mountz, 2011) has not traced the ways in which labour is made mobile in order to relocate work to spaces with fewer worker protections. Similarly, research on migrants' precarity has focused on immigration status, poor work conditions, and social exclusion but has said less about how citizen-workers have also been made “migrantized” (with the exception of Garelli and Tazzioli (2017)). We do not question the justifiable focus on the dire human costs of immigration regimes, but here seek to make connections between the very processes that render people, citizens, and workers differentially precarious. Research and organizing around precarity *has* problematized the flexibilisation of labour through short-term and zero-hours contracts, part-time work, non-unionized workplaces, high youth unemployment, offshoring manufacturing and

outsourcing state services. Finland's shift from corporatist to competitive economic management (Ahlqvist & Moiso, 2014) has demanded *different kinds of workers*, namely globally oriented, multi-lingual, highly skilled engineers (Moiso & Kangas, 2016). To date, analyses of precarity, the multiplication of borders, and Finland's emergent competitive state have remained separate. By bringing together case studies from different parts of a segmented national and international labour market, we want to show the ways in which the differentiation of labour and borders also includes the differentiation of precarity. We argue that the multiplication of borders and labour requires, in the case of Finland, the mobilization of labour and, through this mobilization, a de- and reterritorialization of workplaces, labour protections, and citizenship status.

Below we elaborate our approach to borders, migration, and precarity and describe how this approach informed our methodology. We then contextualize our three case studies in Finland's state restructuring, migration policy-making, and Europeanization. We illustrate these changes through the internationalization of higher education, a case that demonstrates the centrality of internationally mobile knowledge workers for Finland's economic development. We then turn to Finnair cabin crew and forest berry-picking to show how the mobilization of differentiated labourers and the strategic territorialisation of the workplace intersect to produce specific, but all too familiar, forms of precarity. Analysing these cases alongside each other allows us to illuminate both the highly specific ways in which particular workers are rendered mobile and the general way in which mobility has become a precondition for work.

## 2. Borders, mobility and precarity

Migration studies scholars have traditionally explained labour migration in terms of push-pull factors and economic differences between states, north and south, or core and periphery. Recent scholarship, however, has focused on how international labour migration is shaped by state migration policies (Massey, 1999; Raghuram & Kofman, 2002; Samers, 2010), supranational actors like the EU (Leitner, 1997; Kofman, 2002; Cerna, 2013; Geddes & Nieman, 2015; Menz, 2015; Paul, 2013, 2015), international organizations like the International Organization for Migration (Andrijasevic & Walters, 2010; Ashutosh & Mountz, 2011), transnational corporations (Millar & Salt, 2007), recruitment brokers and agencies (Kern & Mueller-Boeker 2015; Sporton, 2013), and other facilitators (Andersson, 2014; Gammeltoft-Hansen & Sörensen 2013). These approaches challenge the view that ‘the migrant’ is the problem to be solved and, in turn, question the status of the migrant as an object of study (Casas-Cortes et al., 2015). Rather, the myriad interdisciplinary studies of enforcement show how states produce illegal immigration through legal categorization, policing, and securitization (Andersson, 2014; Bigo, 2002; Bosworth, 2014; Coleman, 2005, 2008; De Genova & Peutz, 2010; Gill, 2016; Huysmans, 2006; Martin, 2012; Mountz, 2010). As Mezzadra and Neilson (2013) show, skilled labour categories for international migrants activate temporal and spatial borders to craft low-cost labour supplies.

The implementation of the Schengen Agreement and EU free internal mobility for EU citizens forced cooperating states to negotiate the sovereign right to manage non-citizens on their territory (Leitner, 1997). The Schengen Agreement was incorporated into the legal framework of the EU in the Treaty of Amsterdam and sought to create more flexible and mobile labour force and, therefore, a more favourable environment for international investment. Migration policy has become increasingly supranational and a number of EU directives concerning labour migration from

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