

The Perplexing Middlemen: Private Employment Agencies in the Web of Lives of Seasonal  
Workers in Early Twentieth Century America

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## Abstract

This research project examines the relationship between seasonal migrant workers and private employment agencies in the United States in the early twentieth century. It cites sociologists' studies, government reports on the casual labor market, newspapers, and documents from labor organizations such as Industrial Workers of the World. This thesis challenges the dominant historical narratives of private employment agencies as exploitative by arguing that they were effective labor institutions, thanks to their integral engagement in seasonal workers' everyday lives. Private employment agencies were unique in the precarious labor market due to their physical accessibility, their relationship with other services used by seasonal workers, and their alignment with seasonal workers' code of conduct. Employers motivated intermediary labor institutions to participate in seasonal workers' everyday lives as well. However, private employment agencies' engagement in the web of lives fueled hostility and collective action against themselves. Recognizing the significance of these agencies' social function, labor organizations countered their abuses by intervening and restructuring the space of everyday lives. The research findings of this thesis shed light upon the impact of social lives on decisions in the precarious labor market.

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During the winter of 1907-1908, a private employment agency in the West Side of Chicago charged ten Polish laborers \$10 each to work in a lumber camp in Wyoming. However, upon arrival, they discovered that no such position existed. Forced to walk back to Chicago, “one of the men, a bright young fellow of twenty-two, froze his foot... When he finally reached Chicago blood poisoning had set in and it was necessary to amputate the foot.”<sup>1</sup> This poor Polish young man was just one of the many victims of private employment agencies in early twentieth century America, according to Chicago sociologist Grace Abbott. Private employment agencies were institutions that charged fees to place jobseekers with employment opportunities. Nevertheless, “the opportunities of cheating the unsuspecting stranger are too great for the average man, anxious to make money, to withstand.”<sup>2</sup> Therefore, private employment agents frequently abused their power, as documented and critiqued by social investigators.

Mrs. S. J. Atwood, the proprietor of one of the largest employment agencies in the country, disapproved of such accusations. To run her business, “she has followed grading work for months at a time, living in a box car of the construction train. She has camped on the trail of pipelines where thousands of men were at work, sleeping in a tent when the thermometer registered 28 below zero.”<sup>3</sup> In her five years of managing construction work for Oregon Short Line, she built camps for, fed, and cared for between 2,500 and 3,500 men.<sup>4</sup> An honest, hard-

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<sup>1</sup> Grace Abbott, “The Chicago Employment Agency and the Immigrant Worker,” *The American Journal of Sociology* XIV, no. 3 (November 1908).

<sup>2</sup> Abbott.

<sup>3</sup> “WOMAN THE STAR IN LABOR HEARING: MRS. S. J. ATWOOD, AN EXPERT, IS A WITNESS BEFORE FEDERAL COMMISSION,” *New - York Tribune (1911-1922)*, May 20, 1914, 575243393, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: New York Tribune / Herald Tribune.

<sup>4</sup> “WOMAN LABOR AGENT TELLS FEDERAL BOARD ITS ON WRONG TRACK,” *New - York Tribune (1911-1922)*, June 7, 1914, 575268752, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: New York Tribune / Herald Tribune.

working, and successful employment agent, Atwood enjoyed a high reputation among not only migrant workers but also government officials, so much so, that she was invited to testify before the United States Commission on Industrial Relations in 1914.

The predatory yet benevolent image of private employment agencies poses a question: what exactly did the interaction between migrant workers and private employment agencies look like? Moreover, private employment agencies were consistently more popular than public employment bureaus, which were viewed as being even more inefficient. What were the appeals of these predatory private employment agencies, even when they were obviously exploiting workers?

The problem of understanding private employment agencies arises from my research on the intermediary “middlemen” in the labor market of seasonal workers in late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century United States. Seasonal workers refer to those who take on temporary, often seasonal jobs in agriculture and construction and who travel long distances to employment sites in the countryside. My research addresses both larger questions about precarious employment with its associated forms of labor activism and specific questions about the relationship between private employment agents and seasonal workers. By examining the social function of private employment agencies, my research aims to produce unique insights about precarious workers in the early twentieth century prior to the Great Depression. This thesis examines sociologists’ studies of seasonal migrant workers, federal and state government reports on labor relations, personal memoirs, census records, newspapers, prints by labor organizations, and court cases. While there was great heterogeneity in experiences of seasonal migrant workers in different industries across different regions, stakeholders in most primary sources including Progressive Era investigators and government officials framed casual workers as a homogeneous national problem. Due to this limitation of primary sources, this thesis explores the interaction

between private employment agencies and seasonal migrant workers nationally while focusing on Chicago and Spokane for case studies. The thesis addresses issues including economic conditions and personal motivations that give rise to seasonal labor, interaction between seasonal migrant workers and private employment agencies in their everyday lives in the city, and resistance strategies to counter exploitation. This research provides valuable insights into the social and cultural needs of seasonal migrant workers, as well as the relationship between social and economic lives.

While the dominant historical narratives portray private employment agencies as exploitative, I argue that they were effective labor institutions due to their integral engagement in seasonal workers' everyday lives. Private employment agencies secured unique advantages in the precarious labor market due to their physical accessibility, their relationship with other services used by seasonal workers, and their alignment with seasonal workers' code of conduct. This engagement was partially motivated by demands of employers in the casual labor market. Ironically, their rigorous participation in seasonal workers' everyday lives also fueled hostility and collective action against themselves. Recognizing the significance of their social function, labor organizers countered their abuses by intervening and restructuring the space of everyday lives of seasonal workers. As shown by this dynamics, seasonal workers' communal needs were of high priority in their working experience, and private employment agencies at least partially met those needs.

My argument takes on Granovetter's theoretical framework of embeddedness in economic action and social structure. To explain economic decisions and processes, Granovetter rejects the undersocialized account that emphasizes utilitarian pursuit of self-interest and the oversocialized account that focuses on rather mechanical influence of socially constructed customs. Instead, his

embeddedness argument stresses “the role of concrete personal relations and the structures of such relations” in generating economic processes.<sup>5</sup> He seeks to study “the embeddedness of labor market behavior in networks of social interaction and demographic constraints” to relate micro level interactions to macro level patterns and consider the intertwining of economic and noneconomic motives.<sup>6</sup> My research endorses the embeddedness methodology as it treats the dynamics between seasonal migrant workers and private employment agencies as a heterogeneous social process that is constantly evolving depending on the specific actors involved. By focusing on the concrete personal relations between private employment agents and seasonal migrant workers, I hope to make an argument on the impact of personal relations and interaction dynamics on labor market decisions.

Investigating seasonal workers’ relations with private employment agencies offers unique insights into workers’ needs, priorities, perception of work, and construction of coherent social spaces in a highly fluid labor market. Research on workers’ struggle against exploitive employment agents draws attention to seasonal workers’ agency, courage, and potential for collective action. These observations help reframe the conversation on precarious employment in the twenty-first century from how to formalize the informal labor market to how best to assist casual workers in developing their own forms of activism and arriving at their true goals. In addition, the historical research on the role of private vs. public employment agents in the informal labor market has significant public policy implications. To what extent was the state’s involvement empowering or limiting for job seekers in the seasonal labor market, and why? Contemporary casual workers share migrant seasonal workers’ job insecurity, physical mobility,

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<sup>5</sup> Mark Granovetter and Richard Swedberg, eds., *The Sociology of Economic Life* (Colorado: Westview Press, 1992). 53-84.

<sup>6</sup> Granovetter and Swedberg, 233-240.

as well as precarity of urban lives. Nevertheless, casual workers today work primarily in a proliferating post-industrial service sector while the seasonal migrant workers in early twentieth century worked in agricultural and industrial sectors. By comparing and contrasting these casual workers' interaction with state labor agencies, we could better understand the unique features of contemporary precarious labor market and potential innovative regulatory solutions.

### **I. Historiography: who got on the road and how they ran into private employment agencies**

The historiography of seasonal migrant workers, often referred to in the United States as hobos and tramps, discusses their demographics extensively. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, seasonal migrant workers mainly consisted of single white men under 40, such as ex-Civil War soldiers, according to Richard Wormser.<sup>7</sup> Roger Bruns emphasizes the youth of migrant workers even more by stating that 75% were under 21 years old.<sup>8</sup> Contrary to the typical image, Todd DePastino notes that there were skilled as well as unskilled workers on the road, while Wormser suggests that 90% of migrant workers were literate.<sup>9</sup> The three primary industries seasonal migrant workers engaged in were lumber, construction, and agriculture, according to Wormser.<sup>10</sup>

In terms of the motivations driving workers towards seasonal labor, historians of hobos offer three different arguments. DePastino and Wormser propose that the economic cycles of

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<sup>7</sup> Richard Wormser, *Hoboes: Wandering in America, 1870-1940* (New York: Walker and Co, 1994), <https://catalog.lib.uchicago.edu/vufind/Record/1576884>.

<sup>8</sup> Roger A. Bruns, *The Damndest Radical: The Life and World of Ben Reitman, Chicago's Celebrated Social Reformer, Hobo King, and Whorehouse Physician* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), <https://catalog.lib.uchicago.edu/vufind/Record/796597>.

<sup>9</sup> Todd DePastino, *Citizen Hobo: How a Century of Homelessness Shaped America* (Chicago, UNITED STATES: University of Chicago Press, 2003), <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uchicago/detail.action?docID=534347>.

<sup>10</sup> Wormser, *Hoboes*.

boom and recession as well as industrial economy's reliance on wages produce unemployment and thus necessities for workers to roam the countryside for work.<sup>11</sup><sup>12</sup> The extension of railroads dramatically expands their geographical mobility, distinguishing hobos in the late nineteenth century from earlier, place-based tramps. Frank Higbie agrees with the role of industrial capitalism in the production of hoboes but focuses his account on the connections between the city and the hinterland. Because capitalist development requires both labor and raw materials, the "modern world" continues to rely on "nonmodern cycles of agriculture and seasonal changes." Rural and urban America feed each other's needs for labor: rural farmers unwilling to work for wages in agriculture migrate to the city for better employment opportunities; high turnover rates in the city lead workers to migrate to the countryside during harvest seasons for jobs. The close connections between urban and rural economies necessitate migrant seasonal workers.<sup>13</sup> Bruns offers a more romanticized account of the motivations behind tramping. Stating that more than 75% of road wanderers were under 21 years old and citing the example of the famous hobo Ben Reitman, Bruns suggests that American youth fall for the romantic experience on the road and thus proactively commit to seasonal labor.<sup>14</sup> While DePastino's and Wormser's accounts offer a macroeconomic explanation of why seasonal work that required constant migration existed, they fail to discuss individuals' motivations behind becoming a hobo in detail. Although Bruns aims to do so, his account is highly romanticized and thus less trustworthy.

Citing mostly Progressive Era investigators' reports, all four scholars of hoboes wrote about exploitation workers experienced in their interaction with private employment agencies to secure

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<sup>11</sup> DePastino, *Citizen Hobo*.

<sup>12</sup> Wormser, *Hoboes*.

<sup>13</sup> Frank Tobias Higbie, *Indispensable Outcasts: Hobo Workers and Community in the American Midwest, 1880-1930*, Working Class in American History. (University of Illinois Press, 2003).

<sup>14</sup> Bruns, *The Damndest Radical*.



seasonal jobs. Private employment agencies advertised seasonal job openings, hired workers usually after charging a fee, and arranged transportation to the work sites. While workers could find farm labor in the countryside on the main street of villages, majority of them used services by private employment agencies because these agencies offered jobs with large railroad, lumber, and mining corporations. Some agents even controlled jobs of whole territories or ethnic groups. As private employment agencies exercised significant power in the precarious labor market, job seekers resorted to their services.<sup>15</sup> In this process, there were plenty of opportunities for exploitation. These agencies set exorbitant prices, conspired with employers to fire workers quickly in order to maximize the profit from more frequent use of employment services, and sent workers to nonexistent jobs. Seasonal migrant workers countered these abuses by taking advantage of the free transportation provided by these agencies to expand their geographical mobility without committing to the actual work. The Industrial Workers of the World, a union consisting of a significant proportion of seasonal migrant workers, also protested against and sought to replace these exploitative employment agencies.<sup>16</sup>

While acknowledging all these forms of abuse, Tomas Martinez, a historian of private employment agencies, challenges the extent of agency abuse and argues that these agencies played an integral role in the lives of the unemployed. With the example of Atwood, “labourer’s big sister,” Martinez points out that responsive and honest agents did exist. Moreover, some agencies allowed job seekers to stay overnight and became “central meeting places where many activities other than waiting for a job occurred”. Many agents, in fact, complained about the criticism with “the bad apple theory [where] a few spoil the image of all.” Martinez highlights the difficulty of judging the proportion and number of agencies guilty of malpractices due to a

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<sup>15</sup> Higbie, *Indispensable Outcasts*. 52.

<sup>16</sup> Higbie.

shortage of empirical studies. However, he leans more towards the statement that most employment agents were abusive based on registered complaints data in California for 1937.<sup>17</sup> In summary, while Martinez cites similar sources from social investigators and additional magazine sources, he comes to a more ambiguous conclusion than the historians of hobos.

Another historian of employment agencies, Udo Sautter, discusses the competitive disadvantages public employment agencies suffered from compared with private ones. He points out the poor public image of public employment agencies, appointments of public officials based on political patronage rather than qualifications, and the lack of interstate coordination. All of these factors contributed to the failure of public employment bureaus.<sup>18</sup> However, Sautter does not analyze the cause of success for private agencies. Sautter's critique of public employment services prompts further questions about the efficiency of private employment agencies. Why were they arguably the most prevalent middlemen in the seasonal labor market? Higbie briefly addresses the question by stating that the most essential demand of seasonal workers was access to high-quality jobs, and private employment agencies with solid connections with employers enjoyed unique advantages in offering "the best jobs."<sup>19</sup> Yet, it remains unclear how seasonal migrant workers balanced the appeals of "the best jobs" with the dangers of abuse. I am skeptical that economic rationale alone accounts for the prevalence of private employment agencies, since the criteria for "the best job" are rarely limited to economic considerations.

The contradiction between historians of hobos' exploitive agents and historians of private employment agencies' efficient agents highlights opportunities for further research for an

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<sup>17</sup> Tomás Martínez, *The Human Marketplace: An Examination of Private Employment Agencies* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books, 1976), <https://catalog.lib.uchicago.edu/vufind/Record/118950>.

<sup>18</sup> Udo Sautter, *Three Cheers for the Unemployed: Government and Unemployment before the New Deal* (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), <https://catalog.lib.uchicago.edu/vufind/Record/1239890>.

<sup>19</sup> Higbie, *Indispensable Outcasts*.

account of reconciliation. This research project does not seek to offer a quantitative empirical evaluation of the exploitation of workers from private employment agencies; it does not intend to and cannot find the proportion of abusive private employment agencies. Rather, by investigating the non-exploitive, and potentially constructive aspects of these private agents, this research project seeks to understand the needs of seasonal workers that these agencies successfully fulfilled, features of effective mediating institutions in a highly fluid labor market, and conditions for the development of collectivity among season workers.

Another question left unanswered in the current historiography is the identity of private employment agents. Who ran the private employment agencies? Higbie mentions that some immigrants started their own private employment agencies and operated under a padrone system.<sup>20</sup> However, Walter Licht who studied the process of job searching in Philadelphia at the turn of the twentieth century argues that the padrone system is more a myth than a reality.<sup>21</sup> In addition to the confusion about the agents running private employment agencies for immigrant workers, scholars do not discuss at all the demographics and experiences of the agents offering employment services to domestic seasonal migrant workers. The question of the identity of employment agents is significant because it could offer insights into the unique role played by private employment agencies. In the historiography of saloons at the turn of the twentieth century, many scholars mention that saloon keepers served as important patrons for the working class.<sup>22</sup> Employers went to saloon keepers for laborers and the unemployed also gathered in saloons for news of job openings. Scholars of bars hold a favorable view towards the occupational services provided by bar keepers, portraying them as allies of workers. At the same

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<sup>20</sup> Higbie.

<sup>21</sup> Walter Licht, *Getting Work: Philadelphia, 1840-1950* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992).

<sup>22</sup> Madelon Powers, "The 'Poor Man's Friend': Saloonkeepers, Workers, and the Code of Reciprocity in U.S. Barrooms, 1870-1920," *International Labor and Working-Class History*, no. 45 (1994): 1-15.

time, historians of migrant seasonal workers note that many employment agencies operated within saloons. DePastino even mentions that some private employment agents offered saloon services or haircut services to migrant workers.<sup>23</sup> Saloon keepers could sometimes be the same groups of people running private employment agencies, and this research project explores this overlap in roles and its implications. An understanding of the background of private employment agents enables a more critical review of Progressive Era investigators' description of private employment agencies and seasonal migrant workers' demands.

In general, this thesis aims to explore the constructive aspects of private employment agencies, investigate the social and cultural needs of seasonal migrant workers in relation to their precarious economic conditions, and strategies of resistance. It first examines private employment agencies' rigorous engagement in seasonal migrant workers' everyday lives through spatial proximity, additional essential services, and code of conduct. It then discusses the role of employers in driving such engagement. Finally, it investigates how such engagement contributes to resistance and collective action by seasonal workers.

## **II. Engagement in and production of everyday lives: private employment agencies in the web of lives of seasonal migrant workers**

For seasonal workers, the experience of economic production and that of everyday social and cultural lives were not separate. Everyday social and cultural lives include individual and group residential and entertainment activities. Private employment agencies functioned as an essential bridge between labor market and everyday life. First, private employment agencies'

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<sup>23</sup> DePastino, *Citizen Hobo*.

engagement in seasonal workers' everyday life is demonstrated by their geographical locations within the city – their spatial proximity to seasonal migrant workers' everyday lives. Sociologist Frances Kellor conducted rigorous examination of employment agencies in *Out of Work*, published in 1904. Kellor first noted that the majority of private employment offices were located in residential households such as tenements and apartments instead of commercial houses. In New York, of 313 offices investigated, 85% were located in private households. Philadelphia had 84% in private residences while Chicago had 81% in buildings occupied by families. This spatial distribution of private employment agencies shows that the majority of them were close to the cultural space of casual workers. Rather than a business independent of workers' private lives, employment agencies were more likely to be found in workers' residential space where they socialized.

Moreover, while offices in business buildings had obvious signs and could be easily identified on the street, entrance to offices in private locations was often hidden in other social institutions. For example, a saloon was the most prominent signifier for hidden entrance to private employment agencies. Visitors often had to wait in the rear of saloons for several minutes before being shown to the office reachable only through the saloon. In fact, Kellor states that two thirds of all labor agencies inspected were located in or near saloons.<sup>24</sup> In addition to saloons, one office was found on the ground floor in the corner of a barber shop. As shown in a photograph of Oregon Labor Agency, right next to the office was a sign titled baths. Bathing service was right next door to labor services (Figure 1).<sup>25</sup> Gambling-dens, fortune-tellers, palmists, midwives, and other “undesirable ‘professions’” were also found close to private

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<sup>24</sup> Frances Kellor, *Out of Work; a Study of Employment Agencies, Their Treatment of the Unemployed, and Their Influence upon Home and Business*. (New York: Putnam), accessed May 15, 2022, <https://catalog.lib.uchicago.edu/vufind/Record/1995917>. 182.

<sup>25</sup> Alan Sykes, “Harold Farrow’s Splendid Portland, 1910,” *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 99, no. 1 (1998): 48–61.

employment agencies, as idle job seekers attracted by the private employment offices were also the most ideal customers to these social services.<sup>26</sup> Saloons, barber shops, and bathing houses were all places where workers led their everyday lives beyond work. The spatial proximity between private labor agencies and institutions of essential everyday services shows that private labor agencies engaged spatially in casual workers' everyday environment.



Figure 1. Men standing outside Oregon Labor Agency at the northwest corner of Ankeny and Second in Portland in 1910. Some were reading the information about available jobs such as “dairy man” and “choker setter” on the windows of this employment agency. Such private

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<sup>26</sup> Kellor, *Out of Work; a Study of Employment Agencies, Their Treatment of the Unemployed, and Their Influence upon Home and Business*. 20-21.

employment agencies were especially prevalent in providing labor for the timber, railroad, and mining companies between 1905 and 1912 <sup>27</sup>

A closer analysis of the city of Chicago highlights this spatial relationship. According to Grace Abbott, a Chicago urban sociologist, “opposite the Union Station on Canal Street from Adams to Madison and from Canal to Clinton on Madison, there is a succession of employment agencies, saloons, cheap lodging-houses, lunch-rooms, and cheap or second-hand clothing stores. These three blocks are the seasonal labor exchange of Chicago” (Figure 2)<sup>28</sup> The spatial proximity of private employment agencies and saloons, shops, and housing for seasonal workers suggests that there is a spatial overlap between seasonal workers’ social life and job search. Seasonal workers lived, drank, dined, and socialized in the same space where they secured employment opportunities.

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<sup>27</sup> Sykes, “Harold Farrow’s Splendid Portland, 1910.”

<sup>28</sup> Abbott, “The Chicago Employment Agency and the Immigrant Worker.” 294.

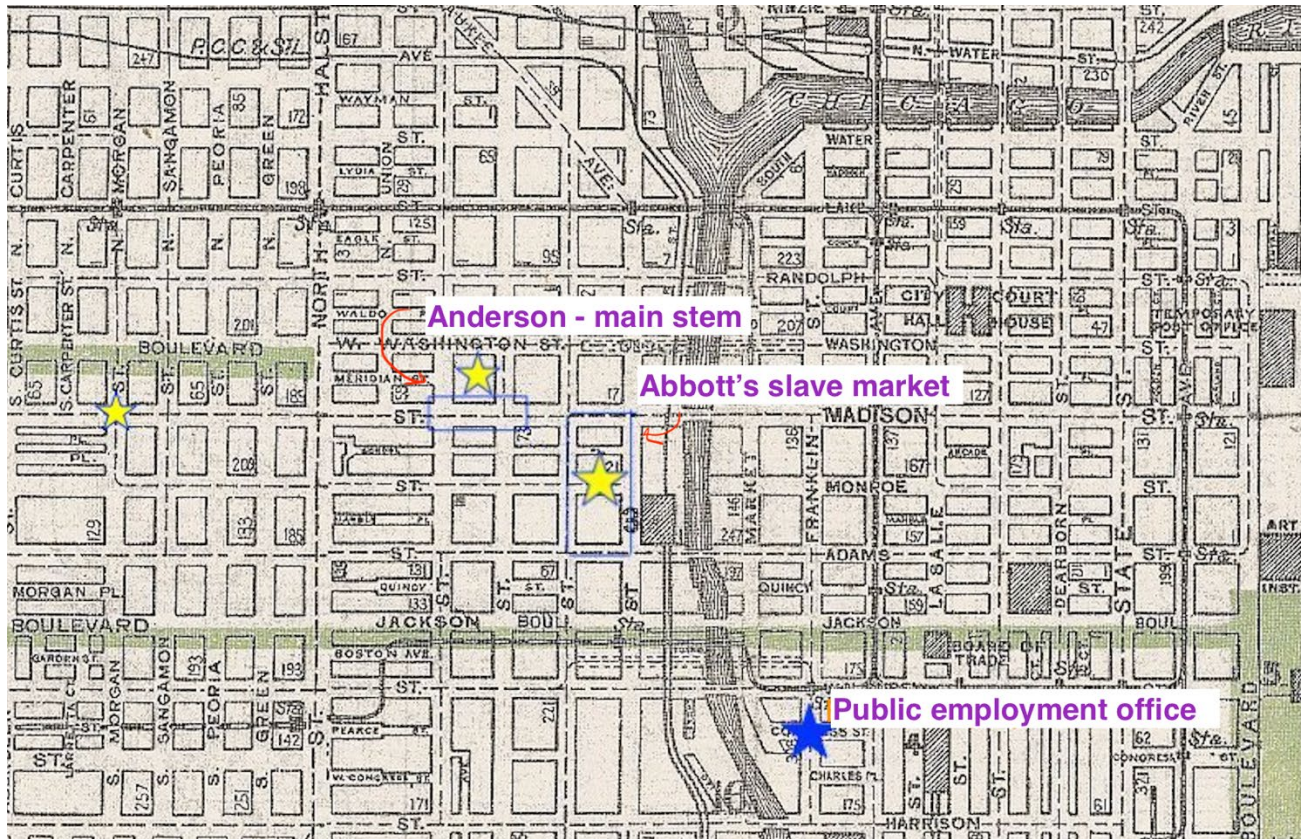


Figure 2. A map of downtown and West Loop in Chicago; the locations of the district of private employment agencies and seasonal migrant workers were marked. The location of the closest public employment office was also marked in the sketch.<sup>29</sup>

Nels Anderson, a sociologist and a hobo himself, has written extensively about this region Abbott refers to in the 1920s. He refers to it as Hobohemia, the district where the homeless men congregated. The number of homeless men in Chicago ranges from 30,000 in good times to 75,000 in hard times. Among all, two thirds were seasonal workers – nonpermanent residents of Chicago. They lived in Hobohemia, all parts of which were within five minutes from the heart of

<sup>29</sup> Rand McNally and Company., *Rand, McNally and Co.'s Street Number Guide Map of the Principal Part of Chicago* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1902), <https://luna.lib.uchicago.edu/luna/servlet/detail/UCHICAGO~2~2~376~1231849:Street-guide-map-of-Chicago-and-sub>.



the Loop. West Madison Street, in the western part of Hobohemia, was referred to as the “slave market” where most employment agencies were located. Anderson gave a detailed analysis of the “main stem” of Western Hobohemia on West Madison Street, between Desplaines Street and Jefferson Street, one block away from the district Abbott studies. In this block, there were a mixture of cheap restaurants, barber colleges, fortune telling stores, missions, saloons, cigar stores, cheap clothing stores, drug stores, cheap hotels, gambling places and employment agencies (Figure 3). The south side of Madison Street highlights the degree to which private employment agencies were spatially close to other social services. Every two employment agencies were separated by either a hotel or a saloon or a restaurant. On the north side of the street, one employment agency was located at the back end of a hotel. In the photograph of private employment agencies in hoboemia, there’s an ad for Melba – a brand of cigarette, right above the job ads, suggesting that cigar stores and private employment agencies could be right next to each other (Figure 4). At minimum, private employment agencies welcomed the marketing for other entertainment services in their labor services. This pattern of arrangement, more than a simple concentration of private employment agencies and other social services, highlights the degree to which private employment agencies engaged in the everyday lives of seasonal workers. On this street, private employment agencies were not immediately distinct from other social service institutions. There wasn’t a specific corner where one could find all of them; instead, they spread out among saloons, hotels, and restaurants. Such spatial arrangement prompted the possible interpretation that in the eyes of the seasonal migrant workers, private employment agencies were not a distinct labor institution but a social institution in the same way as barber shops, restaurants, and hotels. They were inseparable from other social services and rooted in the social lives of seasonal workers. Anderson stated that the concentration of homeless

men “has created an isolated cultural area,” where “characteristic institutions have arisen ... to minister to the needs, physical and spiritual, of the homeless man.”<sup>30</sup>

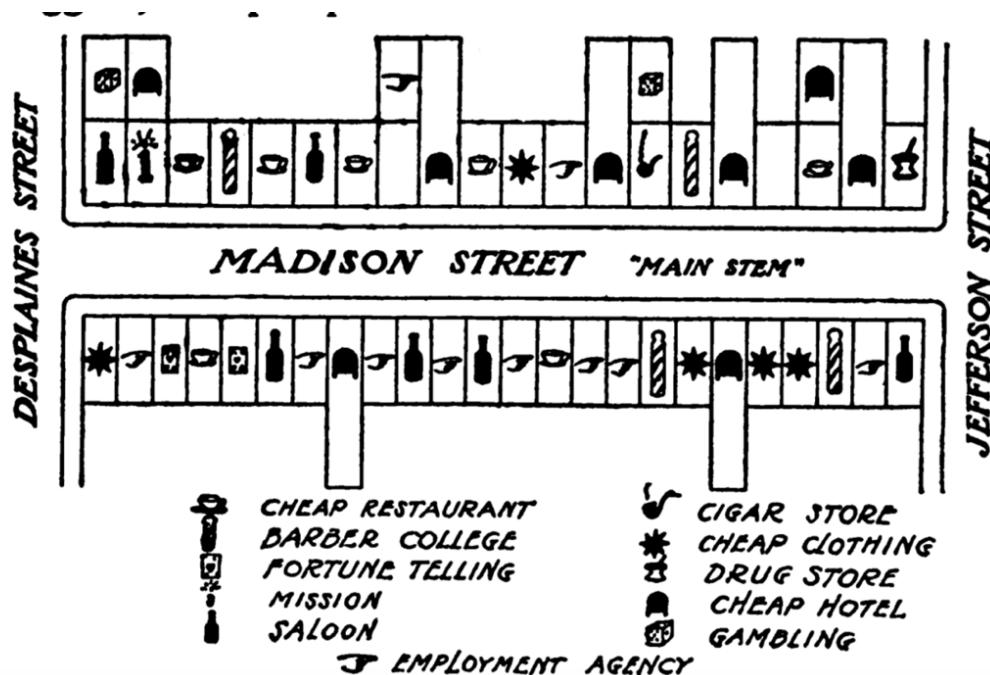


Figure 3. Main stem in Hobohemia in Chicago where homeless migrant workers were segregated. Characteristic institutions such as saloons, hotels, gambling houses, and employment agencies emerged in this district to meet the needs of these homeless populations. This picture is Anderson’s drawing of such institutions on West Madison Street between Desplaines and

Jefferson Street<sup>31</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Nels Anderson, *The Hobo: The Sociology of the Homeless Man. A Study Prepared for the Chicago Council of Social Agencies under the Direction of the Committee on Homeless Men.*, Phoenix Books (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/001133363>. 15.

<sup>31</sup> Anderson. 15.



### EMPLOYMENT BUREAUS OFFER OPPORTUNITY FOR TRAVEL

Figure 4. A photograph of employment agencies on West Madison. Both employment offices in the photo posted available jobs such as yard laborers and factory laborers on their windows. <sup>32</sup>

A contrast with the free public employment bureaus further confirms private employment agencies' unique engagement in seasonal workers' everyday lives. In Chicago, three free public employment bureaus were established in 1899 to address the ills of private employment agencies. The North office was located at 234 Chicago Avenue; the West office was located at 28 Ogden Avenue; the South office – the one closest to Abbott's seasonal labor exchange of

<sup>32</sup> Anderson. 34.

Chicago – was located at 44 Congress Street. (Figure 2)<sup>33</sup> Even the South office was still four streets and a river away from center of seasonal workers. The physical distance makes public employment bureaus less accessible to seasonal workers, which might be one of the reasons why public employment agencies were so much less efficient than the private ones. Anderson confirms this hypothesis stating that thanks to the location at the main stem of the Hobohemia, “strangers in the city find their way to the ‘slave market’ without difficulty but may never become aware of the existence of the free employment office.” In addition, “a migratory worker likes to do a little ‘window shopping’ before he takes a job.” On West Madison Street, one could walk along the street and see signs of jobs on the windows of multiple private agencies. However, at 44 Congress Street, there was only one office available for the job seekers and the public office did not post advertisements on their windows either. In this way, private employment agencies’ engagement in the social and cultural lives of seasonal workers places them at an advantage in the casual labor market.

Private employment agencies were not only located close to other social services, they were in fact also directly providing some of these social services. There’s an overlap between the role of private employment agencies and restaurants, hotels, and banks. Current historiography of private employment agencies and casual workers mainly discusses private employment agencies as abstract institutions rather than as a group of individuals. Questions about the identity and demographics of private employment agents are rarely raised. Private employment agent was depicted as an occupational category rather than a social individual with mixed features. It is necessary to study private employment agents beyond the agencies. If we investigate the background of agents working for private employment agencies, we find that private

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<sup>33</sup> David Ross, *First Annual Report: Illinois Free Employment Offices: August 2nd to October 1st, 1899* (Springfield, Ill.: State Board of Labor Commissioners, 1899), <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/000532791>.

employment agents undertook various jobs and offered diverse social services, including banking and housing. According to Claghorn, the labor agent “may find the holding of money, at first undertaken as a casual accommodation, increase to such an extent that it will outweigh the other functions.”<sup>34</sup> Claghorn’s observations highlights not only employment agents’ capacity to offer banking services, but also the transient nature of their occupation – private employment agents could *become* bankers. Kellor observes that “side occupations for men usually fit in well with the office, such as keeping a saloon which the waiting employees can patronize, running a steamship or railway agency where they can buy tickets, or selling small articles which are wanted by employees”.<sup>35</sup> If the agency was located in saloons, “the same proprietor runs both.”<sup>36</sup> To a certain extent, the employment agency was the means by which such proprietor attracted patrons to their saloon hotels. In these cases, private employment agents *were* the saloon keepers, hotel managers, store vendors, and ticket sellers *themselves*. It is not only that private employment agents sometimes provided other social services, but they also took on those occupational identities at the same time. “In saloons business is often transacted over the bar, and orders for drinks and for jobs seem to be indiscriminately mixed.”<sup>37</sup> Private employment agencies were an active force in producing and shaping the social space of migrant workers. Their practice in saloons defined a standard way in which jobs were acquired. They also defined a cultural space that included work as an integral component. Without them, the casual laborers’ cultural space would have looked quite different. The objects of discussion during exchanges of drinks would be different. Or in other words, the agglomeration of barber shops, lodging-house, and saloons

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<sup>34</sup> Kate Holladay Claghorn, *The Immigrant’s Day in Court* (Harper & brothers, 1923). 35.

<sup>35</sup> Kellor, *Out of Work; a Study of Employment Agencies, Their Treatment of the Unemployed, and Their Influence upon Home and Business*. 42.

<sup>36</sup> Kellor. 181-3.

<sup>37</sup> Kellor. 182.

could be understood as a result of private employment agencies' capacity in gathering the seasonal workers and their undertaking of multiple social functions.

Private employment agencies' critical role in offering diverse social services is even more evident in the immigrant communities, shown by the *padrone* system. "A *padrone* is a contractor, usually a foreigner, who keeps in close touch with arriving immigrants, secures their labor at a low wage, and then rents it out to other contractors engaged in works of construction."<sup>38</sup> The *padrone* charged from two to five dollars from immigrant workers and from two to three dollars from the firm.<sup>39</sup> With such fee charging behaviors, *padrones* operate essentially as private employment agents, only specifically targeting immigrants. Their interaction with new immigrants reflects the dynamics between private employment agents and casual workers because a significant portion of these immigrants engaged in casual work. For example, in 1886, circulars of a New York company were distributed to Wisconsin for grading, mining, street cleaning, snow shoveling, and similar kinds of labor.<sup>40</sup> Grace Abbott also mentioned the immigrants often took jobs that required long distance travel, especially ones that Americans avoided.<sup>41</sup> *Padrones* exemplify the overlap in the social and economic roles taken by private employment agents. "Very frequently the contractor is also a banker, and occasionally, a boarding-house keeper, combining as many ways to secure the immigrant's money for himself as possible." The *padrone* played extensive roles in immigrant workers' social and economic lives. The *padrone* banker was responsible for securing the immigrant laborers, distributing them among boarding-houses upon arrival, assigning them to work, and offering international banking

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<sup>38</sup> Prescott Farnsworth Hall, *Immigration and Its Effects Upon the United States* (H. Holt, 1908). 131.

<sup>39</sup> United States Immigration Commission (1907-1910), *Reports of the Immigration Commission* (U.S. Government Printing Office, 1911). 19.

<sup>40</sup> Hall, *Immigration and Its Effects Upon the United States*. 133.

<sup>41</sup> Abbott, "The Chicago Employment Agency and the Immigrant Worker."

transfer services.<sup>42</sup> Kellor adds to this observation by stating that the padrones also bought immigrant laborers food and wrote their home letters.<sup>43</sup> According to surveys by US Immigration Commission, we observe that saloon keepers were the second most prevalent occupation categories for Lithuanian, Magyar, and Polish immigrants.<sup>44</sup> This suggests that not only did private employment agents play multiple roles, these occupations providing social services were also numerous among the immigrant community.

Public employment agents, on the other hand, share a social status distinct from private employment agents and seasonal migrant workers. Officers at public employment bureau at South Chicago office were generally property owners and immigrants from Ireland or Scotland. William H Cruden, superintendent in from 1908 to 1912, was born in Scotland in 1867 and married with a mortgage free house.<sup>45</sup><sup>46</sup> Before his position at public employment bureau, he was a “humane officer” according to the 1900 census. George Geary, the superintendent of South office from 1899, was a white, second-generation immigrant from Ireland, as well as a house owner. After this position, he worked as a contractor in iron boarding and a clerk in bridge construction and was categorized as an employer rather than employee according to 1910 and 1920 censuses.<sup>47</sup> Public employment agents were professionals who stayed in the occupational

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<sup>42</sup> Hall, *Immigration and Its Effects Upon the United States*. 131.

<sup>43</sup> Kellor, *Out of Work; a Study of Employment Agencies, Their Treatment of the Unemployed, and Their Influence upon Home and Business*. 185.

<sup>44</sup> United States Immigration Commission (1907-1910) and United States Immigration Commission (1907-1910), *Immigrants in Cities : A Study of the Population of Selected Districts in New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, Boston, Cleveland, Buffalo, and Milwaukee* (U.S. Government Printing Office, 1911). 308.

<sup>45</sup> “1920 United States Federal Census - AncestryLibrary.Com,” accessed February 20, 2023, [https://www.ancestrylibrary.com/discoveryui-content/view/102073919:6061?tid=&pid=&queryId=d55f466dcf52a246899ba73630440c15&\\_phsrc=ePF6&\\_phstart=successSource](https://www.ancestrylibrary.com/discoveryui-content/view/102073919:6061?tid=&pid=&queryId=d55f466dcf52a246899ba73630440c15&_phsrc=ePF6&_phstart=successSource).

<sup>46</sup> Illinois, *Annual Report of the Illinois Free Employment Offices. 1907/08-1915/16*. (Springfield, IL: Illinois State Journal Co., 1909), <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/000532791>.

<sup>47</sup> “1900 United States Federal Census - AncestryLibrary.Com,” accessed February 20, 2023, [https://www.ancestrylibrary.com/discoveryui-content/view/11611690:7602?tid=&pid=&queryId=d0ebbfd9463ef264f858c15ae752c3fa&\\_phsrc=ePF1&\\_phstart=successSource](https://www.ancestrylibrary.com/discoveryui-content/view/11611690:7602?tid=&pid=&queryId=d0ebbfd9463ef264f858c15ae752c3fa&_phsrc=ePF1&_phstart=successSource).

space of labor services and did not transition among saloon keepers, bankers, or lodging house owners. The overlapping of roles immersed private employment agents in seasonal workers' everyday lives, while public employment agents stayed away from the social circle of the seasonal migrant workers, making them less trustworthy and accessible for seasonal workers.

Private employment agents' particular strategies of securing labor supplies also exemplify their participation and production of seasonal migrant workers' cultural space. According to Lescohier, private employment agents took a proactive and sometimes predatory approach to securing casual labor supplies. With a low base salary, these agents gained commissions based on the number of men they hired. Thus, except the manager buttonholing casual workers in front of the office, most of these agents were runners who without revealing their identity as private employment agents engaged casual workers in saloons, boarding houses, pool rooms, and "other places where workingmen congregate". Agents then introduced job seekers to their agencies and proposed enrollment, sometimes even boarding the trains with other casual workers to pretend to be a casual worker.<sup>48</sup> Anderson affirmed this image as he described small private employment agency's office as just a place to hang their license. Agents got their patrons through soliciting.<sup>49</sup> The most effective and common technique employed by private employment agents was to directly, and sometimes unpleasantly, intervene the cultural space of casual workers. As they were looking for a relatively large labor supply, private employment agents needed to locate casual workers in collective, and thus the social space where casual workers gathered became where labor exchanges could most easily take place. These agents' choice of locations for and methods of engagement suggests that the social interaction was

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<sup>48</sup> Don D. Lescohier, *The Labor Market*, Half-Title: Social Science Text-Books, Ed. by R. T. Ely (New York: The Macmillan company, 1919), <https://catalog.lib.uchicago.edu/vufind/Record/3566137>. 157.

<sup>49</sup> Anderson, *The Hobo*. 112.



effective in mediating labor exchanges. While such efficiency for private employment agents often meant more penetrating exploitation of casual workers, it is still important to reflect upon the role of the cultural space in mediating such exploitations. Such social intimacy made private employment agents more accessible and appear more trustworthy to casual workers.

Private employment agents also engaged in the cultural space of casual workers in particular manners. According to Anderson, while private employment agents were “gruff and discourteous”, homeless men were used to shouting roughly on the street. “Many men can get along much better with the blunt and unceremonious private agent,” he continued, “than with the sleek, precise, courteous, and business-like officials in the public agencies.”<sup>50</sup> Lescohier also mentioned that private employment agents chose specific clothing to appear identical to casual workers.<sup>51</sup> In other words, private employment agents not only accessed casual workers’ social space, but also attempted assimilation into this space by aligning with their behaviors.

While private employment agents were highly involved in casual workers’ web of lives, the extent to which engagement in social space contributed to the prevalence of private employment agencies is debatable. Lescohier argues that private employment agents were essentially identical to casual workers; the only difference was that these agents had temporarily secured this particular kind of job. Lescohier seems to suggest that common social status and cultural space were shared by casual workers and private employment agents and thus contributed to the prevalence of private employment agencies. On the other hand, while Anderson acknowledges the relative accessibility of private employment agents due to their cultural assimilation, he clearly understood that casual workers’ “preference for the private agent is not for his gruffness or the ease with which they may approach him.” Instead, hating private employment agents for

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<sup>50</sup> Anderson. 113.

<sup>51</sup> Lescohier, *The Labor Market*.

the fees, they went to “labor sharks” because these agents were able to get the jobs they wanted.<sup>52</sup> However, it is worthwhile to understand what best jobs mean to seasonal migrant workers. Anderson claims that jobs offered by private employment agencies were most appealing for two reasons. First, they were interstate opportunities that would enable physical mobility. Second, private employment agencies were not concerned about seasonal migrant workers actually showing up on the site of employment for work while public agencies put efforts into following up.<sup>53</sup> Seasonal migrant workers appreciated the flexibility guaranteed by free transportation and loose regulations from private employment agents. “The best jobs” for seasonal migrant workers are arguably the ones that would enable them to travel with maximum flexibility. The capacity for physical mobility could be of a higher priority than mere economic incentives in driving seasonal migrant workers’ labor market decisions. Overall, even though Anderson does not find engagement in everyday lives a cause of prevalence of private employment agencies, his proposed interpretation of “the best jobs” still suggests that labor market decision are driven by social and psychological needs beyond economic ones.

Given casual workers’ continuous protests against private employment agencies, Anderson’s position seems more credible. Rigorous engagement in the social space of casual workers is not a fundamental cause of the prevalence of private employment agencies, but more a product of the economic reality of the causal labor market. The question at stake here is not to what extent engagement in the social sphere contributes to the continuous prevalence of private employment agencies but what kind of cultural space and interaction were produced in a labor market with restrained opportunities. In a labor market with restrained opportunities, how did cultural space mediate economic reality? On the one hand, how did casual workers navigate this

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<sup>52</sup> Anderson, *The Hobo*. 114.

<sup>53</sup> Anderson. 116.

labor market through social connections? On the other hand, how did private employment agents' engagement in cultural space reflect the shortcomings of the labor market? We care not so much about the idea of why they are popular but how they reflect workers' social needs in a precarious labor market.

For example, the best jobs as the most flexible jobs with maximum physical mobility should not be simply understood as a lack of responsibilities and preference for job postings that did not involve actual work. Instead, as discussed in the historiography section, one strategy that seasonal migrant workers employed against exploitative private employment agencies was to take advantage of the free transportation to expand their own physical mobility. In other words, such construction of best jobs was seasonal migrant workers' response mechanism towards exploitative private employment agencies. In a precarious labor market with restrained opportunities, workers could be discouraged from stable employment and resort to more casualized employment for maximum flexibility and agency.

### **III. Employers as source of guidance of middlemen in seasonal workers' web of life**

Having explored how private employment agencies strategically engaged in seasonal workers' everyday lives through spatial proximity, essential services, and familiar code of conduct, it is necessary to discuss one of the most significant structural forces shaping these dynamics – employers of seasonal migrant workers. Private employment agencies did not interact with seasonal migrant workers independently in the casual labor market; they did so specifically to cater to the needs of the employers. Demands of the employers present a main

structural cause for the contradiction between exploitative and benevolent private employment agencies.

Private employment agencies could be exploitative as a result of their inefficient and corrupted relationship with employers. Walter Lincoln Sears, superintendent of Massachusetts' free employment office, states in testimony for industrial relations that employers were businesses with no sentiment. In need of labor, employers would call several agencies, placed orders, and sometimes advertised in the newspaper. While they advertised through various venues, whoever got there first would fill the job opening. Speed was of high priority to employers in human services. Sarah Atwood, the proprietor of one of the largest employment agencies in the country, echoed Sears' description with the example where the employer sent orders for 25 men to six private employment offices. While every office sent men to the employer, the employer only took the first 25 men and the rest of the job seekers had to find their own way back to New York City. Atwood recommended laws to hold employer liable in the casual labor market to amend the situation.<sup>54</sup> In general, as employers value quick labor supply and did not coordinate supplies from different private employment agencies, a misalignment between demand and supply at the site of employment developed. Thus, some workers were only to find out that no job was available upon arrival at the site of employment and blamed private employment agencies for exploitation.

In addition to the miscommunication between employers and private employment agencies, these two parties sometimes also intentionally colluded to exploit seasonal workers through fee splitting. Employers kept seasonal migrant workers sent by private employment agencies on the job only long enough to gain back the transportation fare. They then fired these workers and

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<sup>54</sup> Commission on Industrial Relations., Basil Manly, and Francis Walsh, *Industrial Relations: Final Report And Testimony*, vol. 3 (Washington, 1916). 1255, 1278.

filled the jobs with new workers sent again by private employment agents. The high turnover enabled private employment agents to increase their fees charged, who then split this extra profit with employers. Some critics referred to this process as “one crew coming, one crew going and one crew working.” Higbie pointed out that such practice not only offered direct cash benefits to employers and private employment agencies, but further destabilized the work and livelihood of seasonal migrant workers, marginalized this group, and rendered them more dependent on the casual labor market.<sup>55</sup> The employer contributed to private employment agencies’ exploitative image through intentional collaboration to destabilize the labor market.

On the other hand, employers made private employment agencies appear benevolent sometimes by instructing them to engage in seasonal workers’ everyday lives. Private employment agencies engaged in seasonal workers’ everyday lives per requirement and demand of the employers. Sociologist and a hobo himself, Anderson claims that there were two types of private employment agencies in the 1920s. Besides the agency that charged seasonal workers fees in exchange for job placement, as discussed in the rest of this thesis, Anderson points out that there were boarding or commissary agencies – also private employment agencies – that charged no fee for the job but made profit by running the boarding for the workers they hired.<sup>56</sup> In other words, sometimes employers contract out the responsibilities of taking care of their employees to a labor market mediator. Private employment agencies were responsible for providing accommodation and building common space for seasonal migrant workers for the employers. Anderson’s categorization explains why in many instances, private employment agents were simultaneously wearing multiple hats and providing diverse essential services such

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<sup>55</sup> Higbie, *Indispensable Outcasts*. 53.

<sup>56</sup> Anderson, *The Hobo*. 113.

as housing, food, and entertainment to seasonal migrant workers. Their engagement in seasonal migrant workers' everyday life was partially driven by employers' demand and requests.

Casual workers at the port of New York offer a more concrete example of the role of employers in driving employment agencies' engagement in seasonal workers' everyday lives. Shipping agencies responsible for supplying vessels with employees – the private employment agencies for the shipping industry – were often located next to saloons and lodging houses. These private employment agencies collected service fees from the boarding house keeper who had access to workers' wages. Workers got paid by employers through boarding house keepers who deducted automatically from their wages their accommodation fees and other debts.<sup>57</sup> In other words, in the shipping industry, employment agencies, saloons, lodging houses, and employers operated as one business system with cash exchanges within. Since employers processed payment to employees and private employment agencies charged job seekers via lodging house, employers played an essential role in driving private employment agencies' engagement in casual workers' everyday lives.

#### **IV. Destructive power of the web of lives: collective resistance against private employment agencies**

While the intimate engagement in seasonal workers' everyday lives through spatial proximity, additional essential services, and alignment of code of conduct contributed to the prevalence of private employment agencies, it simultaneously fueled instability, hostility, and

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<sup>57</sup> Kellor, *Out of Work; a Study of Employment Agencies, Their Treatment of the Unemployed, and Their Influence upon Home and Business*. 179-180.

conflicts against private employment agencies. These agencies' rigorous engagement in casual workers' web of life set up the foundation for casual workers' struggle against them.

Preceded by Western Federation of Miners, the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) was a radical labor organization with an anti-capitalist vision that published its manifesto against craft-unionism and first convened in Chicago in 1905.<sup>58</sup> Membership was open to all wage workers, including African Americans, new immigrants, and unskilled workers. The IWW aimed to establish authority through direct action for workers' control of production. As the prominent member Roger Baldwin explained, "Far more effective is this direct action of open conflict than all the legal maneuvers in the courts to get rights that no government willingly grants."<sup>59</sup> In addition, direct action requires that the "control of the machinery of production and distribution" must be gained and the job question must be solved in order to solve any social problem such as care for vulnerable populations, education, and abolition of religious prejudices.<sup>60</sup> The IWW recognized the efficiency of urban street speaking targeting private employment agencies in recruitment of seasonal migrant workers for two reasons. First, it was difficult to reach casual workers of all occupations effectively at scattered employment sites. On the other hand, the city was where all kinds of casual workers lived, socialized, and looked for work. This also allowed the IWW to avoid interference by employers. Many IWW recruits testified that urban soapboxers aroused their initial interest in IWW. Second, employment agent was a common enemy shared by workers and IWW organizers. During their free speech fights from 1909 to 1912, IWW

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<sup>58</sup> Melvyn Dubofsky, *We Shall Be All; a History of the Industrial Workers of the World* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1969), <https://catalog.lib.uchicago.edu/vufind/Record/484209>. 79.

<sup>59</sup> Quoted in Melvyn Dubofsky, *We Shall Be All; a History of the Industrial Workers of the World* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1969), 174.

<sup>60</sup> Industrial Workers of the World, "Direct Action" (General Recruiting Union, 19--).

members fought to uphold their rights to conduct soapboxing activities on the street and organize mass gatherings.<sup>61</sup>

In 1909, the IWW started this series of free speech protests across the West Coast right in the district of private employment agencies in Spokane, Washington. That protest was most immediately triggered by the employment agent “Macho” posting over 100 new railway job opportunities.<sup>62</sup> Macho had been accused of defrauding seasonal migrant workers but he had managed to beat every charge as illustrated in *City of Spokane v. Macho* and defy revocation of his employment agency license.<sup>63</sup><sup>64</sup> IWW organizers surrounded the employment agency to stop other casual workers from entering, to warn them against accepting the job, and to ridicule all workingmen assigned for work. The gathering of casual workers grew as more and more job seekers arrived at the private employment agency. When violence started, a shower of bricks and rocks was sent crashing through the large plate glass windows of the agency office and also that of the Levi Deller clothing store next door. Like treatment was accorded each successive agency on the street. The protesting workers attacked the agency fronts indiscriminately. One newspaper report gives an account of all employment firms that suffered broken windows: the Red Cross, 224 Stevens street, Rae & Walker, 209 Stevens street, Spokane Employment office, 215 Stevens street; also the plate glass window of Benny Caputo’s saloon, 213 Stevens street, in which is located the W J Fedder employment office, was cracked and a pane in the glass panel of the door of the Logan hotel, adjacent to the saloon, was shattered. The spatial proximity between private employment agencies and casual workers’ everyday lives not only led to more accessibility to

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<sup>61</sup> Dubofsky, *We Shall Be All; a History of the Industrial Workers of the World*. 175.

<sup>62</sup> “Labor Agencies Attacked by Mob,” *Spokesman-Review*, February 17, 1909, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/566329797/>.

<sup>63</sup> “Employment Office Riot Rages Again,” *The Spokane Press*, February 17, 1909.

<sup>64</sup> *City of Spokane v. Macho* (United States State Supreme Court of Washington January 4, 1909).



private employment agencies when workers needed a job, but also more accessibility when workers struggled against them. It is highly interesting that these casual workers are not protesting at the sites of employment but the sites of everyday lives. Walsh, the leader of local I.W.W., stated that “it is up to us to keep in a right way the fight against these employment sharks until we put them out of business, and then the employers will come to us for labor.”<sup>65</sup> Elimination of labor brokers increased IWW’s leverage with employers and contributed to wage raise and working conditions improvement, thus an essential first step in workers’ control over production and distribution. The accessibility and rigorous engagement of private employment agencies in casual workers’ everyday lives at the same time place them at the center of collective hostility.

This hostility is evident in the language used in the Industrial Worker newspaper published by the IWW. “The Industrial Worker is anything but popular with the employment sharks. This speaks well for it and is another reason why you should take the paper – if you are a workingman.”<sup>66</sup> This advertisement for I.W.W. shows that a significant commonality shared by casual laborers of various occupations was the exploitation by private employment agencies. The hostility against employment sharks was a defining feature for I.W.W. newspaper in Spokane. Unification among casual workers was incentivized by their shared distaste for employment agencies. In a sense, private employment agencies provided a common space and experience for casual workers who could have difficulty forming collectivity on the employers’ sites.

Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that I.W.W. did not stop at displaying hostility towards employment agencies and forgiving the employers. They dispatched camp delegates to organize workers into an industrial union, which meant that the bosses had to hire through the

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<sup>65</sup> “Labor Agencies Attacked by Mob.”

<sup>66</sup> “Industrial Worker,” *Industrial Worker*, April 1, 1909.

union rather than the private employment agents. As a result, there was growing industrial control and better working conditions for the workers.<sup>67</sup> In other words, I.W.W. organizers did not attribute the responsibility for exploitation solely to private employment agencies, but also recognized the necessity to unite against the employers. However, in propaganda, framing based on shared hatred towards “employment sharks”, who were often perceived as the most immediate and visible oppressors, was more rhetorically appealing to the casual workers, further highlighting the role of private employment agencies in forming the collective ground for casual workers.

However, the engagement of private employment agencies in the everyday lives of casual workers is a double-edged sword. It is still undeniable that their involvement in the social space of workers creates barriers for IWW organization. It was reported that private employment sharks in Portland “hired a bunch of saloon bums to rotten-egg” Foote, an IWW organizer, at a street meeting.<sup>68</sup> IWW media frames bums, people who do not travel and do not work, as a barrier distinct from the hoboes. In a sense, private employment agencies’ knowledge and involvement in the saloons offers them additional human resources to counter the organization of casual workers. It is easy for these job sharks to identify the fractions among people in this space and initiate disturbance against collective action.

While the engagement of private employment agencies in casual worker’s everyday lives contributed to collective hostility against them and at the same time hindered I.W.W.’s efforts, I.W.W. also learned from the private employment agencies and reflected upon connections between seasonal migrant workers’ economic and social lives in order to develop productive solutions to precarious labor market conditions.

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<sup>67</sup> *Industrial Worker*, March 18, 1909.

<sup>68</sup> “Employment Sharks Must Go,” *Industrial Worker*, March 25, 1909.

I.W.W. recognizes the significance of spatial proximity in tackling employment agencies. “The I.W.W. Hall has been enlarged by the removal of the partition in the west end. It is altogether the largest union hall in the northwest. We will soon be able to occupy all the places now occupied by the employment sharks.”<sup>69</sup> It is interesting to see how the struggle against private employment agencies was framed as a struggle for space. Domination over the social space where casual workers’ daily lives took place is essential to IWW’s control over labor market. In Chicago, per recommendation of William Chance, a militant Wobbly, I.W.W. moved their headquarter from Washington Street in the old business district to the main stem on West Madison Street.<sup>70</sup> Bill Haywood leased a building that used to be a hotel at 1001 West Madison Street for I.W.W. headquarter in 1917. “The windows were ablaze with red lettering and a big I.W.W. emblem. Every migratory worker on the ‘skid road’ (skid row) wore a Wobbly button, and there were I.W.W. stickerettes on every lamppost.” This hall was overflowing, and sometimes open-air meetings blocked traffic.<sup>71</sup> I.W.W.’s reform directly engaged with the everyday lives of the casual workers through its proximity to the main stem. The strategies employed by I.W.W. headquarter such as lettering on windows and stickerettes on every lamppost in a sense mimic private employment agents’ proactive approach to casual workers. In order to counter private employment agencies, I.W.W. had to establish themselves in spatial proximity to casual workers and compete for their attention in the same space with “employment sharks”. Rosemont attributes I.W.W.’s resurgence from 1918 to 1924 with tens of thousands of new members to their headquarter at 1001 West Madison, “the largest and most productive

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<sup>69</sup> “Lumber Industry: A Wholesale Graft,” *Industrial Worker*, March 25, 1909.

<sup>70</sup> Franklin Rosemont, *Joe Hill: The IWW & the Making of a Revolutionary Workingclass Counterculture*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: C.H. Kerr, 2015).

<sup>71</sup> Ralph Chaplin, Paul Avrich Collection (Library of Congress), and Anarchism Collection (Library of Congress), *Wobbly: The Rough-and-Tumble Story of an American Radical* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1948), <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/001137040>. 199.

beehive of revolutionary agitation in the entire country.”<sup>72</sup> As discussed before, a critical cause that disadvantages public employment bureaus is their lack of accessibility and distance from the social space of casual workers. I.W.W. avoided this pitfall through its acute observations of the connections between the social and the economic lives.

This recognition of the social needs of casual workers and their relation to economic needs then prompts I.W.W. to tackle forms of exploitation in the space of everyday lives in addition to addressing the exploitation in the labor market by private employment agencies. For example, *Industrial Worker*, the newspaper published by I.W.W. in Spokane, finds the critique of religious preachers intimately connected with that of private employment agents. Fred W. Hesiewood, an IWW writer featured on *Industrial Worker* and *Industrial Union Bulletin*, argues that “superstition is the most debasing form of ignorance, and ignorance is the greatest enemy of the wage worker.” It is in the interest of the master class to keep the workers in ignorance through superstition. For example, exploiters of labor, gambling sharks, mining brokers, and profit mongers paid Billy Sunday, a preacher in Spokane, 11,000 dollars.<sup>73</sup> It is also stated in another *Industrial Worker* article that private employment agencies were supported by “a small group of cowardly scabs known as the ‘Church’ or the ‘Socialist Labor Party’.”<sup>74</sup> By recognizing the connection and monetary sponsorship between labor market mediators and preachers, Hesiewood captures the social function of labor mediators. Labor market mediators were not only engaging in labor exchanges but also participated in the religious lives of the workers. By sponsoring preachers, Hesiewood argues that labor market mediators were solidifying their control over the mind of casual workers by keeping them ignorant and superstitious. Promise of

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<sup>72</sup> Rosemont, *Joe Hill: The IWW & the Making of a Revolutionary Workingclass Counterculture*.

<sup>73</sup> Fred Hesiewood, “Fat Preachers and Thin Workers,” *Industrial Worker*, April 1, 1909.

<sup>74</sup> “Employment Sharks Must Go.”

heavenly salvation discouraged active resistance in this world. In a way, labor market mediators' involvement in casual workers' everyday lives worked to penetrate their continuous exploitation. Therefore, I.W.W. argues against superstition and finds this intervention in casual workers' religious lives necessary steps towards a more equitable labor market. Solution to exploitative employment agencies necessarily involve intervention in casual workers' everyday lives and changes in their customs.

Chicago IWW organizer Ralph Chaplin had a vision that took the social needs into consideration. He planned to open IWW offices on West Madison Street, exactly where private employment agencies congregated. "The true migratory had no home. He needed a place to park his 'bindle' and to brew an occasional pot of 'java' in addition to flopping on the floor." For Chaplin, the simple replacement of private employment agencies was not enough. Reform of the main stem's popular commercial life is essential to the success of IWW movements. The IWW sought to rival the saloons, theaters, gambling dens, and prostitution resorts for control over the hearts, minds, and dollars of wintering migratories.<sup>75</sup> In other words, Chaplin recognized that private employment agencies, while exploitive, fulfilled essential social needs of the casual workers. Thus, to replace them effectively, it is necessary to develop a completely different everyday reality.

In addition to the occupation of the physical space, I.W.W. also sought replacement of private employment agencies in workers' lives by creating and imposing a new social space through education. Dr. James Eads How, a millionaire who once lived as a hobo, worked as a lecturer at hobo college in Chicago and hopes to establish a hobo university to which the numerous hobo colleges in large cities will be feeders. Dr. Reitman, known as the king of

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<sup>75</sup> DePastino, *Citizen Hobo*.

hoboes, also lectures at Hobo College. “He intercedes for hobos and guarantees their bills in case they do not make good. He is still a refuge for the sick and afflicted and not a day has passes that he does not treat some down-and-outer free.”<sup>76</sup> By providing education and other essential services, I.W.W. revolutionaries attempted to reshape the space of casual workers’ everyday lives.

I.W.W. was not the only party that recognized the significance of the social space to casual workers’ economic lives. Progressive Era investigators sought legislations to ban the connections between private employment agencies and saloons, as such connections resulted in “evils”.<sup>77</sup> Such attribution of responsibilities was stated in the Supreme Court case on the Employment Agency Law in the state of Washington banning fees charged by private employment agencies. Illinois also banned the operation of private employment agencies in saloons in 1899, as it feared that corruption in social lives through saloons would facilitate fraud in labor market exchanges.

Attribution of responsibilities to distinct parties distinguished Progressive Era reformers from IWW in their moralizing accounts of seasonal migrant workers’ web of life. IWW organizers argued that the worst element among the slums is not hobo or tramp but the employing class element –previous businessmen who failed at their professions were more likely to resort to crime than wage-labor. “When the workers are organized in one revolutionary union, that has sense and discipline enough to be successful, and courage enough to take a few chances, there will be less talk of slums and the slums themselves will be abolished,” according to “The Slum Proletariat” in the *Industrial Worker*. “Only the organized working class can and will abolish the conditions that allow the foul haunts which pollute the very air.”<sup>78</sup> IWW organizers

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<sup>76</sup> Anderson, *The Hobo*. 172-173.

<sup>77</sup> Joe Adams v. Tanner, No. 273 (United States Supreme Court June 11, 1917).

<sup>78</sup> “The Slum Proletariat,” *Industrial Worker*, September 23, 1909.

share the same disgust at the social space of casual workers as the Progressive Era investigators. To both parties in pursuit of social changes, abolition of saloons, prostitution, gambling, and other associated vices in the everyday lives of casual workers is necessary to address the precarious conditions these workers experienced. They both recognized the significance of culture and everyday lives in addressing an economic problem and moralized the conditions in the slum. However, while Progressive Era investigators blamed casual workers for these vices and called for the decasualization of labor, IWW attributed responsibilities to the employer class and found solutions to social vices in a revolutionary union.

One key distinction that would be helpful to make is the type of private employment agencies that workers hated the most. It is ambiguous whether casual workers disliked the licensed employment agencies who were run as a formal business or the unlicensed employment agencies that was only a part of the saloons and barber shops. According to sociologist Kellor's description, the licensed agencies were less likely to abuse casual workers than the informal ones in the saloons. Supposedly, workers would target the informal private employment agents more. However, in I.W.W. movements, they seemed to target licensed employment agencies with obvious signs rather than those hidden inside a saloon. Do workers feel more sympathetic towards certain types of employment agencies due to more rigorous social interaction? Or did casual workers develop a strong distaste against private employment agencies despite their social interaction? These are questions worth considering for further research.

## **V. Conclusion**

From the “slave market” on West Madison Street in Chicago to I.W.W.’s protest against the “job sharks” in Spokane, Washington, private employment agencies, a labor market institution, accomplished their desired economic functions by penetrating and gaining control of seasonal migrant workers’ everyday lives. This research project sets out to answer two questions about the dynamics between seasonal migrant workers and private employment agencies. First, what constituted the continuous prevalence of private employment agencies in early twentieth century United States? Second, how do we reconcile the benevolent and exploitative accounts of private employment agencies in historiography?

I have argued that the economic conditions and private employment agencies’ monopoly of opportunities in the casual labor market were not sufficient in accounting for these agencies’ continuous prevalence. These private employment agencies’ strategic engagement and manipulation of seasonal migrant workers’ everyday lives solidified their dominant position in the labor market. Their spatial proximity to seasonal migrant workers’ space of life, ability to offer entertainment and socializing services, and alignment of code of conduct facilitated their interaction with seasonal workers’ web of lives. Such integral role in seasonal migrant workers’ web of lives provided for these workers’ needs for essential entertainment and socializing services, which in turn had a significant impact on their labor market decisions and continuous interaction with private employment agencies. Thus, to address the exploitation of these private employment agencies, it is essential to recreate institutions to meet the social needs of seasonal workers, as demonstrated by IWW organizers’ attempts to replace saloons and religious preachers with their own worker-led, entertainment and educational institutions such as Hobo College. Solutions that failed to intervene in this web of lives, as shown by public employment agencies, failed to improve labor market conditions either.



The interwovenness of the economic and social functions of private employment agencies further indicates the impact of concrete personal relations on economic processes. Economic processes are mediated through relational networks. For example, the process of securing jobs for seasonal migrant workers was mediated through the relation between the workers and private employment agents. To change the economic process, it is insufficient to replace economic institutions such as the private employment agencies. It is equally important to reform the relational network that mediated the previous labor market conditions and develop new forms of relational network that meet workers' needs in everyday lives and foster different economic decisions.

In response to the second research question, this rigorous engagement in seasonal migrant workers' web of lives also explains the contradictions between benevolent and exploitative portrayals of private employment agencies. While the intimate interactions contributed to the benevolent image, it simultaneously served as a form of social control over migrant seasonal workers which facilitated more penetrating exploitation. For example, while physical proximity, additional essential everyday services, and alignment of seasonal migrant workers' code of conduct made private employment agencies' behaviors seem benevolent and caring, they worked to further limit seasonal migrant workers' options in the labor market and reinforce private employment agencies' control of the supply of workers. As private employment agencies were motivated by desires to meet employers' demand for workers with lowest costs instead of concern for seasonal migrant workers' well-being, their solidified control over the labor market facilitated exploitation through benevolent patronage relations and intimate social interactions.

The resolution of the contradiction between benevolent behavior patterns and exploitative impacts on seasonal workers also reveals important lessons on the role of patronage in a casual

labor market. While close relationships fulfill essential needs of high priority, their effect on involved parties are not necessarily positive. While patronage relations offer immediate benefits and essential services, they mediate and reinforce exploitative practices.

While this research project focuses on a sociological analysis of the interaction between private employment agencies and seasonal migrant workers, it is also valuable to understand how this dynamic was shaped by employers and regulation. What role did employers play in exercising social control over seasonal migrant workers through private employment agencies, and why were private employment agencies their choice of medium? Another potential area for further research lies in the impact of regulations on the relationship between private employment agencies and seasonal migrant workers. Investigation into seasonal workers' attitudes towards licensed and unlicensed private employment agencies could lead to insights into how government regulations changed personal network dynamics.

Investigation into the seasonal migrant workers and labor market middlemen in the early twentieth century enables us to pose questions that generate new insights for contemporary problem of subcontracting. In *The Fissured Workplace*, David Weil points out that while multitiered contracting can “make improbable sources of labor seem plausible,” it enhances difficulties in coordination, “thereby [creating] social problems and costs in the form of increased safety and health risks and, at worst, deaths at the workplace.”<sup>79</sup> Private employment agencies were an earlier form of subcontracting to the extent that they helped employers arrange the hiring, accommodation, and transportation of employees and made improbable sources of labor – hoboes – a plausible and reliable source of supply. The history of employment agencies in casual workers' everyday lives prompts us to go beyond Weil's analysis of the consequences

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<sup>79</sup> David Weil, *The Fissured Workplace* (Harvard University Press, 2014), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt6wppdw.100-101>.

of subcontracting at the workplace and pose questions on its impacts on contemporary workers' everyday lives. How do contemporary new forms of contracting in new industries on a much larger scale impact associated workers' experience in the urban space? What social and cultural needs do these contracted workers have and what institutions are currently fulfilling these needs? The stories on West Madison Street prompt us to explore the problem of contemporary precarious labor market not only at the site of production but also at the site of social interaction.

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