**Negotiating Neoliberalism: Informalisation and Reformalisation of Industrial Relations in Norway’s Agricultural Industry in the 21st Century**

**Abstract**

The flow of flexible and inexpensive low-skilled manual labour across national borders has become a defining feature of the contemporary global political economy, often accompanied by neoliberalist labour market reforms and growth in the informalisation of labour relations in receiving economies. As a result, immigrant workers experience precarious and deteriorating wage and work arrangements. I discuss whether these are inevitable processes by analysing one particular case, that of the Norwegian agricultural industry since the turn of the century. In the first years after 2000, a growing number of low-skilled Eastern European immigrants in Norway’s agricultural industry faced precarious work arrangements as the industry drifted toward informalisation. Yet labour relations in Norwegian agriculture have since seen signs of reformalisation, resulting in higher wages and improved working conditions. I examine the characteristics of Norwegian society and its agricultural industry that have facilitated the reformalisation process. Important is the presence of strong and long-lasting institutionalised structures of cooperation and negotiation between state agents and representatives of labour and capital, which promote more than economic rationalities among the industry’s employers. The analysis builds on a mixed methods approach that addresses both macro and micro levels, as well as both institutionalised ‘objective facts’ and actors’ subjective interpretations, by use of various quantitative and qualitative materials.

*Keywords*: industrial relations, immigrant labour, agriculture, precarious work, neoliberalism, informal economy

**Negotiating Neoliberalism: Informalisation and Reformalisation of Industrial Relations in Norway’s Agricultural Industry in the 21st Century**

The flow of flexible and inexpensive low-skilled manual labour across national borders has become a defining feature of the contemporary global political economy. According to the International Labour Organization, there are roughly 232 million immigrants worldwide, most of whom migrate for employment purposes (ILO, 2014). Members of the Countries for Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) alone receive approximately 4 million permanent immigrant workers and another 2 million temporary migrants every year (OECD, 2013a). Many of these are unskilled or low-skilled workers moving from southern areas to more-affluent northern regions where they provide inexpensive labour for Western markets.

In contemporary capitalism, the role of a global immigrant labour force seems more profound than ever. The compression of time and space (Harvey, 1989; Overbeek, 2002) allows for new spatial configurations of capitalism, inviting even more-extensive flows of capital and labour across national borders in the global neoliberal versions of late-modern capitalism (Harvey, 2005; Peck, 2010). The globalisation of labour reconfigures the political, cultural and social features of low-skilled manual work. It first diminishes manual workers’ bargaining power in labour markets since domestic workers now compete against—and often are outbid by—immigrant workers who ‘nearly always provide a given output of work at a lower cost than domestic labour’ (Albert, 1993: 6). Second, global low-skilled workers in societies worldwide are generally underprivileged since they are considered to be non-nationals with restricted claims to citizenship rights and access to national welfare arrangements (Sassen-Koob, 1981). Third, the prevalence of informalised work arrangements further adds to immigrant workers’ disempowerment in labour markets and in society at large since many low-skilled immigrant manual labourers will never experience the benefits afforded by state-authorised and -enforced labour regulations, including wage and work requirements (Heintz & Pollin, 2003). Fourth, large-scale immigration bolsters the socio-political foundations of capitalism (Castles & Kosack, 1972), for the presence of an economically exploited, politically marginalised, and socially detached immigrant workforce prevents domestic protests against capital and also “legitimize[s] the restructuring welfare states” as immigrants are constructed as the “undeserving poor” not entitled to the benefits of universal welfare arrangements and social redistribution (Castles, 2011: 316). The result, as described and discussed in several studies, is the emergence of global, low-skilled manual immigrant labour pools that seem to experience ever-deteriorating wage and working conditions in (semi-)informal sectors of the economy, constituting a global underclass living ‘hyper-precarious lives’ in the North (Lewis *et al*., 2014).

At the very heart of these analyses are the vanishing political powers and thus changing role of the state. The globalisation of labour makes nation-states’ regulations of labour markets difficult yet not impossible (Christopherson, 2011). Contemporary neoliberal economies evade traditional labour-regulation policies, as states compete in offering capital interests the most favourable regulations to entice their investments, even when the price is further deterioration of conditions for labour (Heintz & Pollin, 2003). In particular, low-productive economic sectors cannot raise wages if they are to remain internationally competitive, as their “very survival depends on the (often illegal) immigrant labour” (Baldwin-Edwards, 1999). Moreover, workers’ acceptance of precarious jobs in the informal economy, for lack of better alternatives, may go along with the nation-states’ diminishing willingness and abilities to regulate this economy (Anderson, 2010). Poor jobs are better than no jobs, especially in the present climate of worldwide financial crises. This aligns with neoliberal ideology’s preferences for “smaller” states and less governance and the avoidance of redistributive inference with regard to the markets (Hackworth, 2007).

Yet these dynamics of global flows of labour and the deterioration of labour conditions may not always be unfolding uniformly, as processes of social change may follow neither unilinear nor coherent trajectories. Since its origins in the early 1990s when it emerged in the aftermath of the collapse of communism, the varieties of capitalism literature has demonstrated how different modes of capitalism are coexisting. Albert (1993) suggested an analytic division between *neo-American* and *Rhine* forms of capitalism. The former represents a purer free-market ideology, the latter a version of capitalism that is more regulated by political institutions. Echoing Albert’s works, Soskice and Hall (Soskice, 1991, 1999; Hall & Soskice, 2001) describe the *Liberal Market Economies* (LME) and the *Coordinate Market Economies* (CME) as two different versions of capitalism, where the CME represents the more institutionally regulated of the two. Other works provide yet other typologies of capitalism (Amable, 2003). Despite its diversity, the varieties of capitalism literature agree that global economic trends such as neoliberalism will be negotiated locally. Different national capitalisms react in specific ways to global forces, resulting in contingencies and heterogeneities in how neoliberalism actually unfolds across space. These variations may not follow national state’ borders but appear along other spatial scales or lines, e.g. industrial divides (Peck & Theodore, 2007; Christopherson, 2011).

In this paper, I analyse the Western capitalist agricultural industry, an economic sector that in recent decades has become heavily dependent on global labour and is generally recognised for its informal character and for offering dismal wages and poor working conditions to immigrant workers. For instance, in the US case, Martin (2009) describes a never-ending flow of desperate Mexican immigrants, many residing illegally in the US, who are willing to perform low-skilled manual farmwork in exchange for extremely low wages, thereby generating a ‘new rural poverty in rural and agricultural America’ (2009: xviii; see also Keller, 2013; Harrison & Lloyd, 2013). Similar dismal work arrangements for immigrants are also described in the European context (Hoggart & Mendoza, 1999; Corrado, 2012; Pedreño *et al*., 2015).

Evidence from the Norwegian agricultural industry since the beginning of the 21st century suggests quite another picture and adds several interesting nuances to the overall image of the intensified exploitation of low-skilled immigrant manual agricultural labourers in the West. Around the turn of the century, Norway’s labour markets were liberalised and globalised and processes affecting the informalisation of labour relations occurred within the country’s agricultural industry. However, contrary to all experts’ expectations, during the subsequent decade farm labour relations were reformalised, resulting in better wages and working conditions as well as evident signs of the improved integration of immigrant workers in Norway’s broader welfare society.

These results make the Norwegian agricultural industry ‘an extreme case’ (Yin, 2009), interesting not in the power of its representation of the dominant, average situation so much as in its demonstration of what is conceivable, of the possible alternative trajectories of capitalism, and, more specifically, of the phenomenon of labour immigrant work in the agricultural industry. Further, the analysis suggests several societal contextual properties that, even in a time of global neoliberalism, may work to resist and potentially counter capital’s inherent demand for deregulated access to inexpensive immigrant labourers. The paper’s problem formulations thus are:

What have been the key changes in wage and working arrangements—in terms of informalisation/reformalisation and precariousness—for immigrant workers in Norway’s agricultural industry between 2000 and 2015; how are these changes related to the specifics of institutional arrangements; and how are they dependent on properties of the Norwegian societal context?

Peck and Theodore (2007: 763) call for investigations of *variegated* capitalism, which explicates ‘processes and forms of uneven development within, and beyond, late capitalism’ by studies of theoretically fruitful case studies. This, they suggest, may ‘reveal internal contradictions of neoliberal globalisation and work to identify alternative forms of local development’. This paper seeks to respond to their call.

**Global Labour, Neoliberalism, and Informalisation**

Piore (1979) relates the immigrant worker’s position in Western labour markets to the core ideas of segmented and dual labour market theories developed in the early 1970s (Doeringer & Piore, 1971). Unskilled immigrants are channelled into the labour market’s least attractive positions, characterised by low wages and poor labour conditions; insecure, substandard and ‘flexible’ employment contracts; and few or nonexistent opportunities for advancement. More recent works employ the concept of ‘precarious work’ (Kalleberg, 2008) and the ‘global precariate’ (Standing, 1999, 2011) to address similar ideas about labour relations in the contemporary neoliberal globalised world economy. In parallel, processes of *informalisation* of the economy are observed, whereby larger parts of the economy come to operate outside state regulations and control. Feige (1990) differentiated between, on the one hand, economic activities that are *illegal*, *unreported* and/or *unrecorded*, and, on the other hand, the *informal* economy. While these concepts overlap, the latter refers more directly to economic transactions that operate outside systems of laws and administrative rules concerning ‘property relationships, commercial licensing, labour contracts, torts, financial credit and social security systems’ (Feige, 1990: 992). It follows that activities in the informal sector of the economy invite and are characterised by substandard wage and working arrangements (Castells & Portes, 1989; Chen, 2008). Therefore, the informal economy tends to attract workers who cannot find better employment opportunities. Low-skilled manual immigrant workers are a prime example of people willing to accept work in informalised parts of the economy, as demonstrated in the literature (Boels *et al*., 2013).

Immigrant workers and their employers may find common interests in escaping state regulations, e.g. tax regimes. They may also be willing to compromise on restrictions on working hours to enhance flexibility (employers), total profits (workers), safety measures and other regulations (Meléndez *et al*., 2013; Meléndez *et al*., 2014). Furthermore, the informal economy may have beneficial functions from the state’s perspective, which at times acknowledges or even temporarily supports its existence. Thus, Portes and Haller (2005) emphasise the inherently double-edged association between informal and formal economies. The very existence of an informal economy assumes that a state has established rules for (i.e. *formalised*) economic activities. Therefore, the scale of the informal economy stands in direct relationship to the scale of state regulations of the market: if there are few rules to break, there are, by definition, few violations (Portes & Haller, 2005: 410).

Correspondingly, free-market capitalism has an ambivalent stance towards the formal/informal divide. On the one hand, state regulations are a prerequisite for the creation of ‘a “formal space” of predictable and enforceable transactions where modern capitalism can flourish’ (Portes & Haller, 2005: 409). On the other hand, the creation of ‘free’ markets often translates into ‘freedom from’ regulations, e.g. minimum wages and labour standards. In particular, the advocacy of state non-interventionism is central to neoliberal ideology.

The varieties of capitalism literature brings important nuances to these debates. While characterised by its internal heterogeneity (Peck & Theodore, 2007), a key proposition is the coexistence of different versions of capitalism, each having its particular configuration of market relations and political institutions regulating these. In effect, both outcomes (e.g. precarious work arrangements) and processes generating these (e.g. informalisation) vary between nation states. For instance, Albert (1993) identifies the *neo-American* and *Rhine* models of capitalism. The *neo-American* model represents an enhanced neoliberal version of capitalism, which has become hegemonic since the 1989 communist collapse. It has a strong trust in the workings of market relations free from government interference, as symbolised by Reaganite and Thatcherite politics in the 1980s. The *Rhine model*, on the retreat since the 1990s, represents a model of capitalism where markets are the state’s attempt to ‘correct the excesses of unregulated capitalism, to temper the more violent side of its nature’ (Albert 1993: 252). It is ‘Capitalism instead of state’ (*neo-American* model) versus ‘Capitalism disciplined by the state’ (*Rhine* model). In Albert’s analysis, the former gives power to workers’ interests, resulting in fewer precarious working arrangements and generally higher welfare among citizens.

Soskice (1999) similarly suggested a bifurcated version of capitalism. These are the *liberal market economies* (LMEs) and the *coordinated market economies* (CMEs)*.* In the latter group, in which Norway and the other Scandinavian countries are listed, various institutional arrangements regulate and coordinate the markets. Firms are still allowed—and encouraged—to maximise profits; however, this game of rules requires sensitivity toward workers’ interests. As pointed out by Peck and Theodore (2007: 736) in their excellent review of the varieties of capitalism literature, Soskice attempts to explain:

how firms might ‘rationally’ and productively select strategies within densely regulated environments that were not simply suboptimal, misinformed, or anachronistic, but represented a qualitative different form of rationality.

These and other contributions emphasise that the workings of capitalism depend on the complex institutional frameworks in which market relations are embedded. These regulations go farther than, and are intrinsically interwoven with, the larger societal structures. Esping-Andersen (1990) demonstrates how variants of welfare regimes in the capitalist world are defined by how far markets are given (or take) responsibility for welfare provision. In ‘liberal welfare regimes’, of which the US is a prime example, welfare provision is provided in markets; in ‘conservative welfare regimes’, family institutions play a larger role, while the state is important in ‘social-democratic welfare regimes’. Significant in the latter is the decommodification of welfare, e.g. as represented by universal health services, which are largely provided by an extensive public health system.

The varieties of capitalism literature tend to emphasise affinities between global forces of neoliberalism and the neo-American/LME models of capitalism, often suggesting their combined and reinforcing successes. By contrast, Peck and Theodore (2007: 763) insist that, even if influences of neoliberalism are global, their unfoldings are spatially disparate. Rather, they embrace analysis of contingency and reject the ‘necessity of either convergence or divergence’ and encourage studies that are concerned with ‘path-shaping and path-altering change’ (Peck and Theodore, 2007)

The Norwegian agricultural industry and its use of global labour represent an illustrative case for such a study. As noted in the introduction, Western agricultural industries are most starkly characterised by precarious labour arrangements—nonetheless, there are distinct differences between, e.g. the US and EU cases, both in the configuration of and development of their trajectories. The Norwegian agricultural industry represents an even more distinct and deviant example of how global neoliberalism is negotiated locally. To investigate how the institutional context of immigrant work determines labour practices, I now present a detailed account of Norway’s agricultural industry.

**Transnational Farmworkers in Norwegian Society**

The Norwegian case both confirms and contradicts the general image of how transnational labour is used in Western agriculture. In this section, I detail developments toward Norway’s informalisation of labour relations in the agricultural industry around the turn of the century, resulting in the increased use of transnational labour in combination with the deterioration of work conditions for immigrants. I then elaborate on how these developments were countered by successful initiatives to reformalise labour relations during the next decade, which has resulted in improved wages and working conditions for the immigrant worker population.

The argumentation is based on a collage of materials gathered in the course of my research on transnational labour in Norwegian agriculture over the last decade, resulting from a number of separate research projects that have addressed specific aspects of the phenomenon. In total, the material reflects a mixed methods approach that addresses both micro and macro levels, relying on both qualitative and quantitative data and addressing both institutionalised ‘objective facts’ (e.g. wage structures and work-life regulations) and actors’ subjective interpretations of their life worlds and social practices following thereof.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The analyses further draw on materials from other studies of the Norwegian agricultural industry’s use of immigrant labour (in particular, Eldring *et al*., 2011; and Holm, 2012). Thus, the materials allow for a broad yet detailed analysis of how the phenomenon of immigrant labour has unfolded within the Norwegian agricultural industry since the early 2000s.

***Norway’s Agricultural Industry and Its Societal Context***

Primary characteristics of the Norwegian agricultural industry include its small-scale farm structure, its traditions of family farming, and its highly demanding landscape in terms of topography and climate (Bjørkhaug & Blekesaune, 2008). Only 3.3% of Norway is agricultural land compared to, e.g. the EU’s 41.4% and the US’s 45% (Statistics Sweden, 2010: 226; World Bank, 2013). Most of the country’s 45,000 farms are owned by farming families, who account for 74% of the total labour input. Farms are small and cultivate approximately 50 acres on average. Average-sized cow herds, sheep flocks and pig farms consist of 23 dairy cows, 63 adult sheep and 231 slaughter hogs, respectively (Statistics Norway, 2013). As such, Norwegian agriculture depends on high levels of state subsidies and import regulations. The average Norwegian farmer receives $52,000 in direct payments from the state, while the value of market price support is approximately $40,000. According to the OECD, Norway’s farmers receive more financial support than those of any other country, with a producer support estimate (PSE) of 67% compared to the EU’s 19% and the US’s 7% (OECD, 2013b).

As a result, the industry is extremely dependent on the state and its agricultural policies, which develop in a complex institutional framework including and integrating actors from the spheres of politics, the bureaucracy and industrial organisations (Almås, 2002), reflecting Katzenstein’s (1985) label of “democratic corporatism” found in many smaller capitalist states. For example, institutionalised annual negotiations between the state and farmers’ associations decide key agricultural policy parameters: levels and profiles of direct state subsidies and market price support mechanisms. While the Parliament holds the final and formal power to decide on agricultural budgets, the arrangement represents a powerful tool to influence the state, unparalleled in other sectors of the Norwegian economy.

Furthermore, farmers’ collective representatives hold important roles in various institutionalised arrangements for regulating the markets for agricultural products. For instance, the farmer-owned milk company TINE handles about 95.0% of milk produced by farmers and holds executive powers to regulate production and price levels. Many other niches of the agricultural sector are regulated in similar manners (NAA, 2014). In many other aspects as well, Norwegian agriculture is characterised by its strong state regulations. A prime illustration is the absence of a ‘free market’ for agricultural land transactions. First, allodial privilege gives preferential treatment to farm transfers within families. Second, prices of farmland are required to reflect their value as agricultural land, and the state may deny transactions at overly high prices, regardless of seller/buyer agreement. Third, state approval for transactions of farmland often depends on the acquirer’s intentions to actually live and work on the farm. These and other regulations that constrict the development of neoliberal ‘free’ markets reflect that a key goal of Norwegian agricultural policy is to provide for a decentralised settlement structure all around the country (Report to the Parliament No. 9, 2011–2012), which often trumps considerations of economic productivity and efficiency.

Two aspects of the wider social context are particularly relevant for the analyses of transnational labour in Norwegian agriculture. First, Norwegian agriculture is intertwined with the Nordic social-democratic model of the welfare state, which is characterised by a strong state and policies for levelling social injustice, including policies for the decommodification of welfare services and high employment rates. Income differences are low and absolute poverty is rare. Another of this model’s functions is labour market regulation (Esping-Andersen, 1990). Active state regulation of the labour market seeks to ensure formalised, fair and decent wages and working conditions for all employees (Dølvik *et al*., 2007). For example, written labour contracts are obligatory in Norway, and there are restrictions on working hours, mandatory holidays and workers’ participation in management, while the Work Environment Actspecifies employees’ rights in other regards. However, in principle the state abstains from interfering in wage negotiations, which are left to trade associations and unions. Wage levels are relatively high due to labour’s relative power versus capital interests. Typically, there is no general state-authorised minimum wage, though exceptions exist as illustrated in what follows.

The presence of powerful and well-organised trade unions is considered integral to the workings of the Nordic welfare system. Their full legitimacy is acknowledged and encouraged by the state and, more important, also largely by capital interests. The employers’ associations prefer ‘organised’ to ‘cowboy’ capitalism, as they find the former to enhance a robust and high-productive economy (Bungum *et al*., 2016). For the same reasons, both trade unions and employers’ associations are intrinsically integrated into the daily workings of state, regional and local-level governance and decision-making processes. Union membership across all sectors of the economy is 51.6% (Nergaard, 2014). However, the membership rate is far lower in the agricultural industry and almost nonexistent among immigrant farmworkers.

As in most of the Western world, Norway’s agricultural sector has low profitability, and farming lags behind other occupations income-wise. However, the farming population has a generally acceptable income and enjoys the same generous and universal welfare-state arrangements that other Norwegians enjoy, e.g. free health and educational services and various income policies (e.g. retirement and disability pensions). Thus, there is no outright rural poverty.

Second, until the early 1990s, Norwegian agriculture did not use immigrant labour but relied instead on family labour and a smaller workforce of full-time employees during harvest seasons, all supplemented by a flexible domestic reserve labour force. Like other Western European countries, Norway enacted immigration legislation in the 1970s to curtail regular work immigration (Brochman, 2006), and these measures were by and large effective. However, in the 1980s farmers increasingly reported problems with recruiting seasonal labour in the domestic labour market, and in 1991 a quota system was established to import labour into agriculture and other low-skilled, low-wage primary industries (Rye & Frisvoll, 2007). By the late 1990s, some 8,000 immigrant workers had arrived at Norwegian farms for seasonal work and spread to 2.3% of all farms (Møller & Jensen, 1999). In 1998, they provided roughly 1.5% of the industry’s labour input (Rye, 2007).

The use of immigrant labour further increased as a direct result of the EU enlargement in 2004. This established a common—and so-called free—labour market spanning both old and new member states that, in principle, allowed Eastern EU citizens to seek work in Western Europe freely. While Norway is not a member of the EU, it takes part in the labour market arrangements via the European Economic Area Agreement of 1994, which effectively implies that Norway is a full EU member in regard to immigrant labour regulations.

Today, some 24,000 immigrant workers, most of them Polish or Baltic immigrants, are employed on Norway’s roughly 45,000 farms (Holm, 2012). While exact figures do not exist, the estimate method’s credibility is supported by corresponding results obtained from other sources (NDI, 2005, 2006; Eldring *et al*., 2011). Only a very few come from states outside the EU, mostly as part of quota programmes. Thus, illegality is not a significant issue.

In Norway, 17% of farmers have reported using immigrant labour, which is high compared to previous numbers in agriculture yet lower than other low-skilled industries in the country (Andersen *et al*., 2009). Most immigrant farmworkers perform seasonal work as circular immigrants, although year-round employment is becoming more common. In total, today’s immigrants represent roughly 13% of the total labour input in Norway’s agricultural industry (Rye & Holm, 2013). The detailed demographic structure of the agricultural immigrant population is unknown, as the state does not adequately register or survey labour immigrants’ distribution across trades. However, a substantiated estimate is that males and young adults with a relatively high educational level have been (Møller & Jensen, 1999; Rye & Andrzejewska, 2010) and still are overrepresented in the agricultural as well as in the total immigrant workforce (Thorsdalen, 2016).

***Informalisation: The Deterioration of Wage and Working Conditions around 2004***

The shift from domestic to immigrant agricultural labour in the immediate years before and after the EU’s 2004 expansion reflects the deregulation of the agricultural labour market in Norway and Europe. Inevitably, in practice the EU enlargement has demanded the removal of key national regulations. Most important, while immigration and labour market concerns guided Norway’s import of labour from Eastern Europe before 2004, the guiding principle has since been the necessity of a functional capitalist market and its demand for flexible labour. For Norwegian farmers, the situation has provided access to a practically unlimited source of immigrant workers accustomed to low wages, poor working conditions or perhaps no work at all in their homelands, the less economically developed Eastern European countries.

While exact and detailed statistics on wage levels for immigrant workers at the time are lacking, insights from a 2005–2006 study exploring three different case study areas in-depth are revealing. Wage and working arrangements are discussed in detail elsewhere (cf. Andrzejewska & Rye, 2012; Rye & Andrzejewska, 2010); however, the general situation around 2004 was characterised by low, sublegal, non-negotiable, unsystematic and unpredictable arrangements. Farmers would determine wages for immigrants, who could take it or leave it. Some immigrants would not know the exact wage conditions until the end of the season, and possibly not even then, because farmers would adjust the total sum for lodging, taxes and other deductions. The use of ‘double contracts’, one formal, written to comply with formal demands, and another informal, often unwritten, in which actual work conditions were communicated by the employer, came into practice (Rye & Andrzejewska, 2010). Moreover, in most other regards, the immigrant farmworkers would face precarious working conditions. As an illustration, the *Adresseavisen* [The Address Paper] in the summer of 2006 ran a series of front-page news stories on strawberry pickers who were poorly paid and worked long and exhausting days under unsatisfactory working conditions, including the lack of proper WC facilities. Among them was a 15-year-old Lithuanian who, after 12 hours of ‘gruelling toil’, had earned just $17. The Norwegian Food Authorities immediately decided to close down this operation due to hygienic considerations (*Adresseavisen*, 2016a, b, c).

Tellingly, just a handful among the 174 farmers interviewed in 2006 reported ‘poor work ethics’ or ‘conflicts within the work stock’ (Rye & Frisvoll, 2007). Language problems and the absence of unions further added to workers’ disadvantaged situation. The language of immigrants, usually Polish or a Baltic language, was very different from Norwegian. Neither employers nor employees would have any training in the others’ language(s), and a quarter of the farmers reported ‘language problems’ (Rye & Frisvoll, 2007). As such, the language barrier is greater than that in the UK, for example, where most immigrants have mastered at least some English, or between Mexican migrants and US farmers.

Legal deregulation precipitated changes in informal social institutions regulating labour market behaviour. Interestingly, immigrant workers seem to have been conceptualised as exceptions to usual regulations and social norms in the Norwegian work-life discourse. For example, in a national poll of farmers in 2004, more than one-third (37%) of respondents agreed with the statement that ‘[i]t is acceptable that hired agricultural work immigrants have lower wages than hired domestic workers’ (Holm, 2012). Among farmers actually employing immigrant workers, 57% agreed with the statement in 2006 (Rye, 2006: 47). Such differential treatment was justified by the immigrants’ backgrounds; they came from countries where wages were lower, and since they were in Norway only temporarily, they did not need or deserve Norwegian wages (Ingelsrud, 2007). In any case, Norwegian farmers generally argued that immigrant workers were happy with the conditions offered because they tended to return year after year. At least some immigrants would support this interpretation by applauding their work conditions as far better than those of in their homelands.

Furthermore, although trade unions have been important in shaping Norwegian labour markets, they have neither acquired large memberships among domestic farmworkers nor recruited members among immigrant farmworkers. Due to the family-oriented character of farming, immigrants’ loyalties have been with the farmer and the farm, a reflection of a paternalist instead of class logic of rural social structures (Cloke & Thrift, 1990).

As a result, a segmented and informalised agricultural labour market seems to have emerged around 2004 that was defined along the lines of ethnicity and nationality (Rye, 2007). Eastern European immigrant farmworkers were offered farmwork that the diminishing domestic labour reserve avoided. Given the lack of better work opportunities in their countries of origin, immigrants were content with work arrangements characterised by precarious wages and working conditions, at least according to Norwegian standards. As soon as immigrants began working on the farms, Norwegian workers disappeared in search of better job opportunities and because farmers had developed preferences for immigrant workers. In turn, manual agricultural labour became associated with “immigrant” labour and, moreover, the more-numerous immigrants would, over time, establish social working environments that excluded “natives”. This propelled further ethnification of this niche of the labour market (Martin, 1993).

In line with the critics of neoliberalism, working conditions were expected to deteriorate further as an inevitable outcome of the global trends of labour immigration and the neoliberalisation of Norway’s labour market and agricultural industry.

***Reformalisation: Improving Wages and Working Conditions***

However, these forecasts proved inaccurate. Over the last decade, everyday wages and working conditions for immigrant farmers, rather than deteriorating, seem to have improved. Though the exact picture lacks details, the indicators are clear.

Wages have increased tremendously. In 2004, farmers had to pay their immigrant workers $13.90 per hour to comply with regulations. Nine years later, the hourly wage has risen by more than 29% to $17.90. In fact, many immigrant workers are entitled to even higher wages.[[2]](#footnote-2) Consistent with developments in other industries, wage increases occurred during a period of strong growth in the Norwegian economy, which was never really hit by the recent global financial crisis. Most groups in the Norwegian labour market experienced equal or greater increases in wages, and the average increase was approximately 41.1% during these years (NMOL, 2013). Thus, the agricultural wage level continues to be lower than those in other industries that employ low-skilled labour. Nevertheless, even if agricultural farmworkers have not narrowed the wage gap with employees in other industries, which are expanding instead, the negotiated returns on their labour have increased. Wage levels also surpassed the RPI inflation of 18.4% between 2004 and 2013, implying improved purchasing powers.

Perhaps more important, today’s wage level is by and large adhered to by farmers, and other wage regulations (e.g. overtime pay and holiday payment) are also more commonly observed. Key informants in trade unions and employers’ associations have a unanimous impression that the average farmer has fairly good information about formal regulations and, moreover, that informal expectations have developed among farmers that these should be observed. Those often referred to as ‘unserious’ farmers, looking for a quick profit by bypassing rules and regulations, are less common.

These improvements are further reflected in the work of the Norwegian Labour Inspection Authority, which has implemented extensive control programmes in the ‘immigrant’ industries. Agriculture was among the industries specifically targeted in the first years after the EU enlargement, and examples of violations of the labour laws were quite plentiful. As registered violations became fewer, it was decided that the agricultural industry no longer warranted particular attention, and resources were directed toward inspection of other trades (NLIA, 2008­–2011; Eldring *et al*., 2011).

Furthermore, the immigrant workforce in Norwegian agriculture, as in other sectors, has become better integrated into the welfare state. Interestingly, in the debate following the 2011 White Paper on welfare and immigration (White Paper, 2011), attention was not directed toward immigrants’ lack of social rights but instead their potential abuse of Norwegian welfare arrangements, which also apply to non-citizens from the EU or EEA who operate on the same terms as citizens. Norwegian welfare compensations are considered generous, both in terms of benefits and eligibility. Reports also suggest that immigrants have gained a better knowledge of their rights, partly due to information campaigns in their native languages.

As a result, in recent years there have been very few media reports of socially unacceptable working conditions in agriculture (Holm, 2012). Representatives of both unions and employers’ associations agree in interviews that this reflects improved work arrangements. Other sectors using low-skilled workers such as sanitation, construction and the sex industry now hold the reputation as the main exploiters of transnational workers in Norway.

Today’s immigrant farm labour force has improved its position in the Norwegian labour market and welfare state. This statement does not claim that they have become fully integrated into Norwegian society, for immigrant farmworkers still occupy the least attractive job positions with poorer wages and working conditions compared to most Norwegians. Nonetheless, a hypothesis that the inevitable informalisation of labour as it becomes global and, as a result, the deterioration of wages and working conditions does not apply to the Norwegian agricultural industry. On the contrary, the presented evidence suggests processes of reformulating labour relations and that situations for immigrant farmworkers have improved.

**Explaining the Recent Reformalisation of Labour Relations**

In the remainder of this paper, I explain how the reformalisation of immigrant labour in Norwegian agriculture resulted from welfare-state and work-life regulatory programmes that were implemented in coordination with industrial representatives of labour and capital. Their actions were attuned to important structural characteristics of the agricultural industry and supported by dominant discourses of social equality and cohesion, as accentuated by the media and the public’s attention to developments in this segment of the labour market. Results of these processes of reformalisation included improved reporting and recording of the agricultural labour market and, as a consequence, enhanced implementation of work-life regulations. In turn, precarious wage and working conditions became less prevalent.

An overview of the timeline of measures and events that induced these processes is presented in Figure 1, and these are presented in further detail below.

*----- FIGURE 1 IN ABOUT HERE -----*

***The Importance of National Policies***

Norway is often characterised as having an egalitarian society in which the values of social equality and cohesion are central to political and other public discourses (Witoszek, 2011). This characteristic has served as an important backdrop for Norway’s post-2004 labour market and labour immigration policies. On the one hand, there have been concerns that cheap labour from Eastern Europe would overflow into Norway and outbid domestic labour, which would cause the deterioration of wages and working conditions. On the other hand, there have been concerns that immigrants would be offered substandard working conditions and thereby establish a secondary segment of Norwegian labour, which would also poorly suit the equalitarian welfare-state ideals of Norwegian society.

In response, key actors at the national level and state agents and representatives of both labour and capital interests initiated several policy measures to prevent the formation of an immigrant labour market segment with substandard wages and working conditions. Most important, the Norwegian government decided to introduce transitional rules in the first years after the EU’s 2004 enlargement, which covered eight former Eastern European countries (often referred to as the EU8).[[3]](#footnote-3) The key measure was to make the negotiated wage rate in any given industry, which was $13.90 per hour in agriculture in 2004, a *de facto* minimum wage for immigrant workers from Eastern European states. On paper, immigrants therefore had *stronger* legal rights than Norwegian citizens, for whom free bargaining with employers about wages is the rule. Soon after, the transitional rules were combined with extensive information and control programmes in the exposed industries, including the agricultural sector, by the Norwegian Labour Inspection Authority during 2008–2010. Among other measures, they prepared informational materials on rules and regulations for immigrant labour directed toward both farmers (in Norwegian) and their employees (in Polish and other Eastern European languages) (Eldring *et al.,* 2011: 174). In addition, the farmers’ associations invested resources in the compilation and distribution of various informational materials (see e.g. AEA, 2004a), including a website guiding farmers through the legislative and administrative pitfalls of employing foreigners.

Furthermore, several other legal measures were implemented to protect immigrant workers, including regulations regarding manning companies, joint and several liability, ID cards on construction sites and cleaning (Proposition to the Parliament No. 1, 2008–2009; Report to the Parliament No. 2, 2005–2006). Due to the characteristics of the industry, however, these regulations were of less importance in agriculture.

The transitional arrangements expired in 2009,[[4]](#footnote-4) at which time the agricultural trade union suggested invoking the Norwegian legal framework of General Application of Collective Agreements (GACA) to enforce what constitutes a branch-wise minimum wage in practice and with primary effects parallel to those of the transitional rules. More unanimously than in any other trade, the initiative was acclaimed by the farmers’ trade association and among individual farmers. Furthermore, in a 2010 poll by Fafo, 65% of farmers supported the introduction of the GACA, while only 6% disapproved (Eldring *et al*., 2011: 80). The initiative went into effect in 2010, and results suggest that it had clear impacts on wages and working arrangements in the fields. As many as 85% of farmers surveyed by Fafo stated that the GACA were complied with to a ‘great’ or to ‘some’ extent by farmers. Employers in other industries were far less convinced of the actual effects of the GACA(Eldring *et al*., 2011: 83).

Its successful and largely unquestioned introduction reflects the strong position of Norwegian trade unions concerning the regulation of wages and working conditions on behalf of workers, even in the agricultural industry, in which the rate of union membership is comparatively low. The same applies to employers’ associations, which similarly negotiate on behalf of all trades regardless of low membership among farm enterprises. Thus, despite the lack of grassroots initiatives or organisations among both employers and workers, the national-level tripartite alliance of state, capital and labour managed to shape daily practices in the industry.

***Industrial Demand for Formalisation of Labour Relations***

Initially, the *Landbrukets Arbeidsgiverorganisasjon* [the Agricultural Employers’ Association, AEA] held a negative attitude toward state regulation of farm wages (AEA, 2004b), reflecting the employer perspective’s general and principled scepticism toward any measure likely to increase labour or any other costs. The organisation and the other national farmers’ associations nevertheless soon turned around and decided to support the introduction of transitional rules (in 2004), the General Application of Collective Agreements (in 2010), and other regulations of wages and working conditions throughout the period. This turnaround is explained by the industry’s financial dependence upon the state since the agricultural industry needs to maintain a favourable relationship with the wider public. For the individual farmer, cutting wage costs by hiring immigrant labour and offering substandard wages are both rational strategies. However, for the industry at large, it is a risky strategy because it challenges its public image as a decent trade worthy of state support. If too many farmers treat their immigrant workers poorly according to public standards, as expressed in national discourses of equality and social justice, the current strong support for the high level of direct subsidies and import tariff rates could sour. In turn, the industry’s allies in Parliament would find it difficult to advocate for the continuation of today’s expansive support system or fear losing support in the electorate. In this sense, agriculture stands out among other trades that are less dependent on state transfers.

In response, Norwegian farmers need to calculate not only wage costs but also potential income losses resulting from reduced state support. While the former relates to strategic decisions on the individual level, the latter needs to be managed at the collective level by farmers’ associations. In the case of Norway, this has been possible given the trade’s capacity for collective action. This is thanks to long-standing traditions in Norwegian labour for intimate, institutionalised cooperation between the state, employers and employees (Bungum *et al*., 2016). These parties have developed a shared understanding of the importance of avoiding substandard working conditions and have applied the tools available to them to such an end (e.g. the General Application of Collective Agreements and the formal control of its implementation by the National Labour Inspectorate).

These formal measures were combined with informal campaigns to establish social norms for the decent treatment of the immigrant workforce. Norway’s Farmers’ Union, noticing media reports on precarious working conditions among immigrants, began to discipline its members to adhere to formal regulations even before the EU enlargement took place. They condemned substandard wages as socially unacceptable (Farmers’ Union, 2003) and followed up with informational campaigns emphasising the need for ethical employment standards. The association has had at least some success in convincing farmers to accept this line. The number of farmers who agreed with the claim that it is ‘acceptable’ for immigrant workers to receive lower wages than domestic labour has declined from 37% in 2004 to 27% in 2014 (Storstad & Rønningen, 2014: 118).

Crucial to this argument is that the public not only acts as consumers in relation to the agricultural industry with low prices as their only interest; they must also act as citizensand voters allowed to realise their preferences for broader societal interests. In the Norwegian case, the existence of a traditionalist small-scale, geographically decentralised, family-farming version of agriculture is an element of the majority’s political preferences. In the 19th century, rural Norway provided components essential to the romantic national construction of Norway as a society of equality by upholding a pastoral countryside with small-scale family farming and a decentralised settlement structure, a construction that finds consistently solid support in annual opinion polls (Farmers’ Union, 2012).

However, the use of immigrant labour may challenge this support. For example, in 2006 *Økonomisk Rapport* [Economic Report] published an article addressing how state subsidies were used by farmers to pay Polish workers while the farmers themselves worked off farms, thus undermining the very rationale of state expenditures on Norwegian farming (Økonomisk Rapport, 2006). Under the headline ‘The Farmers’ Great Bluff’, the urban intellectual weekly newspaper *Morgenbladet* [The Morning Paper] suggested that the ‘kings of state subsidies’, the farmers, were really spending time on their couches while poorly paid Poles were working their fields (*Morgenbladet*, 2005). Other media ran similar stories, often with reference to obvious misconduct by some profit-eager farmers. For instance, the *Morgenbladet* piece referred to reports of tax dodging in *Nationen* [the Nation], the mouthpiece of agricultural interests: a review of 15 farmers employing foreign labour revealed extensive tax evasion practices, including off-the-books payments (*Nationen*, 2005).

In sum, migration laws, the regulation of industrial relations and more inclusive welfare state arrangements are informed by global trends, yet implemented, transformed and often countered at the national level. In Norway’s case, the situation has led to discourses of social equality and cohesion regarding immigrant workers, the establishment of state regulations as supported by industrial interests, and the reinforcement of public attention on how agriculture must be maintained to preserve its function as a national symbol.

***Small-Scale Agriculture and Discourses of Equality***

The discourses of equality are supported by agricultural policies hindering development of large-scale and hyper-industrialised production methods oriented toward profit maximizing and market competition between farmers. The state production support systems and regulations are designed to hinder formation of large farm units, which likely would rely on hired instead of family labour. For example, a national milk quota system implies that most of dairy farms’ demand for labour is met by farm family members, or by the owners in dairy farming cooperatives. Therefore, demand for immigrant workers is limited.

Other institutional arrangements work to counter the formation of free-market mechanisms within agriculture, which would invite stronger rationalisation production and demand higher profits and returns on capital. As noted above, there are strict legal restrictions on the property sales of farms, higher state subsidies for farms in peripheral regions, and nationwide farmer cooperatives, which are legally entitled to distribute farm products to the consumers. These arrangements support the upholding of a small-scale industry that in turn facilitates development of increased social relationships between employees and employers, extending that of the formal labour contract. It is observed that many immigrants develop quite intimate and multifaceted social ties with their employers and their families. In part this results from the employer/employee ratio. Most Norwegian farmers employ just a few immigrants, many of these returning to the same farm for years. Farmers and immigrants work side-by-side in the fields, and immigrants are often housed in farmhouses or other nearby vacant houses, of which there are plenty due to rural depopulation. This discourages exploitative labour arrangements. Obviously, social relations differ in more industrialised parts of the industry, e.g. at the larger strawberry farms. At these, several hundred pickers would work for short periods. Yet, compared to other Norwegian industries that employ immigrants, or with the agricultural industries in other western societies, most farmers develop dense social ties with workers. For example, out of 250 farmers in the study regions that were surveyed in 2006, as many as 49% said they often share meals with immigrants and 28% had visited immigrants in their homeland (Rye, 2007).

The employment relation thus becomes more than a pure rational economic relation, but also a genuine social relationship. The immigrant worker represents more than an anonymous, replaceable ‘production factor’, a ‘commodity’ to be transacted on a market. This slows down the neoliberalisation of the agricultural labour market.

**Conclusions**

In this paper, I have employed the case of the Norwegian agricultural industry to explore the variations of the unfolding of neoliberalism in contemporary Western capitalist economies. The focus has been on the interplay between global flows of low-skilled manual workers, processes of informalisation and reformalisation, and the prevalence of precarious wage and working arrangements. Most important, the evidence presented suggests that Norwegian society at large and the parties in the agricultural industry have successfully managed to negotiate global neoliberal trends of deregulation of the labour markets. The industry has not drifted toward further informalisation or, even worse, toward legalization of informal/precarious work as happened, for example, in Argentina in the 1990s (Olmedo & Murray, 2002). Instead, the industry has seen real and substantial reformalisation of labour relations since the turn of the century. It follows that the Norwegian agricultural industry is less informal than it was a decade ago. Moreover, its global immigrant workforce experiences wages and working conditions that are less precarious.

The paper further suggests several structural properties that were decisive in regard to how the Norwegian agricultural industry has welcomed its immigrant workforce. At the core lies Norway’s solid and long-lasting social-democratic traditions of institutional regulation of capital. The strategic political alliance between the rural peasantry and the urban working class (Esping-Andersen, 1985) gave way to a version of capitalism that is the subject of the state’s active work to regulate the economy. This takes place within a neo-corporatist framework that has been continuously renewed (Dølvik, 2007). A key objective has always been to finance an inclusive and generous welfare state where differences in income and living conditions among citizens are relatively small compared to other capitalist societies (Bungum *et al*., 2016). Thus, state agencies and national labour unions were able to evoke popular support for discourses of equality to enforce regulations of labour relations applying to the low-skilled manual industries that attract global labour.

Interestingly, the regulations of the immigrant workforce have also been supported by employers in the agricultural industry. Given the Norwegian societal context, the farmers found it in their interests to more or less unconditionally support reformalisation of labour regulations. In part, this follows from the consideration of maximizing profits. The farmers rely as much on state subsidies as on market profits, and they are therefore responsive to state and civil society actors who may be concerned about agricultural state subsidies being spent on immigrant labour in exploitative ways. The formation of an informal labour market, where precarious conditions prevailed, could erode support for the agricultural industry’s traditional decentralised, small-scale, family farm characteristics. Thus, employers have a direct economic rational interest in complying with the reformalisation of the Norwegian agricultural labour market. Furthermore, the case of the Norwegian agricultural industry’s use of immigrant low-skilled manual labour illustrates how a societal fabric that consists of more than purely economic market relations is pivotal to understanding how neoliberalism unfolds unevenly across spaces of capitalism. The farmer’s *economic* interests in regulations of labour were supplemented and supported by other considerations, which similarly invite the acceptable treatment of labour. Most important is the presence of strong and multifaceted bonds between farmers and immigrant workers, and secondly, between farmers and the state. In the first relationship (farmer/worker relations), the social proximity invites individual farmers to behave in socially responsible ways in their everyday social interactions with immigrant workers. The workers, in turn, become ‘persons’ and not abstract, standardised and socially distant units of ‘labour’. In the second of these relationships (farmer/state relations), the farmers are collectively given responsibility to produce extra-market outcomes, e.g. a decentralised settlement structure, and are given the tools to do so. This works to slow down attempts at neoliberal ‘market reform’. In addition, the other social relationships the farmer enters as an employer of global labour have characteristics that invite more-than-economic motivations of actions. The high level of state transfers and other forms of agricultural support encourage farmers to be sensitive to public discourses and state demands, both as individual employers and through their collective bodies. They cannot restrict their operations as farmers to the economics of the various markets they are engaged in (the labour market, the commodity markets of input and output factors, financial markets and so forth). For example, the industry is dependent on citizens’ support as political citizens—as voters—and not merely as individual consumers acting in markets (farmer/public relations). Similarly, the materials demonstrate the multifaceted relationship between collective bodies of employers and employees (farmer/trade union relations), in which the wage-bargaining function is just one among many. For the industry’s parties, the upholding of a large agricultural industry, which demands continued support from the state/the public, is more important than how to divide profits. As shown, informalisation and precarious working conditions represent, more than anything, a problem for the majority of farmers.

The institutionalised intimate tripartite network between state, unions and employers and the small-scale family farming structure have emerged as results of numerous piecemeal steps that have concluded in—for the time being—the practices that are described here. Thus, the case of the Norwegian agricultural industry demonstrates the path dependency of institutional arrangements and capitalist developments.

The Norwegian agricultural case demonstrates more generally how the presence and upkeep of strong and multifaceted social relationships are able to modify the workings of the market relations. It is the conceptualisation of the Norwegian agricultural employers (i.e. farmers) as more than *homo economicus* that allows them—both as individual firm managers (i.e. farmers) and collectively through their representative bodies—to negotiate neoliberalism in socially responsible ways.

**Acknowledgments**

Dr. Jonathon Moses has provided invaluable comments on this paper. I am also grateful to the guest editors of this special issue, the participants at the Global Market of Unskilled Laborconference heldat the University of California, Davis, in October 2013, and the anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments.

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1. More specifically, the material includes: a) various national agricultural and immigration statistics for the period from 2000 to 2015, primarily from Statistics Norway; b) case studies of three strategically sampled local level agricultural communities in 2005–2006 (materials include surveys returned by 174 farmers, among whom a strategic sample of 25 farmers were subsequently interviewed in-depth; qualitative in-depth interviews with 54 immigrant workers; and several formal and informal qualitative interviews with local key informants); c) qualitative interviews with several key actors in the national industry at regular intervals up to the present, and finally; d) analyses of national discourses of immigrant work in the agricultural industry (e.g. legal and other public documents and searches in media accounts by use of the ATEKST database). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The $17.90 rate applies to vacation and harvest workers who work for less than 12 weeks. For longer periods of employment, wages increase to $18.30 for periods lasting 3–6 months and to $20.50 for permanent unskilled employment. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Transitional regulations were also applied in older EU member states, though with important variations. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Transitional rules for 2007 EU entrants Bulgaria and Romania lasted through 2012 but were not applied when Croatia joined the EU in 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)