Irena Grugulis and Ödül Bozkurt (eds)

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Retail Work is the latest volume of articles emanating from the *International Labour Process Conference* and part of the valuable Palgrave series, *Critical Perspectives on Work and Employment*. My initial reaction to *Retail Work* was, if only something similar had been available during the 1990s when I taught retail employee relations to Sainsbury managers. It is a paradox that such a huge and visible sector, accounting for ten per cent of employment in advanced economies (p. 4), is so under studied as a distinctive category of employment. One obvious reason is that retail work is often subsumed within the literature on services. Another could be a spill-over effect from the common perception that it is a 'Cinderella industry' (p. 125).

Laudably, the editors want to begin forging a network of scholars on retail work and highlight three pivotal reasons as justification for this volume. First, retail work is 'significant' because it is a large and growing sector of employment. Second, retail work is 'diverse' as it 'involves many different sub-sectors and many different types of workers in different age groups, in different stages of participation in the labour market' (p. 6). Finally, they argue that retail work is 'problematic'. This is because in response to intensifying competition retailers are increasingly rationalising store operations. This not only makes retail employment more precarious - especially in

smaller and independent businesses - 'but also suppresses the potential for collective action by workers in their own ranks' (p. 10).

While these are undoubtedly compelling reasons for exploring the world of retail employment, the reader is left with the nagging question of what constitutes retail work. At one level, it is obviously about people who work for companies that have retail outlets, such as Tesco, Carrefour, Body Shop, Marks and Spencer and local *corner shops*. However, to what extent does retail work encompass, Amazon, eBay, drive-in tyre and exhaust centres, retail banking and sun-tan centres? Clearly there is much blurring at the definitional boundaries.

The volume is divided into four parts: *Work and skills*; *Retail as a job versus retailing as a career*; *The pressures of retail work*; and *Negotiating 'good work' in retail*. Inevitably, many of the chapters are studies of supermarket retailing, covering the UK, USA, Germany, Netherlands and Sweden. These chapters usefully investigate a diverse range of issues, including the potential for workplace learning throughout the increasingly rationalised retail chain (Felstead et al); the growing significance of student part-time work (Huddleston); and the overlooked experience of young male retail workers (Roberts).

The theme of workplace autonomy and de-skilling in supermarkets operating highly centralised 'lean retailing' is a common one in a number of other chapters. Notably, Grugulis et al examine the parsimonious opportunities for discretionary 'leadership' by store managers where their primary role is implementing centrally determined

management decisions. Similarly, Price highlights the tendency in supermarkets to deskill, despite UK companies' formal commitment to accredited craft training for bakers and butchers.

This long-term decline in the quality and pay of supermarket work is most graphically shown in Jordan's ethnographic study of a hypermarket in the American Midwest in which she traces the downward trend in pay and job quality since the 1970s and its dire social consequences. Even in more regulated labour markets, such as Germany and the Netherlands, there is a 'race to the bottom' as van Klaveren and Voss-Dahm, (p. 188) reveal. However, this is not a uniform picture, as Andersson et al present contrasting evidence that Swedish retail work continues to be vested with higher pay, high levels of employee satisfaction and, crucially, a 70 per cent union density rate. Yet such a high density rate is a rarity, as Lynch et al reveal in their chapter on comparative retail union strategies in the UK and Australia.

At the other end of the spectrum in independent *high-end* retailing, Gatta investigates US employers recruitment practices and finds that they tend to rely on their first impression – the 'blink moment' (p. 62) - as a trusted method to choose staff with the requisite personality, enthusiasm and look. Gatta draws on the notion of a 'style labour market', which Nickson et al also explore via survey evidence of fashion retailing recruitment practices in Manchester and Glasgow. Significantly, they offer strong evidence that recruitment is underpinned by customer and management expectations of workers embodying the brand/style image, and that 'the service

performance may be more or less aligned with the gender or ethnic identity of the worker' (p. 85).

Like all edited collections, this volume suffers from variable quality and inevitable gaps (e.g. the role of employees with a 'love of product'). However, *Retail Work* is much more than another edited collection. The editors have successfully assumed the mantle of pioneers by producing a long overdue, comprehensive, engaging and critical account of retail employment.