



Global Labour
Research Centre

Mandate and Core Themes (2024-2029 Charter)

Mandate

The Global Labour Research Centre (GLRC) engages in the study of work, employment and labour, organizing its activities around: the impact of the changing nature of work and employment on labour rights; interrelationships between migration, citizenship and work; gender relations in work and labour movements; the revitalization of workers’ movements; and work and health. The GLRC is a hub for pan-university collaboration with a community engagement model that encompasses a range of labour and community partners.

General nature of the research program to be pursued through the GLRC

With a focus on broad and open-ended understandings of work and labour, including “global labour” and “labour research”, the GLRC’s research program aims to confront the major challenges and injustices encountered by workers, families and communities within the global economy. Additionally, the GLRC will extend the existing community engagement model to prioritize both the theory-action relationship as well as worker and social movement praxis for social transformation. The Centre’s social action-oriented agenda is concerned with production of research and advocacy for social transformation as a way of sharpening the Centre’s role as a locus for collaborative, inclusive and community-engaged research. The GLRC will pursue concrete ways to deepen pan-university engagement by seeking to enhance opportunities for collaboration amongst faculty, students, and communities and to develop and fortify global linkages of research institutes and centres in the common project of labour studies, placing particular focus on worker education. To this end, the Centre will pursue research collaborations with global partners and will remain open to other focus areas for collaborative research partnerships in the global South and elsewhere.

Proposed Research Program: Strategic Themes

The GLRC is organized thematically around the study of work, labour and livelihoods in relation to: (a) activist knowledge production; (b) climate action and environmental justice; (c) colonialism and decolonization; (d) health crises, epidemics and pandemics; (e) artificial intelligence and platform technologies; and (f) law, rights, regulation and governance.

(a) Movements + Activists/Scholars

The ‘Movements + Activists/Scholars’ initiative aims to account for the learning and action strategies needed to respond to the challenges presented by the shifting nature of work, labour and livelihoods globally. The GLRC will prioritize the ‘intellectual lives’ of labour and social movements, building initiatives such as a worker education incubator, strengthening global connections between research institutes and centres focused on labour studies with a particular interest in worker education, and providing learning pathways for labour educators, students and workers.

Work under this theme will include The Worker Education Incubator, which will expand spaces for worker education by bringing together work and social justice organizers and labour educators within trade unions, workers’ collectives, centres, and community unions to support the development of worker education. A key objective is to hold space in academia for ‘learning activism’, including worker and wider community activism, and scholar-activism. It will build on experiential knowledge and incidental, informal and non-formal learning amongst workers, drawing on global historical models and pedagogies for doing worker education. The Incubator will offer learning and training opportunities and pathways for labour educators and students, will provide opportunities for research dissemination of GLRC Associates amongst labour and social movement actors, and will strive to generate outcomes around the expansion of the capabilities of participants to engage in organizing and advocacy. A SSHRC Partnership Development Grant has been secured in late 2023 to initiate the project (PI Katherine Nastovski; Co-PI Adrian Smith) with the ultimate aim of securing a SSHRC Partnership Grant to scale up the initiative.

A second component of work under this theme will include efforts to foster collaboration across ORUs who share a commitment to providing space and opportunities for the development of critical and radical theory. The research focus will be to incorporate the growing body of research and scholarship aimed at defending the place and importance of critical and radical theories of dissent in public discourse. A key aspect of this is to keep open space for the proliferation of new research and thinking in critical and radical theory pertinent to the livelihoods of workers and wider communities, and for the dissemination of said research through public talks, events and meetings.

(b) Climate Action and Environmental Justice

The Climate Action and Environmental Justice theme will deepen the Centre’s existing commitments to climate research and action. The evolving focus on impacts of climate change on work, labour and livelihoods includes climate action and mitigation strategies. It will attend to growing social upheavals stemming from climate change, including consideration of the distributional effects of mitigation strategies. From ‘green jobs’ initiatives to the deep and continuing social impacts of resource extraction on Indigenous communities and others, to land defense, the GLRC will prioritize the climate crisis and considerations of decarbonization and a “just transition” to a low-carbon global economy.

A key activity organized under this theme will aim to draw together researchers in a multi-year cross-disciplinary speaker series to address questions related to work, labour and livelihoods in the face of

accelerating climate change, environmental crisis, and with a view to established accounts of environmental justice. In other words, the Centre will aim to take up the climate emergency while avoiding leaving behind existing and entrenched social and environmental vulnerabilities and collective struggles of environmental justice.

(c) Colonialism's Ongoing Work, Labour & Livelihoods

The Centre will extend and contextualize member research on immigration status, migrant labour, supply chains and cross-border relations within the ongoing legacies of colonialism and global capitalist development. In doing so, the Centre will provide opportunities for consideration of entanglements of migration with indigeneity, gender, racialization, sexualities, abilities, and class formations, encouraging reflection upon how these are produced in and through colonialism and the national state to shape work, labour and livelihoods. This will occur in two key respects.

First, building on existing relationships with labour unions, the GLRC will pursue opportunities to host challenging and difficult conversations about labour union strategies to address social inequities and injustices surrounding Indigeneity, im/migration and racism. In doing so, the Centre will encourage conversations within labour unions about how the insights might be infused within existing union practices. The GLRC will work to develop a forum for internal reflection within labour unions on collective bargaining and other processes and strategies of engagement in relation to confronting Indigenous self-determination, settler colonialism and racism. The aim will be to invoke commitments to push further on decolonization through labour union work, supporting existing labour union partners and striving to bring new ones into the GLRC fold.

Second, a defining aspect of this work will be to highlight the role of the Canadian state in the re/production of “unfree labour” locally and elsewhere. The GLRC will provide intellectual space for the burgeoning global scholarly discussion around “unfree labour” and the utility of other framings (e.g., forced labour, contemporary slavery, labour trafficking, indentureship, precarity, pliability). Working in collaboration with Justicia (Justice) For Migrant Workers, the Centre will convene a speaker series organized around situating temporary labour migration programs within broader histories of colonialism and global capitalism. The series will draw together researchers and organizers in ongoing dialogue and will be designed to be responsive to the interest and needs of worker organizers in supporting worker advocacy and self-activity or self-organizing. Special emphasis will be placed on workers in the global food chain, with everyday experience of migrant farm workers as a particular point of inflection. The series will open opportunities to expand and formalize linkages amongst organizers, activists, and researchers.

(d) Health: Crises, Epidemics and Pandemics

Building on the GLRC's longstanding emphasis on research oriented around health and healthcare workers, the Centre will maintain its work on the impacts of COVID-19 on the world of work with the aim of supporting preparations for future global health crises. The GLRC will preserve its online COVID-19 project ensuring it remains openly available during the charter period. The COVID project is a large repository that serves as a model for the kind of research responsiveness called for in the moment of

public health crises. It is a digital database of information for and about workers relating to the shifting impacts on economic and social engagement including the effects of policy responses in the early pandemic moment. The resources in the database tell the unfolding stories of COVID-19 and working lives, including not only paid employment but also informal and unpaid work, caregiving, piece work, sex work, and the administrative and emotional management of households. By drawing many threads together in one place, the hope is that the repository will facilitate ongoing research as well as open new avenues for inquiry.

(e) Work Against Automation & Technology

The GLRC is well-positioned to assume a prominent role in cutting-edge investigation of the complex social impacts of, and collective responses technological change in relation to work, labour and livelihoods. In this regard, the Centre's activities under this theme will situate ongoing developments in technological systems—machinery and automation, digital and other emerging technologies—within a social context in which collective action and worker agency are seen to be not simply pertinent but in fact consequential. In this charter period, the GLRC will work to consolidate the research interests of scholars, students and others in York University and beyond in an interdisciplinary space rooted in an understanding of the fundamental and irreducible social character of technology. In particular, the Centre will provide concrete opportunities for community consideration of the counter-histories and struggles against automation and technology. These initiatives will unfold in relation to subthemes of: (i) 'Artificial Intelligence and Platform Technologies'; and (ii) 'Algorithmic Work, Labour & Livelihoods'.

The GLRC will also bring together scholars, workers and others to speak to wider trends. With a view to how technological developments have restructured social life, and work, labour and livelihoods in particular, the GLRC will seize upon its interdisciplinary positioning to assemble thinkers to investigate the social whole in regard to the relationships between technology and work. The GLRC also offers great potential in integrating the traditional research fields of AI in the 'natural' sciences with research insights from sociology, law, business, applied ethics, among others, in the study of the normative social dimensions of algorithmic livelihoods. The GLRC will provide space to also explore collective resistance to the latest AI and platform technologies, while remaining cognizant of prior historical challenges to the introduction of machinery and automation, recognizing too that the study of AI is not new and has itself unfolded over some six decades. The GLRC is particularly well situated to encourage consideration of the impacts of AI and platform technologies in mediating social interactions and relations, tackling normative considerations beyond consumer-oriented interventions, ones that do not simply rest with the consumer but in fact extend to experiences of work and how its astonishing modularity across time, space and socio-economic contexts relates to developments in emerging technologies.

(f) Law, Rights, Regulation and Governance

The GLRC's entrenched thematic focus on rights will be revamped through a re-examination of its "Know Your Rights" initiative launched in 2010. While the initiative has provided concrete and accessible, general legal information about a variety of workplace issues, the GLRC will push to deepen, widen and ultimately reorient these aims. The Centre will broaden the formulation of the "Know Your Rights" initiative beyond a rights framing to considerations of law, regulation and governance. Emphasis will be

placed on developing resources and workshops that account for the intricate ways in which law and legal relations are infused in work, labour and livelihoods, moving away from individualized formulations of worker advocacy and justice to better align with the collective action commitments of worker and social movements. Resources and workshops developed during the current charter period will account for the richly textured nature of current critical legal scholarship, thickening understandings of law and turning the emphasis toward workers' experiential knowledge and collective action. A primary deliverable will be the production of a handbook on law and worker organizing, with an evolving set of materials for use in workshop settings.

This work will draw on legal scholars, and on an 'untapped' segment of the York University student population by presenting opportunities for York students studying law, whether in professional degree programs or the Law and Society program, to contribute to the GLRC's work. Most notably, drawing in students who have completed one of Osgoode Hall Law School's social justice clinical intensive programs, such as the Poverty Law Intensive Program, which includes students with interests in workers' rights and related areas such as immigration law and social assistance, will provide an outlet for their legal clinical-experiential knowledge.