Working in Culture: Insecurity and Precarisation

I'm going to talk about workers in the cultural sector in Slovenia. We are speaking about roughly 40,000 people working across various fields of arts and culture, under different arrangements and employment statuses. These include students, contract workers, self-employed cultural workers, sole proprietors, employees in companies and private institutions, associations and cooperatives, those employed in public institutions, as well as unregistered workers.

The group we primarily work with in our association are self-employed cultural workers. This is a specific form of self-employment where, under certain conditions, individuals can obtain the right to have their social security contributions (with the exception of long-term care contributions) paid by the Ministry of Culture. This status is attractive for two main reasons: first, it significantly eases financial pressure, saving individuals around €600 per month in contributions; and second, it offers a degree of flexibility, as it remains a form of self-employment.

When we talk about workers in the arts and cultural sector, we must first understand the underlying material conditions in which they work. The word that probably best describes work in this sector is *precarious*. Precarious conditions are not a deviation, but rather the norm that characterizes work in the sector—and increasingly beyond it as well.

At its core, precarity is defined by insecurity: insecurity in health, in old age, in housing, in work, and in overall social well-being. Since 2010, Slovenia has seen a noticeable rise in precarious work. This trend was reinforced by the economic crisis and austerity measures, which pushed employers to seek more flexible and cheaper forms of labour. The number of self-employed individuals in Slovenia has risen sharply since 2008—from around 70,000 to about 120,000 today. Their share of the working population now stands at approximately 12%, indicating a significant structural shift in the labour market.

There are a few statistical facts I would like to share at this point. According to IRSSV data, the poverty rate among the self-employed is 24.7%. This group is therefore nearly twice as likely to experience poverty compared to low-educated employees, part-time workers, and foreign nationals. More than 50% of self-employed individuals do not go to the doctor when they are ill, if the illness is not perceived as serious. Almost one quarter report mental health problems. These figures derive directly from the precarious nature of the work they perform. They clearly show that despite their apparent independence, self-employed individuals often operate in socially and economically vulnerable conditions, exposed to higher risks of material deprivation and insecurity.

Let us now focus on precarious conditions in health and well-being. When it comes to sick leave compensation, the situation is less favourable for precarious workers. Regular employees receive compensation from the first day of sick leave, whereas self-employed individuals are only eligible after 30 days. Self-employed cultural workers do have a partial advantage: if they are on sick leave continuously for at least 31 days, the Ministry of Culture reimburses them retroactively for the first 30 days, and this can be claimed twice per year. However, shorter absences—such as one or two weeks—remain uncovered, which means that sick leave compensation remains relatively inaccessible.

A positive legislative change introduced last year is that eligibility for compensation now also includes injuries, whereas previously it applied only to illness. This means that a worker who, for example, fell off a stage and broke a leg would previously not have been eligible. As mentioned, this changed only last year. Another positive development has been the adoption of regulations on occupational diseases. Workers suffering from such diseases are now eligible for disability pensions. However, the problem is that the regulations are too narrow, and some conditions are not included—for example, hearing loss, which is particularly relevant in our sector.

A recent and evolving issue is the lack of security for workers in arts and culture in old age. The effects of precarious work are already becoming visible among those retiring. People who worked under precarious arrangements in the past—especially before 2013—often did not have this period counted toward their pensionable years. As a result, they may reach retirement age without fulfilling the requirement of 40 years of contributions, leading to very low pensions.

Slovenia does have a guaranteed minimum pension (currently around €818), but only if both conditions are met: the required number of years of service and the retirement age. For many precarious workers, this threshold will be difficult to reach. It is also important to note that someone with a pension of around €500 may not even be able to cover the cost of living in a retirement home. Our organisation proposed amendments to address this and secure a minimum pension for precarious workers, but these were not accepted by the government.

In general, the pension system does not provide adequate solutions for generations of precarious workers retiring with extremely low pensions. There is a mechanism known as a republic recognition allowance, which provides an additional benefit to retired artists with special achievements. However, it is difficult to obtain, as the decision rests with the acting minister, and as such it does not represent a systemic solution. All of this means that retired precarious workers often end up relying on the long-term care system, which has its own challenges.

Although a dedicated law on long-term care has recently been introduced, this does not mean that long-term care did not previously exist—it was simply part of the broader social welfare system. The new legislation mainly reorganizes existing services and introduces a dedicated contribution and funding mechanism. This means that more funds are entering the system, but the problem lies elsewhere: in staffing shortages caused by extremely low wages in the care sector. As a result, the state is increasingly shifting toward home-based care and deinstitutionalization, but these approaches are difficult to implement effectively without sufficient funding and workforce capacity.

Finally, a few words on retraining options. A legal opportunity for retraining exists within framework legislation for ballet and contemporary dancers. This is relatively new, and it remains to be seen how effective it will be. In any case, it is too narrow and does not include all workers in the field. There is also an option for occupational insurance for ballet dancers, allowing them to retire earlier. However, the issue remains the same: the scope is too limited, and not all hazardous professions are included. The scheme should be expanded to other professions, and the same applies to retraining opportunities more broadly.