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TEMPORARY WORK AND THE GROWTH OF INSECURITY

In the mid-twentieth century, it was thought that quality of life improved inevitably as a result of economic growth. However the spread of development across the globe has shown that this is not necessarily the case. Communities and traditional support networks in many parts of the world have been torn apart by investment and replaced with social fragmentation, child labour and absolute poverty. Even in the OECD countries there has not been the increase in quality of life that was expected. This has been evident in two ways. Firstly increased access to material goods, has not led automatically to increased quality of life and secondly, the gap between the highest and lowest income groups has widened. These however, are limited indicators of the quality of life. What might be a sophisticated approach to measuring the wellbeing of a community, and to international comparative analysis of trends in wellbeing?

Richard Eckersley in his introduction to the publication, *'Measuring Progress'*, which is based on papers presented at a national conference in 1997, *'Measuring National Progress: Is Life in Australia Getting Better, or Worse?'* says the following:

'Quality of life is a broader term than standard of living and relates to total wellbeing, not just material wellbeing. Wellbeing, or welfare, refers to the condition or state of being well, contented and satisfied with life. Increasingly, health, is being defined in terms of wellbeing rather than just the absence of disease or infirmity. Wellbeing (and so quality of life) has several components, including physical, mental, social and spiritual. Wellbeing and quality of life are also used in a collective sense to describe how well a society satisfies people's wants and needs.' (Eckersley 1998)

The welfare economist, Amartya Sen, argues that wellbeing includes the ability to take action, or behave in certain ways, according to certain expectations which will inevitably differ from individual to individual but also from groups of individuals such as classes and communities. Sen puts forward the idea - *'The focus has to be on what life we lead and what we can or cannot do, can or cannot be.'* Sen calls the various living conditions we can or cannot achieve our 'functionings' and our ability to achieve them our 'capabilities': *'[t]he main point here is that the standard of living is really a matter of functionings and capabilities, and not a matter directly of opulence, commodities or utilities'* (Sen, 1987). This approach provides a basis for evaluating the comparative quality of life of groups of workers, including temporary workers.

Temporary employment is growing without our having any real understanding of what it means for the wellbeing of individuals or society. Based on an ABS survey on forms of work in Australia, conducted between April and June, 2000, it was shown that nearly 2.7 million jobholders (or 29.3 per cent of the workforce) had work that was temporary (Beaton 2002). In this survey, temporary employment included fixed term employees, casual employees and owner managers who work on a contract basis. Almost half of these workers are women and more than two-thirds were over the age of twenty-four. More than half of all workers in some industries, such as hospitality and

recreational services, are temporary. Temporary workers have a high rate of part time work, and job duration is significantly lower than among permanent workers (Beaton 2002).

The need for or the desirability of flexibility has shaped the increase in temporariness. Around the world, employment and labour market regulation has been challenged and changed. De-regulation has been the name of the game for governments and business – although an inaccurate name, for whilst the regulation of workers' employment rights has been diluted, there has been increased constraints on the legal rights of workers to defend their conditions. The result has been an increase in a variety of 'flexible' employment forms. The expectation that a person could readily find a permanent job worked during the daytime from Monday to Friday is fast disappearing. So-called 'flexible' forms of employment involve either variant time arrangements or temporariness or both and most newly created jobs fall within this category. Both of these features have major consequences for a society that has organised itself around the five-day week in the permanent job. While variant time arrangements carry with them a whole set of issues, the issue of security is one of the more important.

The stresses arising from temporary employment have different implications for people depending on their circumstances. Many women enter temporary work in order to accommodate the family's needs – both social and economic. However, the segmentation of the labour market means that once in this type of employment, there are few clear pathways into more secure and ongoing employment. While short-term needs might be met, their longer term vulnerability to poverty, or at best a marginal livelihood, is increased. Young people supplement their income with temporary jobs while studying; yet even though it is amongst the fastest growing employment sectors, the terms and conditions of call centre employment, for example, do not constitute secure ongoing work.

The changes in the economy over the last quarter century, with massive company collapses such as Ansett, challenge the concept of permanent employment. Nevertheless there is still a significant distinction between jobs that are understood as ongoing and those that are understood as temporary. There is a considerable amount of work being done on wellbeing in Australia at the moment. Some of this is about developing standards and indicators. There is a possibility that these methods could be developed specifically to evaluate the wellbeing associated with different forms of employment. We need a much deeper understanding of the relationship between temporary work and feelings of insecurity and the relationship between this insecurity and general wellbeing.

Whilst a clear picture of the trends in temporary employment is emerging, there is less agreement about the appropriate employment policy or industrial strategies for containing the more negative consequences for Australian workers. This is an issue which will be pursued by URCOT in subsequent projects.

Lynn Beaton

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References

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Lynn Beaton joined URCOT in the second half of 2003 as an Applied Research Officer. Lynn has vast and diverse experience in research, writing, program development and teaching. Her work is widely published in Australia and the UK. Her research has concentrated on labour market and workplace issues with particular emphasis on marginal and emerging areas. Whilst at URCOT Lynn has been developing the classification framework and updating of position descriptions at the Sustainable Energy Authority of Victoria. Her background in the labour movement and her experience in facilitation and teaching are invaluable in her work with organisations on applied research and organisational development projects. Lynn's achievements have been enormous throughout her career:

- In the late seventies and early eighties when the participation of women in the paid workforce was increasing at rapid rates Lynn worked for the ACTU Working Women's Centre in a role that included researching, developing policy and editing the award-winning newspaper 'Women at Work' and the 'Women's Information Service', a regular monograph that raised and discussed aspects of women's paid employment.
- Lynn was instrumental in relaunching the campaign for equal pay once it became clear that the legislation passed in the early 1970s had limited effect because of the occupational and industrial segmentation of the workforce.
- Lynn also developed policy and procedures to deal with sexual harassment in the workplace that were the first in Australia to recognize the problem as an industrial hazard for women and provide procedures for complaint.
- Lynn spent twelve months in the UK at the time of the 1984/85 British miners strike where she wrote a book about the involvement of women in the strike. She spent a further three years as a free-lance journalist and writer in the UK focusing on the situation in pit villages after the strike and in Northern Ireland.
- Lynn also worked for the Victorian Department of Labour and then the community organization Job Watch where she analysed the increase in marginal employment.

Lynn has always placed great importance in telling of stories about people's experience of work. She believes that there is a richness of experience in our working lives that is usually absent from cultural representations of society: *"It's not just the relationship between the work and the worker that provides a great deal of fascinating experience, it's the relationship between worker and worker in the context of the organizational culture. This tells us a great deal about our society and its real, as opposed to its stated values."* Apart from working at URCOT Lynn is also undertaking a doctoral thesis that looks at the social implications of temporary employment.



LABOUR & INDUSTRY NEWS

Labour & Industry has a new assistant editor: Annelise Balsamo. Annelise comes from Macmillan Education Australia where she was the editorial assistant for the Secondary Division, but in another incarnation altogether, Annelise taught and researched for seven years at La Trobe University, Victoria University and Australian Catholic University. She obtained a Ph.D in English Literature before deciding that she would like to move out of the university system and into industry. She relocated to the USA during this transition, living for two years in Silicon Valley as a corporate wife and shopaholic. On returning to Australia in late 2000, she moved into publishing, working for the Mietta Best Restaurant Guide 2002. She is currently completing her Graduate Diploma in Publishing and Editing at RMIT University. Annelise has two children, Paris and Zelda, and is expecting her third any day now (Tallulah for a girl, Niccolo for a boy). In her spare time (ha!) she dabbles in fiction writing, and watches home renovation TV shows. She often dreams about moving to a Greek island to let her feet soak in the Aegean for years and years and years.

Jenny Crozier has left Labour and Industry to concentrate on raising her three children. URCOT and the Labour and Industry team thanks Jenny for her excellent work on the journal and wishes her the best for the future.