

# Fair Work or Workfare

## Respect and Value in Contemporary Employment Relations

Harriet Bradley looks at the deterioration of working conditions and, together with increasing unemployment, the rise of the *precariat* – those in insecure, badly-paid jobs.

I want to start my talk with a quotation taken from a collection of narratives on work (*Work: Twenty Personal Accounts*), edited by oral historian Ronald Fraser:

Frankly I hate work. Of course I could say with equal truth that I love work; that it is a supremely interesting activity; that it is often fascinating; that I wish I didn't have to do it; that I wish I had a job at which I could earn a decent wage. That's six subjective statements about work and all of them are true for me.

Although this was written by an unemployed miner in the 1960s, it seems to me to be true for many people today and to reflect the ambiguity of our social attitudes towards work in contemporary societies. On the one hand it appears as a necessary evil, 'Adam's curse', something we moan about to our friends and families, 'another bad day at the office'. On the other hand it is something that possesses and obsesses us, is a major preoccupation, integrates us into the social whole and is seen as greatly desirable by those that do not have it. Famously, many men in their 60s have found it difficult to adjust to life after retirement (my father was one) and I am sure many of the older people in the audience remember the famous cry of Yosser in *The Boys from the Black Stuff*: 'Gizza job!'

This talk is a personal overview of the changing conditions of work – and some continuities – over my own lifetime. I have called it *Fair Work or Workfare* because I would argue that over that period – I was born in 1945 – social attitudes have changed, from a perspective that deemed that it was the goal of a decent society to provide full employment for its citizens and to reward a 'fair day's work with a fair day's wage', to one that accepts a fair level of unemployment as inevitable, while simultaneously blaming those who cannot find work for their own predicament, and even punishing them for it by making them perform menial work for an amount below the

minimum wage.

### Why Work Matters

Sociologists have found it quite difficult to pin down what work is. A basic definition is 'purposeful activity' but that could also apply to eating a nice meal or watching a football match. We have, then, to see that purposeful activity in specific social and historical contexts. Cooking, for example, could be a waged job as a chef, or housework, or a pleasurable hobby, according to the circumstances. In general, work is something that we do regularly, that is structured and routinised, which is carried out within certain specific time frames and under certain contractual conditions; work is constrained – we have to do it and we have to do it in certain ways – it is not 'free time'. Which is why we often contrast work with leisure that is free time.

In fact, this idea of constraint is probably responsible for the fact that in modern societies when we talk of work we usually mean employment, waged labour – with self-employment included by extension of the term. That is certainly what governments mean by work, when they talk for example of 'getting single parents back into work' – as if looking after small children was not work, and very hard and important work too! I would favour moving to a broader definition, looking at work in its social context: thus, work becomes all the purposeful activity that is necessary for the maintenance and reproduction of society. That can bring in the whole range of paid jobs, plus the vital contributions of domestic and voluntary workers. Looking at work in this way also reminds us of the *social necessity* of work, all work: the refuse collector, the lavatory cleaner and the child minder matter to us, as do the doctor and lawyer. So the question we need to ponder is why we reward the latter so highly and the former so much less well.

In terms of status, in our current society, those who are outside the wage labour nexus are

generally seen as in some way inferior, the unemployed above all, but also the sick and disabled, full-time housewives, the retired. All these groups are too often portrayed as a 'burden' to society, particularly when they depend on state benefits. Look at the current attacks on pensions, even though these have been partly constituted out of employees' earnings. Above all, the unemployed are stigmatised, characterised as welfare scroungers, lazy, happy to live lives of luxury funded by the state, even though research among the unemployed, especially young people, shows that they want jobs.

The question then becomes: what type of jobs could they do? What could these jobs be and where would they come from? While it is sometimes suggested that people will reject jobs seen as too demeaning and low-paid, the major problem is still the lack of jobs in certain areas and at certain levels. This brings me on to consider how jobs have changed over the past decades.

### The Deterioration of Work

There has been a major shift in the nature of work during my lifetime. Since the full employment period of the 1960s we have seen the steady decline of our manufacturing base and the development of what sociologists have termed a post-industrial economy. In this process, a whole heritage of industrial working life has been lost in certain parts of the country.

So what are the features of paid work and employment, now in the 21st century? Unfortunately in my view, the picture is not a positive one, despite the fact that new technologies provide cleaner and safer working environments, surely preferable to most of us than working down a mine. Alongside the loss of well-paid jobs in industry, we are in the midst of a dismantling and reconstruction of the public sector, which is leading to the loss of good stable jobs. There has been recent growth in long-term unemployment and where new jobs are created they tend to be in low-paid areas of the service sector: such as retail, privatised social care, leisure and catering.

These trends come together to create what has been termed by the economist Guy Standing the *precariat*, a major segment of the population (a third) in insecure and ill-rewarded work. These people also are at risk of losing their jobs and so live in a state of struggle and stress. Members of ethnic minorities are likely to be particularly at risk, as our economy remains strongly segmented

by ethnicity and gender. Women are also more likely to be in precarious jobs. In general we can see a polarisation between a highly paid and skilled elite and a marginalised group trapped in a low-pay labour market or in unemployment. Moreover, the role of employment agencies as gatekeepers to jobs in the lower layers of the occupational structure has both encouraged the spread of temporary employment, since agencies mainly deal with cover, not permanent recruitment, and also has helped push down wages because of agency fees.

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All this must be seen in terms of broader social developments, arising from globalisation and heightened international competition. It has been argued that the emergence on the international scene of new economic powers like China and India has led to a 'race to the bottom': which countries can produce goods and services more cheaply. This is also linked to the way different countries are placed in the international economic order. Thus, the UK, like other early industrialisers, has, it has been argued, been subject to a process of 'financialisation'. That means that the basis of wealth creation has shifted from manufacturing, as occurred in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, to making money by speculating in money. What this means in the UK is an increase in bad jobs. Good jobs are high-paid, secure, skilled, full-time, unionised, offer career opportunities. They are found in the professions, manufacturing and public sector services. Bad jobs are low-paid, precarious, unskilled, part-time, non-unionised dead ends, found especially in private-sector services.

The increase in bad jobs has many deleterious effects for individuals and for society as a whole. For individuals it has meant a loss of security, an end to 'the job for life'. This leads to a decline of loyalty and trust among employers and employees, which helped provide a moral 'glue' within society. For example, in my own area of employment, employee surveys increasingly reveal negative experiences: workers report insecurity, stress, lack of recognition by managers, a culture

of bullying and micromanagement. Staff report that while they are jumped on for any mistake or failure, nobody ever applauds them for work done well.

Because employees fear losing their jobs, many feel obliged to work long hours with adverse effects on their health, well-being and family life. Even those in high quality jobs find their work is becoming a burden and cause of anxiety. Yet despite all this the government is still attempting to dismantle legislation and institutions that protect workers' rights and disadvantaged social groups. Thus there is talk of closing down the Equality and Human Rights Commission.

These developments also have deleterious results for society. As long-term ghettos of unemployment consolidate, there tends to set in a spiral of decline: the 'broken windows' syndrome. Local businesses collapse, shops are boarded up, criminal elements move in, drug cultures flourish and more jobs are lost. In these communities with concentrations of people who are unemployed, underemployed or struggling to survive on low incomes, many of the voluntary organisations and state-funded agencies that have offered support in the past have lost funding or are being forced to close. The support for those in this situation is inadequate. Try surviving on £71 per week (current job seekers' allowance)! What may emerge as a result of this we have seen on our streets last summer, as those excluded from social participation and consumption took the law into their own hands.

### The Low Pay Economy

The young men and women who took to the streets on those days were mainly unemployed or employed in what I call the 'low pay economy'. People in these positions are deprived of social

worth. In a trenchant discussion of our social attitudes to class and difference, Owen Jones reveals the increasingly contemptuous attitudes shown to working-class people stigmatised as 'chavs'. This is a word I have heard upper-class students at Bristol use about local people: 'peasants' is another term of abuse. Our working-class students told us how the students from private schools consider state school students as inferior and stupid. In the work sphere the same attitudes were reported by a factory worker I interviewed in Newcastle, who said simply of his managers: "They tret us like bairns."



Care Workers demonstrating outside Norwich City Hall. Photo: Roger Blackwell.

The view of workers in manual or less skilled jobs as stupid and unworthy seems to underlie our conviction that such people only deserve to receive low rewards for their work efforts. What is of particular concern is that many young people are increasingly likely to find

themselves in this low wage economy, especially those with low education levels or from disadvantaged backgrounds. This has led to talk of a lost generation or a jilted generation, betrayed by the greed of their elders. Youth employment currently runs at 22%. Among young black males it is 55%. This is a growing trend. When we carried out research in Bristol in the 1990s among a sample of 1100 young adults aged 20 to 34, at a time when the economy was quite healthy, we were astounded to find out how low their incomes were: 63% had income of less than £12,000. 54% had experienced unemployment, 10% for 3-5 years. Only a small proportion in the traditional elite professions – law, engineering, medicine – enjoyed high wages.

That was in the good times: since then the world economic recession has hit young people across Europe, with rates as high as 40% in countries like Spain and Greece. This is not just a

material problem, but one that affects their mental well-being. These young people are being told that society has no use for them and so they are seen as a burden on their families and on society. It is not surprising if some of them turn to crime, drown their troubles in alcohol or drugs or become depressed, even suicidal.

Women are another social group long associated with low pay. From the time of the industrial revolution, women's work has been seen as of lower worth. Through the nineteenth century, wages for women's jobs were only one third to one half of men's wages. Of course, since World War Two women have made steady progress and the gender pay gap now rests at around 20%. However, certain types of work associated with women remain poorly rewarded, compared to the kinds of jobs men do. These are the jobs associated with care: nursing, child care, elder care. This has historically been justified by the idea that the skills involved are somehow 'natural'. Social anthropologists have pointed out the symbolic associations of women with nature and men with culture. Consequently the skills in jobs which are seen as male are viewed as cultural, learned, and therefore deserving of greater rewards.

I have talked with women in caring professions, and, like others researching in this area, I have found how strongly committed these workers are to their ill-paid jobs, because of the value they put on what they are doing: helping those less fortunate, making a difference. They talk of the attachment they feel to their clients. In choosing these jobs, they demonstrate that they care more for people than money or status. Some quotations from young women students contemplating their futures illustrate this impulse:

It depends what you see the rewards as – whether they're like monetary or like helping people gain knowledge. I've always enjoyed helping people that struggle with things.

I like to listen to people and I like to try and give them advice

Yet we as a society persistently show that we care more about technology and money, as we reward most highly those whose jobs revolve around them. A re-evaluation of our priorities seems to me long overdue. Yet the reverse is happening. As the public sector is rationalised and privatised, care workers are seeing their conditions degraded, as illustrated in a study of elder care by Lydia

Hayes. Workers shifted from local council to private companies told of how their jobs were re-graded downwards, how they no longer got travel allowances, were not paid for the waiting time between visits to clients, and how their visits were strictly timed and monitored, preventing them from doing the little extras for the old people which had helped them build strong relationships in the past.

### A Better Way?

Could we do things differently? The deterioration and unfairness I have outlined are often seen to be inescapable and inevitable, the 'laws of the market'. As Mrs Thatcher put it, 'there is no alternative.' But other nations show that it can be done in a more egalitarian and humane way, for example, the Swedish or Scandinavian model and the Australian Fair Work framework. Both these examples, from countries where it appears employees are treated with more respect and the dignity of labour more widely acknowledged, posit a rather different arrangement between the worker and the state. In return for adults' commitment to full-time work, the state accepts responsibility for appropriate support and protection. There is more than one way to manage a market society.

How would I like to see ours managed? Top priority would be the raising of the minimum wage, to address the injustice of low pay leading to family poverty. More difficult to achieve would be the reduction of pay differentials that have spiralled out of control. But what I believe is achievable, given the will, would be an ethical readjustment: the re-humanisation of work, so workers of all kinds are treated with respect and the value of their contribution acknowledged. Autonomy and trust need to be restored, with an end to micromanagement and over-intrusive monitoring, which destroy goodwill. This requires a shift in the perspectives and values of employers and managers. In sum, drawing on the experience of Scandinavia and Australia, we need a rebuilding of the contract between individuals and the state.

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