

Decent Work: Implications for Equality and Social Justice

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Introduction

The idea that any job is better than no job is increasingly debatable, and the assumptions that have guided employment policy for decades no longer hold.

There is not much point in wanting to return to a golden past of straightforwardly good jobs, perhaps in the 1960s and 1970s, because they never existed. However, while in many ways work has got better, there has been a crucial deterioration in other aspects of work. Firstly, the very types of jobs that are being created are now part of a process of growing inequality. Secondly, much employment is insecure and *precarious*, and this means that many of the reasons why employment was seen as desirable are simply not valid anymore.

The Golden Past and its Problems

In the ‘golden years’ of welfare capitalism in Western Europe¹ and the United States after World War II there was full employment – at least for men. Most jobs were regular and if not strictly permanent, they were nonetheless long-term. Work was central in people’s lives and the basis for many people’s social relations. Extensive trade union organisation protected most workers from arbitrary authority. However, work was often boring – consider, for example, the banality of working on the assembly line of a car factory. For a significant number of manual workers, jobs were quite simply dangerous: injuries at work were on a scale that today would be unacceptable. Bad working conditions contributed both to campaigns for better working conditions and to early retirement. In countries such as Germany and Sweden in particular, there were action research programmes aiming to ‘humanise’ work. What we did not realise at the time was that those societies – constituting, of course, only a tiny corner of the world – were in themselves relatively equal. Certainly, over the Wall and behind the barbed wire in what was then called Eastern Europe, income distribution was more equal, and there was even greater job security. Yet of course, the overall standard of living was lower and, even after the end of the Stalinist terrors, there was not exactly political freedom.

Improvements in Work

How do jobs today compare with those of forty years ago? Are jobs today getting ‘better’ or ‘worse’ and in what sense? There is a long social science research tradition studying different aspects of job quality and we now have comparable survey data in most European countries that goes back more than twenty years.

The simplest aspect of job quality is perhaps now the least important in differentiating between jobs, namely the physical environment in which work occurs and any attendant risks to health and safety. Here, nearly all available sources show clear improvements over time. For example, Green *et al.* (2013) construct a Good Physical Environment Index using self-report questions from the European Working Conditions Survey (EWCS) from 1995 to 2010 to measure exposure to ‘environmental hazards and posture-related risks’.² At the United Kingdom level, this index shows a slight fall between 2005 and 2010, but it remains the case that workplaces are still significantly better than when measurement began in 1995. Clearly part of the reason for this long-term improvement has been the shift in employment away from manufacturing and extractive industries, but most of the improvement has been *within* industries.³ Health and safety at work is one area where European Union level regulations have been important.

There are some possible counter-trends to the long-term improvement in physical working conditions. Firstly, some work in the growing services sector creates industrial injuries of types that are often unreported and simply accepted and normalised as part of the job – as evident in our study of working conditions in Ireland. To illustrate, one worker in an Irish fast-food restaurant recalled:

... everybody [in the kitchen] got injured and there wasn't a huge fuss about it, just 'get on with it'. I only saw one person get injured quite badly. And his hand went into the fire. Now: he was ... with the ambulance and all that kind of stuff. But he was back in work in a couple of days.

And she went on to say:

And he worked with the bandage. He didn't go anywhere near the fires, he was just doing burgers. And you can do burgers with one hand. So that's fine [laughing].⁴

The author's study found that in hotels, cleaners – who are usually women – have to turn mattresses as part of their job. This is curiously invisible: few people apart from the cleaners themselves realise that this is heavy lifting work. Furthermore, cleaners work to targets of cleaning so many rooms per shift. During the recent recession in Ireland, these targets were often increased as hotels tried to cut their costs. As one hotel middle manager recalled in our study:

I think it's coming down to health and safety at this stage. Where people are actually doing damage to themselves in regard to their backs ... 17 rooms is way too much for people to be doing. Way too much.⁵

Secondly, the new availability of an immigrant workforce in some areas of Europe and the USA is facilitating the re-emergence of low skilled and often unregulated work in agriculture and manufacturing.⁶ Indeed, in sectors such as garment manufacturing in cities as different as Paris and Parma new cheap labour allows the use of out-of-date equipment and working conditions that until recently would have been unthinkable.

Always More and Better Jobs?

Until recently it was believed that economic growth automatically created more and better jobs. 'Better' here meant jobs that were more skilled and more interesting, and better paid. This comforting belief was based on a particular picture of social change. It was assumed that the occupational structure of

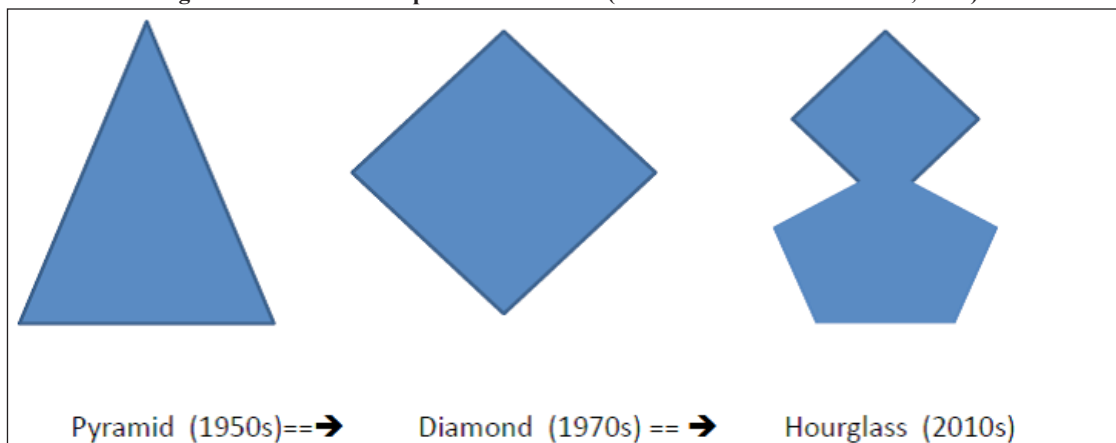
developed societies was changing from a pyramid towards a diamond (see Fig. 1) – there were fewer unskilled low-paid jobs at the bottom of the society and more jobs in the middle of the society. In other words, changes in the sort of jobs were by themselves creating a more equal society. These jobs are now moving more towards an 'hourglass' shape (Fig. 1), reflecting similarities to changes in income distribution.⁷

However, in recent years something different seems to be happening in most countries. Certainly there are more skilled and highly paid jobs being created – consider the new jobs in Ireland in financial services or in the IT sector. Yet there are also many new jobs that are low paid and not especially skilled – jobs in catering and hotels, jobs in cleaning and security. At the same time, the jobs that are being lost are jobs in the middle of the structure – routine but moderately well-paid jobs in administration and manufacturing.

These trends started well before the last economic crisis. For example, Goos and Manning (2007) used UK Labour Force Survey data for 1979 to 1999 to show that the occupations that grew during this period were those with highest pay and (to a lesser extent) those with lowest pay.⁸ They argued that technical change increases the number of good and bad jobs ('lovely' jobs and 'lousy' jobs) but reduces the number of intermediate jobs.⁹ Studies have found this trend towards occupational polarisation in other European countries including, very recently, here in Ireland.¹⁰

Furthermore, TASC's study of Irish working conditions showed that many jobs that used to be routine and steady, have been transformed and casualised. For example, working as a bartender in Dublin used to be a job with security, regular hours

Figure 1: Trends in Occupational Structure (source: Wickham and Bobek, 2016)



and some real if limited progression. It was the sort of job which a young person could enter, receive basic training and expect to earn enough to take on a mortgage. In the words of one interviewee in our study:

[THEN] *It was seen as a job that you could buy a house, pay a mortgage ... which I did, I got a house, I was 23. Well I took a loan at that stage and I had no hesitation to do it because I was earning quite enough money to do so.*

[NOW] *... You have people coming in for 4 hours or so, you have people with split shifts ... when the food is over what happens is those people are sent home at nine, nine thirty in the evening ... The whole sphere has changed to actually having two or three people of a qualified nature, and then the rest is totally casual.*¹¹

One cause of the growing income inequality in contemporary society is the type of jobs that are being created: more highly-paid jobs, but also more badly-paid jobs, and a growing ‘hollowing out’ of the middle. Employment change, in other words, is generating increased inequality.

Hollowing Out the Firm

The bartender’s account of the changed workforce in his pub can be replicated across wide areas of employment. In many different ways, work is becoming *precarious*. *Precarity* has different elements but at the most fundamental level it means that earnings are irregular and unpredictable.¹² For example, in the United Kingdom ‘zero hour contracts’ commit the worker to working for whatever hours management decides and to remain available even if no hours are offered. Officially this is not possible in Ireland, but so-called ‘if-and-when’ contracts have much the same effect.¹³

TASC’s research in the hospitality industry showed that the combination of a low hourly wage rate and short hours means that many workers are earning well below what they would receive for a normal working week with each hour paid at the hourly National Minimum Wage. Low earnings are exacerbated by precarity and unpredictability. In the words of one of our interviewees, an accommodation assistant in a hotel:

They [the managers] write on the roster, they write for example: start at 8am and finish at 3pm but next day you come and you see that you have work until 5pm not until 3pm (...) You never know, you can’t plan anything, and now it is even worse

*because they put the roster on the wall the last day, on Sunday. They put the roster on the wall so for example if you have on Monday your day off you can’t make a plan for your day because you didn’t know [that] you will have tomorrow a day off.*¹⁴

In this case the worker is at management’s beck and call, but she is at least an employee with an employer, even if their relationship is rather tenuous. However, in a growing form of precarious work, this relationship is broken: the worker is compelled to be self-employed. For example, in the construction industry in Ireland, many workers have always been self-employed and usually by choice. With the economic crisis and the collapse of employment, a rising proportion of workers (especially craft workers) were working for themselves, but this was what the author regards as ‘bogus self-employment’.¹⁵ They were doing the same work as before, they were still controlled by management, but now have not been offered a job with wages, and instead they are being paid for a contract. This has been facilitated by changes in the tax system. Through the Relevant Contracts Tax system the employer simply defines the worker as a self-employed subcontractor. In the words of a bricklayer we interviewed:

Yeah. I am working for them [large firm], but I am a sub-contractor to a sub-contractor. It’s bogus subcontracting, in essence. Which is encouraged by the Revenue Commissioners [the state body with primary responsibility for the assessment and collection of taxes] ... The subcontractors cover themselves by telling your details to them and he says that [interviewee’s name] is on a relevant contract for XXX Euros for the next 6 weeks. The Revenue Commissioner acknowledges this and then sends me out a slip to say ‘we acknowledge you are on ...’¹⁶

Since the worker is now a self-employed ‘subcontractor’, wage agreements and even minimum wage levels do not apply; the employer (now re-defined as the ‘principal contractor’) does not have to pay employer’s Pay Related Social Insurance. Since the worker is only paid for work actually done, there is no holiday pay and no sick pay. Indeed, if there is no work, the self-employed worker has no entitlement to Jobseeker’s Benefit (a weekly payment to people who are out of work) and has to apply for the means-assessed Jobseeker’s Allowance (a payment for people who are unemployed but do not qualify for Jobseeker’s Benefit).

Such bogus self-employment is now widespread. The genuinely self-employed worker works for more than one client, has the ability to hire employees (even if she or he does not currently have employees) and can make important decisions about how to organise the work themselves. A study by Eurofound (European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions) defines ‘economically dependent workers’ as those self-employed who do not meet at least two of these three conditions. Across the EU this would appear to be about one per cent of all at work.¹⁷ Very recently, the growth of the so-called gig economy suggests that this proportion may have increased. For example, the drivers who work for Uber (an online-based transportation network company) and the delivery cyclists who work for Deliveroo (an online food company) are ‘contractors’ not employees.

In Ireland, according to the Quarterly National Household Survey (QNHS) the number of people who work as ‘self-employed without employees’ is now at an all-time high: they currently make up about 12 per cent of all those at work. How many of these individuals are actually ‘economically dependent workers’ or ‘bogus self-employed’ is actually a matter of conjecture. However, the highly publicised cases of ‘portal’ firms like Deliveroo are really just the tip of the iceberg and furthermore, much bogus self-employment has very little to do with technological change and the internet. Instead it is driven by the determination of employers to cut their labour costs: turning employees into ‘independent’ contractors means that workers have less bargaining power and fewer rights.

Today in Ireland ‘entrepreneurship’ is the new virtue, lauded in pronouncements by business lobby groups and government policy-makers. The growth of self-employment is taken as a sign of economic progress. Yet such enthusiasm detracts from the reality of much self-employment. An increasing proportion of the solo self-employed are self-employed because they have no choice: they are scraping a living from the scraps of casual work.¹⁸ Research shows that the self-employed are more likely to have low incomes than are employees.¹⁹

The problem of low incomes is no longer just a question of low wages but is also a question of the precariously self-employed. This dependent self-employment is increasingly different from the traditional independent craft worker or small business person, and it is a long way from the

excitement of the high-tech start-up or new forms of consultancy. If the new self-employed are described in these terms, then the cult of the entrepreneur has become an ideology, a cover-up for new forms of exploitation.²⁰ Work is becoming more precarious. As we have seen, this can happen because the employer makes the time and period of work less predictable, or it can happen because the employer transforms employment into self-employment. As Kalleberg (2013) has documented for the United States, the firm is less and less a social institution and more and more simply a collection of short-term economic connections.²¹

Conclusion

Changes in work now militate directly against equality and social justice. The growing inequality within the OECD countries is partly caused by the very type of jobs that are being created: more good and well-paid jobs but also, crucially, more bad and poorly-paid jobs.²²

Rather less obviously but perhaps more fundamentally, changes in employment also work against social justice. A long European tradition of both social democratic and Christian democratic social thought has stressed that the employment relationship is distinctive. From this perspective, the relationship between employer and employee is inherently and necessarily unequal, in that the employer tells the worker what to do. It follows that this inequality must be regulated – hence the obligation on the state to regulate the workplace and the consequent growth of employment law.

This perspective also recognised the duality of the employment relationship. On the one hand, it is the basis for collective organisation (trade unions and other forms of representation) and even opposition to the employer. On the other hand, the employment relationship also necessarily involves mutual recognition and mutual responsibility between employer and employee. Arguably, social democrats have, at least historically, stressed the former aspect more, while Christian democrats have stressed the latter aspect. However, once the employment relationship is replaced by a highly unequal ‘contract’ between a global company and an isolated individual, then all that disappears. Neo-liberal economists continue to call for even more ‘de-regulation’ of employment, but tackling the growing social crisis of western societies and creating decent work requires the exact opposite – a re-regulation and re-institutionalisation of the employment relationship.

Notes

1. Independence in the 1920s, protectionism from the 1930s and neutrality during World War II together ensured that Ireland only experienced the tail-end of the 'mid-century social compromise' (Crouch, C. (1999) *Social Change in Western Europe*. Oxford: Oxford University Press).
2. Green, F. et al. (2013) 'Is job quality becoming more equal?', *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, Vol. 66 (4), pp. 753–784.
3. Green, F., Felstead, A. and Duncan, G. (2015) 'The Inequality of Job Quality', in Felstead, A., Duncan, G. and Green, F. (eds.) *Unequal Britain at Work*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 1–21.
4. Wickham, J. and Bobek, A. (2016) *Enforced Flexibility? Working in Ireland Today*. Dublin: TASC, p. 33.
5. *Ibid*, p. 35.
6. Martin, P. L. (2009) *Importing Poverty? Immigration and the Changing Face of Rural America*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
7. Wickham, J. and Bobek, A. (2016) *Enforced Flexibility? Working in Ireland Today*. Dublin: TASC.
8. Goos, M. and Manning, A. (2007) 'Lousy and Lovely Jobs: The rising polarization of work in Britain', *Review of Economics and Statistics*, Vol. 89 (1), pp. 118–33.
9. *Ibid*.
10. Eurofound (2015) *Upgrading or polarisation? Long-term and global shifts in the employment structure: European Jobs Monitor 2015*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. (Available at: <http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/publications/report/2015/labour-market/upgrading-or-polarisation-long-term-and-global-shifts-in-the-employment-structure-european-jobs>)
11. This extract is from an interview with a Dublin-based interviewee who started an apprenticeship in the late 1970s.
12. Standing, G. (2011) *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic.
13. O'Sullivan, M. (2015) *A Study on the Prevalence of Zero-Hours Contracts among Irish Employer and their Impact on Employees*. Limerick: University of Limerick. (Available at: <https://www.djei.ie/en/Publications/Publication-files/Study-on-the-Prevalence-of-Zero-Hours-Contracts.pdf>)
14. Wickham, J. and Bobek, A. (2016) *Enforced Flexibility? Working in Ireland Today*. Dublin: TASC, p. 29.
15. Wickham, J. and Bobek, A. (2016) *Bogus Self-Employment in the Irish Construction Industry: The Reality of Entrepreneurship*. Dublin: TASC. (Available at: http://www.tasc.ie/download/pdf/bogus_selfemploymentfinal.pdf)
16. Wickham, J. and Bobek, A. (2016) *Enforced Flexibility? Working in Ireland Today*. Dublin: TASC, p. 47.
17. Eurofound (2013) *Self-employed or not Self-employed? Working Conditions of 'Economically Dependent' Workers*. Dublin: Eurofound.
18. Wickham, J. and Bobek, A. (2016) *Enforced Flexibility? Working in Ireland Today*. Dublin: TASC
19. Collins, M. (2015) *Earnings and Low Pay in the Republic of Ireland: A Profile and Some Policy Issues*. Dublin: Nevin Economic Research Institute (NERI Working Paper Series, No. 29).
20. Wickham, J. and Bobek, A. (2016) *Enforced Flexibility? Working in Ireland Today*. Dublin: TASC
21. Kalleberg, A. L. (2013) *Good Jobs, Bad Jobs: The Rise of Polarized and Precarious Employment Systems in the United States*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
22. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2011) *Divided We Stand: Why Inequality Keeps Rising*. Paris: OECD.

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