

CONTRIBUTION FOR THE INDEPENDENT WEEKLY

Changing Economy, Changing Work

In the past thirty years, three major changes have reshaped the terms of work in Australia: changes in the distribution of working time, in wages and conditions, and in employment forms. Each of these has played a part in increasing labour market inequality: between those with too much work, and those with too little; those with a lot of income, and those with little; and those with predictable and secure work, and those without.

The Australian labour market is now characterized by a growing number of employees who work very long hours (with 29 per cent of men now working more than 50 hours a week, up from 22 per cent in 1982). At the other end of the spectrum, over 580,000 Australians can't find any work at all. Many European countries are working at these two problems simultaneously, reducing the length of the working week, while spreading the work around and boosting employment. After leading the world on reductions in the length of the working week in the 1800s, Australia is now lagging, and those who live in households affected by either over-employment or under-employment, pay a high price for this mal-distribution.

A second distinctive element of the Australian scene is the growth in precarious jobs, with 27 per cent of all employees now working on casual terms, without paid holidays and sick leave (16 per cent in 1984). Compared to similar workers in many other countries, Australia's casual workers have weak rights, they represent a very large proportion of the labour market, and many are in fact doing ongoing work. Their jobs are not truly 'casual'. The average tenure of casual workers in Australia is 2.6 years: hardly short term or temporary. Casual terms give employers control and cut wage costs, but the price for casual workers and their households is high, in terms of predictable hours and income, respect, and earnings. There is also a hidden price for productivity as casual workers are under-trained, and hold back their ideas at work.

The other significant source of growing inequality lies in earnings and conditions. The shift to enterprise and individual bargaining since the late 1980s, has seen widening gaps between those at the top and those at the bottom. Earnings inequality increased strongly in the 1990s. Rapid growth in Australia's working poor is the consequence. Low paid service sector jobs have grown strongly in the past decade, and their rewards have lagged behind. Australia's claim of an egalitarian society is seriously undermined by these developments. But inequality does not end with wages: many employed in the private sector and small workplaces miss out on many other conditions, including for example, paid maternity leave.

With more women joining the labour market - many of them part-time and necessarily casual - our workplaces and institutions are straining to accommodate the changing worker, imposing significant costs on working carers. These strains are recognised by politicians in the current election: but can they talk less and act more?

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