



## Why jobs are not the answer

By Chandra Pasma on March 24th, 2011

As we address in our [response to the budget](#), the government once again demonstrated its commitment to the labour force as the answer to poverty and economic insecurity this week. In fact, if you only read the budget or listened to Jim Flaherty's speech, you'd be forgiven for thinking things are looking rosy in Canada today. After all, there are more jobs than there were before the recession and more Canadians are working today than ever before. The fact that four million people are living in poverty, many of them despite having a job, and that nearly one million Canadians are working part-time involuntarily seems to have escaped the government's attention.

But this is not a problem limited to the Conservatives. Pay attention to some of the voices on the left, and you'd be forgiven for thinking that the whole answer to poverty is good jobs: unionized, high wage jobs with good benefits. The fact that globalized markets and international trade agreements make it increasingly difficult for workers to find such good jobs – and increasingly more expensive for companies to offer them – doesn't seem to be part of the equation. Neither is the reality that we do not now, nor have we ever had, enough jobs for everyone – let alone enough good jobs.

Both approaches are the result of a common ideology of work, *labourism*. Labourism emphasizes paid work – but narrowly defines the notion of work – and achievement of economic security and the rights of citizenship through paid work.

Labourism is so much a part of the twentieth century – and now twenty-first century – mindset that it is hard for us to understand just how recent an idea this is in the history of human work. In his book *Work after Globalization*, economist Guy Standing provides a fascinating overview and a devastating critique of labourism. He notes changes over the centuries in how people have understood work and divided up its various components, assigning some more value than others.

The Greeks valued reproductive work. They saw productive work as the activity of slaves. Reproductive work, such as deliberative political work and personal relationships, was the work of citizens. In the feudal era, labour was performed by serfs, not the upper classes. The rise of industrial capitalism is responsible for reversing the preference for reproductive labour and making productive labour the basis of citizenship. Eventually reproductive work – caring work especially – came to be regarded as unproductive work and ignored. The goal to put as many people as possible into paid jobs thus ignored the fact that many people were doing work already because what they were doing wasn't counted as work.

Standing distinguishes between work, which is holistic and combines productive, reproductive and creative activity, and labour, which refers to an often painful activity done under duress or conditions of control. Employment stabilizes labour in jobs, as employees receive wages and benefits and other forms of security in exchange for submitting to control and accepting a subordinated or segmented role in the production process. Industrial citizenship emphasized participation in labour and employment as the basis of rights and entitlements, including social protection and income. Only those who could legitimately be excluded from paid employment, such as the disabled, could receive full social protection outside of paid employment. Eventually, even full social protection for the disabled was scaled back to encourage them to take jobs as much as possible too.

Industrial citizenship worked as a form of social contract – and even then it had significant drawbacks – as long as national economies remained closed. The commitment to full employment was sexist and based on a male breadwinner model in which women's work was ignored and only men were promised a job, but at least there was a commitment to extending the social protection of employment to everyone. Unions were also allowed to represent workers as a collective voice,

negotiating for decent wages and reasonable working conditions in exchange for workers submitting to company control in the labour process.

But once global capitalism erased the boundaries of national economies, the social compact of industrial citizenship was gone, sacrificed on the altar of competitiveness. The result has been catastrophic for workers, exacerbating the previous drawbacks to the labourist model and creating a whole host of new problems. The relatively fixed costs of social insurance tied to work (pensions, health care, etc.) have made it difficult for the labour force in industrialized countries to compete with the labour force in newly industrializing countries without drastically cutting worker benefits. (Think for instance of the fuss made over pensions for former employees of GM when the automaker was bailed out several years ago.)

Even governments have dumped social policies, claiming it is necessary for the sake of competitiveness. Social policy has become aimed at making people "productive," distinguishing between the deserving and undeserving. The unemployed are depicted as victims of character defects, refusing to be productive, rather than as victims of industrial restructuring.

For workers, there is more instability, lower pay, no mutual commitment from their employer, the need to constantly update skills that become obsolete faster, a loss of control over time, eroding boundaries between work and home, and the personal impacts of stress and lack of security. The ever-increasing urge to be competitive has resulted in a loss of security for a whole class of workers, creating what Standing calls "the precariat," those forced to move frequently between jobs with little labour security, few or no benefits from their workplace, and little or no access to government benefits.

But while the situation for workers is untenable under global capitalism, that doesn't mean the response is a return to the golden age of labourism. There have always been crucial problems with this model. Labourism has resulted not only in the commodification of work in the form of labour, it has also resulted in the commodification of people. It reduces agency and the capacity for self-determination. Rather than allowing people to decide what kind of work to do and how to do it, it submits people to ever-increasing levels of control in the name of efficiency and competition. Portions of work become ever smaller, leaving people as cogs in a production process, rather than as professionals or craftspeople delighting in work well done. It leaves out crucial aspects of work, which includes creative and restorative activity, social and political interactions, and ethical behaviour.

"Work done because a person wishes to do it, in the pursuit of self-chosen goals of development and social participation, is the essence of real decommodification," says Standing.

So how do we escape the clutches of labourism, with its limited ideas of work and its dehumanizing emphasis on paid labour? How do we counter the devastating effects of global capitalism on people and their work? We need to reconceptualize work and find ways of detaching income security from paid employment. It might not surprise you then to learn that Guy Standing is a past president of the Basic Income Earth Network. But more on the solutions next week...

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