The Face of Globalization
Women Working

BY ALICE DE WOLFF

Au Canada le "nouveau travail" signifie les emplois à temps partiel et les faibles revenus des travailleurs autonomes. L'auteure assure que le gouvernement et les employeurs sont responsables en grande partie de la transformation du travail permanent rémunéré en celui de "travail flexible" et d'en faire assumer les coûts par ces travailleurs. Comme il se trouve que ce sont les femmes qui occupent ce "nouveau travail" sous-payé, cet article examine les façons dont les travailleurs, les groupes communautaires et les syndicats commencent à se rebeller contre cette pratique.

The growth of "flexible" work is a key component in the persistence of poverty among women and their children in Canada. It provides one of the answers to the question "how does income discrimination continue in this country, and why are young women and immigrant women in particular having such a hard time finding good work?" This article is a quick introduction to changes in the Canadian workforce that are just now becoming visible and the issues that they raise for working women. It also introduces a growing activism among community groups and unions round these issues.

If you were to look at the popular media, or current human resource management literature about what was new and different about the world of work at the beginning of the new millennium, it might lead you to think that the "new workers" are all high tech workers, that they are mobile because of personal computers, palm pilots, and cell phones; and that they are very much in control of when and how they work. There are certainly people working like this, but the media and human resource managers have done it again—they are portraying a social change only from the perspective of people, mostly male, who have a certain amount of wealth.

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The kinds of employment that have grown in Canada in the last decade are low waged contracting or self employment, and temporary work. Most of the women who do this "new" work earn very low wages. The labour market strategies of both employers and governments are transforming permanent, waged work into "flexible" independent contracts or temporary positions.

Changes in the Canadian workforce

There has definitely been a change in how people work in Canada in the last ten years. A quick review of recent labour force statistics is important here, because the snapshot that it produces confirms the working experience of women across the country. Although there was some job growth over the decade, but by far the largest proportion of the growth (39.6 per cent) was in situations where the worker was self-employed (Jackson *et al.*). That is, more workers were on contract, or were being paid for the completion of a particular piece of work. In over two thirds of those situations, self employment did not mean a small business where the person hired other people, but rather a person working alone.

This was a different pattern of growth from the previous decade, and interestingly, it does not echo growth in the U.S. over the same period. Full time jobs accounted for 18 per cent of job creation in Canada between 1989 and 1998, compared to 58 per cent during the 1980s (and compared to 75 per cent in the U.S. during the 1990s). Self employment accounted for 58 per cent of the increase in Canada between 1989 and 1998, compared to 18 per cent during the 1980s (and compared to 6 per cent in the U.S.) (Picot and Heisz). However, a growing proportion of full and part-time waged workers were employed as temporary workers. Temporary employment grew from 4.9 per cent of employment in 1991 to 11.4 per cent in 1995 (Jackson *et al.*). Another cluster of workers has employment, but it is only short term. When we look at the structure of the Canadian labour market, we see that only 54 per cent of Canadian workers and 51 per cent of women were in permanent full time jobs in 1998.

Most people think that the self-employed are all high paid consultants or contractors. But only a very small proportion of this group, 6.7 per cent, earned over $100,000 a year in 1996. Of the 1.67 million people who were their own employer, 45 per cent earned less than $20,000 a year (*Labour Force Update).*

Changes in women's work

Women have done more precarious work than men

throughout most of the century. At different moments in the earlier parts of the century it has actually defined women's work—men earned "family wages" and women were expected to only need to work for "pin money" to supplement the primary wage. The changes of this last decade have been described as the "feminization" of work, not only are there more women in the labour market, but the working conditions that used to be only associated with women's work now apply to a broader set of employment situations. (Vosko; Armstrong; Jensen *et al.*).

During the 1990s the big change for women was that more have become self-employed: 41 per cent of the growth in women's jobs was in self employment (Jackson *et al.*). There are still, however, more men than women who are self-employed: in 1996, 39.5 per cent of own account self-employed workers were women (Hughes). The traditional imbalances in the proportion of men and women in permanent, temporary and part-time jobs is leveling out slightly. The number of men in permanent jobs actually decreased over the decade, while the proportion of women employed in permanent jobs increased (51 per cent). About the same proportion of women are temporary workers as men: in 1995 12.6 per cent of women and 10.7 per cent of men were temp workers (Jackson *et al.*). Part-time work continues to be women's domain: in 1999 21.1 per cent of Canadian working women over age 25 were employed in part-time jobs, compared with only 4.2 per cent of working men in the same age group (Jackson *et al.*).

The big difference between women and men's employment continues to be how much they earn. The wage gap is slowly closing because women's earnings at all levels are increasing and, except at the very highest level, men's earnings are decreasing. In 1997 women earned 72 per cent of men's earnings. However, the wage gap is much wider between men and women who are self-employed. Women who worked on their own earned an average of $15,070 a year, or 59.5 per cent of men's earnings in 1996. Women who employed others earned only slightly more: an average of $16,814, or 56.4 per cent of men's earnings (Hughes). On the other hand while the hourly wages of part-time women (both unionized and non-unionized) were lower than a full time wage, women's part-time hourly wages were higher than those of men (Jackson *et al.*).

More young women are likely to be employed in temporary, contract or part-time jobs than mid-age women. And in Toronto which is the centre of most immigration in the country, a recent study of the 1996 census helps us see that that immigrant women are particularly affected by contingent work (Ornstein). New immigrants are streamed into non-standard work by employment and training programs and systemic discrimination throughout the labour market. Employers exclude workers who do not have Canadian experience, and most professional and trades certification from other countries is not recognized here. These and other conditions combine to create a polarization of income in the city between European ethno racial groups and African, Caribbean, South Asian and Latin American groups. The earnings of women who are self-employed are particularly racially polarized, with African, Black, Caribbean and South Asian workers having the lowest incomes.

Marcia is a temporary worker who works many, but not all, nights inserting the advertising supplements that we find in our newspapers the next morning. She works at the big print shop of one of Toronto's large newspapers along side a small group of unionized workers and workers from three or four other temporary service agencies. She says that she's happy with her current agency because they pay her just a bit more than minimum wage, they will pay overtime, they make her EI contributions, and they don't mind that she has children. She earns less than $1,500 a month.

She has worked for a couple of the other agencies, and knows the other workers. She knows what they are earning. It's different for all of them. "Some," she says, "are paid in cash, less than minimum wage. They are the newer immigrants." One of the other agencies she tried doesn't take on women with young children because, they told her, women can't get to an assignment fast enough if they have to deal with finding child care.

A global economy: program cuts, tax cuts and free trade

These changes are not happening by accident, or by

Renita's position has been funded by project money for the last 12 years. She has worked with the same community agency on a series of contracts for that whole period, and is the most senior worker in the agency. Her wages have not increased "one penny" in 12 years. She has some medical insurance, but no dental. She says that her children are covered under their father's workplace plan. Her workload has increased because now she has to fundraise for her position and projects.

She has seen the cycle of project start up and wind down enough times to know that it hurts the program and the people she works with. "The program doesn't work unless people know and trust us, and developing a community relationship takes a while. But every ten months or so we have to re-invent ourselves for our funders and package what we do in some new way. It makes it hard for people to learn who we are."

some natural process. Since the mid-1980s governments and employers have been experimenting with the theory that decreased taxes, combined with lower "payroll taxes" like Employment Insurance (EI) and workers compensation, and relaxed employment standards legislation will allow employers to create more jobs. We are beginning to see that this kind of public policy does not produce permanent jobs, but rather lower paid, flexible work which is designed to solely to meet employers needs.

During the early to mid-1990s employers, including all levels of government, engaged in massive restructuring. In much of the private sector this was done in the name of maintaining profitability through the recession, and restructuring for global competition. Governments responded to business and international financial pressure to cut deficits by reshaping policy and gutting social program spending. They also embraced freer trade as an economic development strategy and as the legislative foundation for increased contracting out of existing government services. Towards the end of the decade, as they came out of the recession, employers began another round of restructuring to respond to what many describe as an industrial revolution—the growth of the information economy and electronic business. In this period governments reduced or eliminated their deficits, but did not reinstate program spending, responding instead to pressure to reduce taxes. Neither governments nor employers have returned to the fiscal or employment strategies of the late 1980s.

A key component of both private and public strategies of the 1990s was the encouragement of labour market "flexibility." In Toronto during the first half of the decade, large lay-offs and high levels of unemployment meant that employers in most sectors had created the flexibility of an employers' market, and were able to increase skill requirements, lower wages, and reduce benefits. They were reluctant to hire permanent employees and if they did create new work, the jobs tended to be temporary, contract and part-time. By the middle of the decade most industrial sectors, including health and community services, had permanently adopted some "just in time" production and staffing models from the manufacturing sector. These models bring workers, supplies and distributors on site only as they are required by sales and production schedules. Now, at the end of the decade, flexible forms of work have been "normalized" in most businesses and are being described as the model of employment for the new economy.

Throughout the decade government programs have contributed to the creation of a more "flexible" labour force. Many services that used to be provided by government have been contracted out, and much of the work has been transformed from permanent, decently paid jobs to lower paid, less secure, contractual and temporary jobs. In 1996 the federal government restructured the uses of the employment insurance fund. Changes in eligibility criteria have made Employment Insurance (EI) inaccessible to a large proportion of those who pay into it, creating a larger pool of unemployed workers who are prepared to take any kind of work in order to survive. Employment counselling services have been contracted out, with funding to the ***Cinda*** is a high school student who does factory work at night. She leaves for work at 8:00pm most evenings, arrives at a pick up point along the subway line at around 8:30pm and then is bussed to a factory. She works along side permanent workers in auto parts and other industrial plants. Her shifts are usually ten hours, although sometimes they are 12 hours long. She is paid $45 for a ten-hour shift, which is substantially lower than minimum wage. The agency deducts her transportation from her wage. She wonders whether they pay her less because she is a student, but is afraid to ask in case they stop calling her to work.

She sleeps on the bus both ways and sometimes, she says, in classes. When she gets home in the morning, she usually has about an hour to get ready for school, and then is in classes from 9:00am to 3:30pm. She does homework and helps with chores from 4:00pm until she has to leave again for work.

The impact of these large scale changes in policy and practice on the part of both private sector employers and government is now visible in the changed structure of the Canadian labour market.

Living with non-permanent work: Workers concerns

The Contingent Workers Project in Toronto con-

ducted a participatory research study in 1999—2000 which examined the concerns of 205 mostly women non-permanent workers (de Wolff). The study found that the central concern of the study respondents was the low level of income that they were receiving. Seventy percent earned less than $1,500 per month, or a maximum of $18,000 a year. Women respondents earned less than men; young and older workers earned less than mid-age workers; and recent immigrants earned less than those who had been in Canada longer. And a large proportion—40 percent—of the earners at this level were the sole earners in their households. These workers were earning and living far below what Statistics Canada describes as the low income cut off. This is understood to be the level at which households strain to meet regular expenses. In 1998 this was estimated as an after tax income of $27,890 in cities over 500,000 (*Income in Canada*).

The study found that in addition to paying low wages, employers are downloading other costs to these workers. When an employee is defined as a contractor, she becomes responsible for her own equipment, its maintenance, overtime pay, holidays, sick leave, maternity leave, training, pension provisions, medical insurance and long term disability insurance. The result is that many low-income earners are carrying *more* employment related expenses than higher waged permanent workers. Or, more accurately, they can not cover these costs adequately, and worry about them constantly. .

Further, governments are downloading costs to these workers. Almost half of the Toronto study respondents were not covered by federal Employment Insurance, and two thirds did not think that they were covered by the provincial Workers Insurance and Safety Board. Even those who think they are covered find that eligibility criteria tend to exclude contract and temporary workers from training and other benefits. This may be a defining feature of the "new" work: that workers do not have access to assistance with lost earnings due to major employment transitions, illness, or injury from either government or employers. It is almost impossible for these workers to acquire the resources to create their own individual safety net which can see them through the insecurities of contingent work

Much is made in the popular press about how non-standard workers, particularly women, have more flexible time to be with their families. There is some polarization around the experience of "flexibility" and whether it actually works in this way: some higher end earners may find it easier to control the flexibility in their work and make it fit their lives. However, the lower-waged workers in the Toronto study were dealing with unpredictability and a constant process of re-scheduling rather than flexibility. 43 per cent didn't know their schedules in advance, 45 per cent worked split shifts; and temporary workers reported being constantly "on call." This has a profound impact on workers' abilities to maintain healthy friendships, intimate and family relationships, and stable child or elder care arrangements. They find it difficult to support their children at school, get involved in any community activities, or to participate in a regular course of study.

Other studies are beginning to show that contingent work, particularly where workers are paid by piece of work completed, has a higher rate of injury than regularly waged work (Quinlan *et al.*). Workers are not given the same health and safety training as permanent workers and they are not always given safety equipment. A central health concern tends to be stress. The other is that workers have no protection if they are sick or injured. In the Toronto study, only 30 per cent received sick pay, and most worried that they did not receive adequate health and safety training or equipment when they went into each new workplace. Two thirds were not covered by WSIB, which indicates a very large problem either with the program itself, or with employer compliance.

Non-permanent workers are particularly vulnerable to workplace discrimination and harassment on the basis of race, gender and age, with very little union or legal protection and only marginal access to workplace complaints processes. A recent U.S. study has demonstrated that temporary agency employers favour Caucasian applicants over African American applicants (Nunes and Seligman). Temporary agencies are particularly unaccountable to workers or their advocates. Home-care workers are constantly re-scheduled, and many employers are not accountable to anyone about how they make assignments and schedules.

Contingent workers worry about their futures. They do

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Rose and Feli are home care workers. Both have nursing qualifications from their home countries, but they are not recognized here. Neither woman has been able to afford the exams required to re-qualify in the Canadian system. They work for the same agency and earn about the same—just over minimum wage. They want a union in their workplace. They are particularly frustrated with the way their employer draws up their schedules. Sometimes they are asked to work only a couple of hours a day. Sometimes their schedule doesn't give them enough time to get from one place to the next on public transit. Or, sometimes they have two or three hours between workplaces (without pay), and their employer suggests that they wait it out in the local mall.

The other problem is that they only get the equivalent of four sick days a year, and they work with people who shouldn't be exposed to colds and flu. "They don't want us in their homes if we have a cold." Both women think that if they form a union their employer will have to treat them better, and that they will provide better care for their clients.

not see how they can break out of contingent work, or how their own working conditions could improve. Temporary agencies restrict some workers from taking permanent jobs. Employers rarely invest in training for contingent workers, and in Ontario right now, no level of government is taking overall responsibility for the training and human resource development of the workforce. Temporary workers feel that they are permanently relegated to the contingent workforce when they find that they are excluded from EI training benefits because they have "employable skills."

Getting active

The single most important thing that workers in the Toronto study wanted to change was the nature of their work. They wanted secure jobs that paid fair wages. This can not be accomplished by individual effort alone—there are not permanent jobs for contingent workers to move into in the current labour market. This suggests that contingent workers need a collective voice and strategies which build the kind of power that can change the labour market itself.

A number of efforts in Canada and the U.S. are working in this direction. In Montreal, Au Bas de L'Echelle has 25 years experience working with non-unionized contingent workers, providing legal clinics, workshops and individual advocacy.[1] They have built the Front de Defense des Non-syndique-e-s, a coalition with community, academic and labour groups which has been a strong advocate for appropriate employment law for non-standard workers. They are a feminist group, and their demands were central to the Quebec Women's March Against Violence and Poverty. A much newer group has formed in Toronto. In its first year the Contingent Workers Project held workshops, a forum, and is beginning to support the organizing efforts of temporary workers and community service agency workers. The Carolina Alliance for Fair Employment (CAFÉ) is a U.S. member-based organization.[2] They support member locals across the state, provide job rights education, lobby to improve labour laws, and take up individual cases both in the courts and on the streets.

Groups are beginning to take action around the unfair practices of the temporary services industry. Labour Link at Dixon Hall in Toronto is one of several experimental non-profit temporary placement agencies that are quietly challenging the industry by paying their workers decent wages and benefits.[3] Another is a unionized placement service for high tech workers associated Working Partnerships in San Jose, California.[4] More direct pressure is being placed on the industry in the U.S. by the National Alliance for Fair Employment (NAFFE), who have adopted a national campaign around a fair code of practice for temporary service agencies.[5]

Many unions across the country are waging a constant battle to fight employers 'efforts to reduce the "core" of their membership and to increase the "periphery" of non-unionized flexible workers. Some unions have recognized that their own survival depends on their capacity to keep their existing membership and organize new members as

Anita and Marta were unemployed last year, and both felt lucky that they had worked long enough to qualify for Employment Insurance. In order to collect it, they were required to attend a day long employment search training session. In both cases, the people who ran the session started the day by saying that everyone had to get used to the new reality of work, that is, they had to prepare themselves to become self-employed or to work for a temporary agency.

Later when Marta, who had done some work for a temporary agency, said that she wanted to apply for training she was told that she wouldn't qualify. "They told me that because I had worked with an agency that I had employable skills, so didn't need more. They didn't care that it was factory work and I wanted to use my degree from back home."

employment arrangements change. In Quebec the Communication Energy and Paperworker's has taken an innovative step, creating the Quebec Alliance of Autonomous Workers (AQTA), which includes 600 insurance and forestry workers who are not able to form a union until the labour law is changed. A number of unions are making efforts to organize employees who have been designated as independent contractors—cleaners, newspaper carriers, rural route postal carriers, and taxi drivers. And ACTRA provides us with a useful model of a union whose members are almost all contract or part-time workers.

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[1]Au Bas de L'Echelle website is *www.cam.org/~abe/.*
[2]CAFE website is *www.cafesc.org* .
[3]Labour Link, Dixon Hall website is *www.dixonhall.on.ca/labourlink/*
[4]Working Partnerships website is *www.atwork.org.*
[5]The NAFFE website is *www.fairjobs.org.*

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WE DEMAND THAT THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT:

6. Provide universal access to public and free education at all levels of learning from infancy through adulthood, increase the commitment to adult education, community-based literacy programmes, and English and French second lan-guage programs, with funding for adequate support services for women.

7. Replace the current Canada Student Loans Program with a system of non-re-payable grants. The Grants Programme must be publicly accountable and ad-ministered solely on the basis of need.

8. Implement a national strategy for the reduction of homelessness and poverty that recognizes homelessness, poverty and inadequate housing as a national emergency. Reinstate social housing programmes for those in need and provide adequate housing programs for persons with disabilities. As the first step in this process, the federal government must allocate an additional 1% of its an-nual budgetary revenues to meet housing needs in Canada.

9. Ensure that sufficient public research and medical funds are allocated to fur-ther define the links between environmental toxins and the state of women's health.

10. Develop a policy framework that integrates unpaid work into the various social security, income support programmes, education, training and employment programs.

11. Collect data on unpaid work through regular national surveys, the census and a variety of other means to ensure that the full scope of unpaid work and its impact on society and on the women who do it is fully understood and inte-grated into all policy discussions.

12. Uphold and protect the right to unionise, bargain collectively and to strike in all workplaces under its jurisdiction.

13. Reform the Employment Insurance Act to ensure full and fair insurance cover-age for all workers including self employed, seasonal and part time workers and, at a minimum, restore the admissibility criteria and the funding levels in existence prior to 1996. The surplus accumulated in the EI fund must be used to restore and increase the level of benefits in such a way to fully uphold our right to social security.