

MORE JOBS – BUT NOT AT ANY PRICE

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While Summer 2013 has seen the welcome beginning of a downward movement in the Live Register, groups like 'Claiming Our Future' and the Nevin Institute rightly call for urgent and sustained investment in job creation. There has been less focus or debate about the type and quality of jobs in the Irish labour market. While few from any political spectrum would deny the importance of jobs it is worth reflecting that different political ideologies lie behind seemingly common calls for jobs.

A social democratic approach champions the right-to-work and requires high levels of participation and full employment to fund high levels of social investment. This means obligations to participate in reasonable and regulated employment. The neo-liberal approach argues a relatively unregulated market should be allowed create jobs and the State should incentivise (through make-work-pay) or force (through workfare) the low-paid to take such jobs. There is little focus on the human cost of low-paid employment and how it impacts on quality of life and capacity to care or parent. A third conservative approach is more likely to focus on the moral imperative to work and problematise the behaviour of the poor: It stress the need to avoid inter-generational joblessness or creation of a dependency culture and promotes work obligations and sanctions, sometimes ignoring the reality of care obligations and real barriers to employment.

In practice policy in most countries is an amalgam of such ideologies and certainly we hear all three intermeshed in Irish debate and political discourse. It is worth, therefore, standing back, reflecting and perhaps clarifying what we mean by more jobs. Do we mean more jobs but jobs that are created solely

to meet the needs of the market, low-paid,
unregulated and part-time? Do
we mean it is okay to
relax employment,
environmental
and health

regulations to create new jobs? Do we mean more low-paid jobs and tough rules to force the low-skilled to take up those jobs? Do we mean compulsory work for low-skilled parents so their children will grow up in a culture of work? Do we mean high-quality jobs with progression routes to a better quality of life?

ONE THIRD OF EUROPE'S JOBS ARE LOW-QUALITY AND POORLY PAID

Whatever we might personally mean by 'more jobs' it does seem that globally recession has occasioned intensification of the restructuring of the labour market towards more precarious employment. One third of Europe's jobs are of low-quality and poorly-paid. Nearer home, over half of all new UK jobs are now part-time. There is growing concern with the decline in the quality of employment at a global level and growing de-regulation at the margin of the labour market. The trend has been the creation of segmented labour markets in which employees with atypical contracts carry the burden of adjustment to economic shocks. All of this comes with increased social, economic and psychological consequences, increased fear, a growth in work-related stress and a weakening of collective bargaining power.

In Ireland, Government policy (intentionally or unintentionally) has both enabled labour market precarity, but also reduced social protection and made the precarious more vulnerable. Our labour market is very flexible. We have the fifth most relaxed employment regulation framework in the OECD and we have a light-touch approach to implementing and monitoring employment standards. Various social welfare cuts mean precarious workers are increasingly unlikely be able to access social protection to top up low pay. A combined pincer movement means insecurity in the labour market occurs at the same time as a tightening of obligations to enter the labour market or 'activation'.

'DECENT' – NOT JUST 'MORE' - JOBS

All this adds up to a scenario where 20% of our workforce is low-paid (many of them men). In 2000, just over one-in-six people employed in Ireland worked part-time. By the last quarter of 2012, close to a quarter (24.3%) of all those employed, or more than 450,000 employees, worked part-time. The number of men in part-time employment has doubled from 6% to 12% and much of this is involuntary part-time employment. The in-work poverty rate for part-time workers is more than twice that for full-time workers. In 2011, one-in-every-seven individuals at-risk-of-poverty was at work and one in ten of those was in consistent poverty. The Irish League of Credit Unions 'What's Left' Tracker 2012 suggests that rising debt, borrowing and financial stress effects both the working and non-working adult population. The volunteers in the Society of St Vincent de Paul observe similar trends amongst Ireland's working poor.

Is this what we mean when we say 'more jobs'?
Do we need to say 'more decent jobs'?

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