

Editorial

Jobs and working conditions: two sides of the same coin

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Europe is a patchwork of employment trends, with very wide gaps between countries and often regions of the same country. As a pointer, the increase from 7% to just short of 10% in all-EU unemployment from 2008 to 2011 covered drastic rises in Spain and Greece and a decline in Germany. The scale of the crisis, public policy differences, varying effective trade union action against closures and layoffs, and the distribution of employment across business sectors all play into these gaps.

One common thread, however, is that job losses are not improving working conditions in those that remain. Contrary to popular myth, low-grade traditional jobs or ones in low-skilled occupations are not necessarily those being shed. An analysis of the working conditions surveys finds no provable link between lost jobs and better working conditions. The story is not always the same. Significant job losses often go together with worsening working conditions.

A fair share of the new jobs appearing and existing jobs being kept have their downsides like repetitive work, lack of autonomy, disregard for rights, no job security. Lacking a real joined-up policy, the "more and better jobs" soundbite has held pride of place in EU action since the so-called Lisbon Strategy adopted in 2000. But it is not walking the talk. The much-vaunted benefits of a "knowledge economy" have not come through. Some countries have fewer and worse quality jobs. Elsewhere, there is a visible disconnect between the "more" and

"better" aspects. Since the Hartz reforms of the early 2000s, Germany has witnessed the growth of *mini-jobs* with monthly salaries below 450 euros and *midi-jobs* with salaries of 450 to 850 euros.

General statistics report only averages. Looking more closely at the detail, widening social inequalities are flagrant. For women, the rise of part-time is most disturbing, for with it go low pay and often poor working conditions. In employment terms, it effectively collectivizes female unemployment while limiting women's access to benefit systems. Almost without exception, a part-time job — even if very low paid — gives no entitlement to unemployment benefit. The problem for young people is a sharp rise in insecurity: temporary contracts, weak collective labour rights, working conditions that combine traditional risk factors like

accidents and health damage with a despotic work organization that effectively imposes "sweated labour".

The spectre of unemployment looms large over workers. Employers everywhere are driving down working conditions on the often spurious grounds of saving jobs. Longer working hours, more flexibility, eroded collective labour rights, pay restraint are set beforehand as the redlines of any bargaining.

What is really needed, however, is to issue a reminder that employment and working conditions are two sides of the same coin. Improving working conditions and opposing closures and layoffs are two sides of a pressing equation. From reducing working time to tackling insecurity, jobs and working conditions are joined at the hip. Sacrificing one for the other would be a pointless and risky business. ●

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