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Europe

The persistence of inequality

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The current profound restructuring of European capitalism includes a widespread attack on a woman's right to work. One of the primary elements of this attack is the spread of part-time work.

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/womenworkerseurope.jpg>]

However, when one looks closely at the situation of waged workers and more generally at the status of women in each country, it is clear that the structural effects of part-time work have varied greatly in their impact on the social regulation of women. There is a general trend towards restricting women's right to work, but the tactical angles of attack taken by the different national bourgeoisies have often differed.

Since the beginning of the recent phase of restructuring, and especially since the middle of the 1980s, the position of women in the job market has deteriorated at an accelerating pace. This deterioration flows from the worsening situation of wage workers in general under the twin blows of austerity policies and deregulation. But the attack on woman workers has been greater, because of the general discrimination women still face.

Throughout Europe, a gap of around 30 percent still yawns between men's and women's wages, and the general erosion of buying power has been felt particularly by women, who tend to have the worst paying jobs.

At the beginning of the 1990s, women's level of unemployment was higher than men's everywhere except in Britain. In Sweden the difference has been negligible. But in other European countries, women are two or three times as likely to become unemployed as men. The same general picture is true when one looks at the plight of young women. Spain holds the scandalous "record", with 42,1 percent unemployment among young women.

In general women are unemployed longer than men. Though here there are three exceptions:

- Countries which have low levels of unemployment and a high level of women in the workforce, like Denmark or Sweden.
- Countries which have a very high level of unemployment, and where it is difficult to find another job quickly, like Ireland, or Britain.
- Countries where there is a low official level of unemployment but also a smaller proportion of women active in the workforce, like the former Federal Republic of Germany or the Netherlands.

In these cases, the lower difference between male and female unemployment levels is probably due to women's withdrawal (retreat) from the labour market. Women in these countries become what the OECD (Organisation for Economic Development and Development) euphemistically calls "discouraged job-seekers". Married women with children are not even considered unemployed in some countries. In Ireland, unemployed married women with children receive less than the full unemployment benefit.

Unorganised resistance

None the less, throughout the '80s and '90s, there has been a steady growth in women's participation in the workforce, continuing and in some countries accelerating a trend which began in the 1970s. Despite the crisis, despite unemployment, and despite government pressure, women continue to go out to work. This suggests that even in the absence of a visible struggle around this issue or a specific campaign by tradeunions on woman's right to work, there is still strong, mass, resistance, however unorganised, to any attempt to roll back this hard-won right.

Earnings differentials between women and men persist (and in some countries are widening) despite a series of European directives and legislation. This is in part because these laws are not restrictive enough to affect employers, and partly because effective control mechanisms do not exist. Gaps also persist because men and women only rarely hold the same jobs. Often, we don't even work in the same sectors.

Since the early 1980s, there has been a general structural shift, with jobs being displaced from industry into the tertiary, or service sector. This re-distribution of paid work has had contradictory consequences for women's employment. On the one hand, it has been "positive" in the sense that, because of the sexual segregation of the jobmarket, the level of unemployment among women has risen more slowly than among men. This has been particularly the case in Britain, the European country where the trend towards de-industrialisation and the growth of the service sector has been strongest. In Britain the gap between female and male unemployment is the inverse of the situation in other European countries.

On the other hand, the struggle of women workers at Moulinex in France illustrates quite clearly that women industrial workers have not been spared from the effect on jobs of the relative decline of the sector.

Globalisation has also had vicious effects on working women. Capital's continuing search for lower labour costs in Third World countries only explains a small part of the increase in European unemployment. But these "mobile" jobs are usually concentrated in so-called "traditional" industries, like textiles and electrical appliances. These sectors are labour intensive, rather than depending on sophisticated technologies.

They are often organised along strict "Taylorist" lines. Workers are invariably poorly paid, unskilled, and exposed to wretched working conditions.

In other words, women lose at both ends of globalisation: in Europe they lose their jobs, and in Asia and Latin America they get jobs, but only under draconian conditions of super-exploitation. What's more, the new jobs created in the "service sector", particularly in sales, have jerry-built a ghetto of underpaid, insecure, part-time "female" jobs. Britain is the extreme case, but France is not far behind, not least in its chain stores and supermarkets.

Part-time work...

In many countries the only area of net growth in job creation in many years has been in part-time jobs.

Although part-time work has been a recognisable phenomenon for more than fifteen years, it has lately begun to spread almost everywhere, including in countries like Greece, where formal part-time contracts were until recently rare. This expansion has been encouraged by government policy initiatives.

There is great disparity across Europe. In southern Europe, Luxemburg and Finland, part-time work represented less than 10 percent of all employment in 1995. At the other end of the spectrum, more than 20 percent of all jobs in Scandinavia, Switzerland, Britain and the Netherlands are part time. France, Belgium, and Germany are in between,

with around 15 percent of jobs being part-time.

...a sign of modernity?

Everywhere, however, part-time work is overwhelmingly female. Fully 85% of part time workers in Germany, Belgium and Luxemburg are women, as are 80 percent of part-timer staff in France, Norway, Switzerland, and Britain. One analysis popular in ruling circles presents part-time work as a necessary criteria of "modernity": a statistical classification which allows the neat partitioning of Europe between these northern countries where the levels of women's employment are very high but with a strong tendency towards part-time work, and southern European countries (Spain, Portugal, Greece, Italy) and, to some extent Ireland, where the involvement of women in the workforce is low, often because of their role in the family, and part-time work is poorly developed.

Other "experts" distinguish between an industrially dominated "Rhine" capitalism, defined, as in Germany, by a low level of female participation in the workforce, and an "Anglo-Saxon" capitalism, where the relative de-industrialisation and development of the service sector has as its corollary the opposite: a high level of female participation!

Reading the official reports today, you get the impression that putting numbers on part-time work is practically an implicit extension of the EU convergence criteria!

This type of employment offers bosses and governments a number of short and long term advantages. The relative weight of these benefits may vary depending on the country, and on the concrete forms which part-time work has taken, but what is common about part-time work is that it represents a virtual guarantee that women will never be workers like "everyone else" (men). Women will always have one foot out the door, and one in the kitchen.

In fact, a massive wave of women returning to the home, that eternal dream of the right and the far right, is an impossibility from the strict point of view of a rational capitalist, in the same way that the dream of sending immigrant workers back to "their" country is impossible. What employers need is exactly what these groups today provide: manual labourers made vulnerable by the very conditions (both legal and social) which allow them to work. Workers whose qualifications can be ignored and who can be paid less, precisely because of who they are.

This is what employers get with the administrative harassment of immigrant workers; and this is what they get with the latent indictment of women in the conservative discourse on the family and women's "natural role". A discourse which still resonates for a large number of women, faced with the daily reality of a double workload: on the job, and at home. In this regard, part-time work is plausibly presented as the ideal reconciliation between paid work and family duties.

The same old story

In capitalist Europe, women are still considered only in terms of their function within the family. Thus, wherever part-time work takes root, it is inevitably accompanied by measures which bring into question women's economic autonomy. In Belgium, a "partner" (invariably the woman) gets only half the regular unemployment benefit. In France, the allowance for parents (mothers) who choose to stay at home with young children is being extended to the second child, and there is a campaign to create a "parental salary for free choice"; in former East Germany, the right to fulltime employment is being abolished, to conform with the model in Western Germany. The Netherlands is the model: combining of low female participation in the workforce, and a high rate of part-time employment for those who

do.

Part-time work must therefore be understood as part and parcel of "family" policies: a method of managing the potential contradictions between taking advantage of women's manual labour and the justification of women's role in the social reproduction of the labour force, in the best interests of capital.

The expansion of part-time work leads to an increasing tendency to "manage the male and female work-forces differently". The "soft" version is clear in northern European countries where there has been a certain socialliberalism, where women have long had access to abortion and where the definition of a family has become more flexible, with acceptance of divorce, of living together, and of children born outside of marriage.

You see the "hard" version further south, where anti-abortion forces are gaining ground, governments are establishing aggressively restrictive family policies and "norms", and the partisans of a public "Moral Order" refuse to accept the evolution of family types towards the "northern" model. Britain's last Conservative government launched a hypocritical "back to basics" campaign, and continued to scapegoat single mothers. In France, economic policies and social benefits unashamedly favour married couples, and large families.

Maximum flexibility

The struggle against part-time work must also take into account the major role it plays in strategies for deregulating the labour market. Part-time work, which has never been a "social demand" on the part of women, or a better way for them to enter the work world, is something which women endure rather than choose. It meshes well with the general strategies adopted by companies desiring to adapt better to market fluctuations and minimise their labour costs. Part-time work is central to the extension of labour flexibility, and to the employers' dismantling of earlier expectations of a normal, full-time job, with relative security, inherited from the post-war economic boom.

Thus, part-time work is often bound up with other elements of job insecurity: temporary work, subcontracting, and fixed-term contracts; and why it often involves irregular schedules at the discretion of the employer, especially in chain stores and supermarkets.

This is why the majority of part-time jobs are unskilled, with potential neither for training nor promotion; and why part-time status is not only imposed on workers as the only alternative to total unemployment, but often irreversible: a return to full-time work is almost impossible.

This type of part-time work is dominant in France, in Belgium, and especially in Britain, which is in the forefront of labour market shifts. It is in these countries, in fact, that jobs last the shortest amount of time, and that below a certain level, any vestige of equal treatment (prorated pay or bonuses, guarantees) disappear.

While the level of women's employment in Britain is relatively high, the socially approved norm is a two-income household where the man brings home the primary paycheque and the woman works a few hours a week to make up the rest, since she is entirely responsible for childcare in the absence of affordable alternatives.

It should be noted that even if in this case we are talking about a sort of "savage" part-time work, left totally to the discretion of the employer. The Conservative government nonetheless offered financial incentives to the introduction of this type of work.

A new model

Official reports have begun to stigmatise this type of part-time work, judging it discriminatory, and discouraging. The analysis is the following: part-time work should no longer be considered underemployment, or a cut-price job, but should, on the contrary, be regulated and benefit from all of the guarantees of a full-time job. Part-time status should be voluntary, with equal treatment, and access to training and promotion.

This was the gist of the general accords which have just been signed between the European Confederation of Trade Unions, the European Community Industrial Union, and the European Centre for Public Sector Enterprises. These recommendations include eliminating discrimination suffered by part-time workers, and identifying and reducing the obstacles which limit companies' ability to increase part-time work.

The long-term goal is that part-time work should be "normalised", regulated and governed by regulations and guarantees, as it is already in Sweden or in the public sector in France. As a result, it is hoped, part-time work will become acceptable, perhaps even desirable, for a majority of workers.

A false choice

In fact, even under these conditions, the expansion of part-time work for women still rests on a false ideology of "choice". Accepting part-time work as a "choice" means deliberately obscuring the real conditions of working women: the lack of any real male participation in household labour, insufficient or non-existent childcare alternatives, a lack of time, and pathetic jobs, most of which are unskilled and poorly paid.

All of which comes back to the still dominant idea that paid work for women is only subsidiary and temporary, and that women's salary is a complementary "extra" in the family budget.

The extension of part-time work is a way for employers and governments to avoid being forced to shorten the length of the work day for all, which would entail redistributing profits and re-organising social life.

Increased inproductivity and Europe's continued weak economic growth mean that fewer hours of work are necessary. And these hours of paid labour are being distributed among the working population in a harsh and regressive manner, through mass unemployment and the imposition of part-time work.

The central struggle in Europe today is the struggle around defining what work should be: defending the idea that people's desire to work less and live better must not be "settled" at the individual level, by factors like poverty, insecurity and discrimination.

This struggle, which is also a struggle of ideas within the trade union movement, is taking the form of a struggle for the 35 hour, or maybe even 32 hour week, throughout Europe, immediately, and without a loss in pay.