

The Rise in Temporary Employment. The Loss of Job Security in America

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According to a [New York Times article](#) published on December 19, 2010, the US Labor Department reported that 80% of the 50,000 private sector jobs added in November were temporary as were more than a quarter of the private sector jobs added this year. The latter figure is startling in comparison to previous periods of alleged economic recovery, as this graph from the Bureau of Labor Statistics shows:

I worked as a temp for many years after finishing school in 1980. Back then the temp agencies—there were more of them and they were more visible then—advertised that you could work when you wanted. That was a lie unless you had the highest skills: Typing 80 wpm, 10-key by touch, or accounting. For someone like me who aced the temp agency spelling and math tests, but who only typed 40 wpm and looked at the keys on the calculator, work was catch as catch can.

Doing a good job did not necessarily help my employment longevity, something a lot of so-called regular employees have learned about their situations recently. I was kicked out of one assignment because someone within the company wanted to make a *lateral* move. Another job ended abruptly after four months and although the manager denied it, one company employee told me that the policy was never to have a temp longer than that.

Being a temp works out well sometimes and for some people, especially if you are young, single and healthy. But the lack of health insurance, income stability and opportunity for advancement begins to wear after a while. So also does the lack of respect you endure for being “just a temp.” During one period of temporary employment in the mid-80s, I was also volunteering at a local college radio station. I interviewed one of my temp co-workers, a poet. Soon afterward we parted company, headed for different assignments. When we met again, he told me that when I aired the interview, he asked permission to listen at the law firm where he was then working—donkey work for lawyers, he called it. When they said “yes” and listened to it as well, finding out that he was a poet, he suddenly became visible as a person to them. I was happy that my interview bought this intelligent, talented man a little workplace dignity, but I know that not many temps have the opportunity to be on radio during an assignment.

Some people, I among them, hoped to go from temp to “perm”. But, although the chance to do this was a major selling point of temp agencies back then, it rarely happened. I was offered a permanent job once, but I didn’t take it. Financially, I could not handle the transition, which would have had me go three weeks without a paycheck. That’s a problem for a lot of temps. Just as well, as I did not want to be a permanent *bank* employee anyway.

Nowadays, I would be surprised if temp-to-perm is ever done. Temp agencies have always made companies pay a fee for hiring a temp permanently. From what a legal secretary in my neighborhood told me years ago, the fees are now so high as to make a permanent job offer virtually impossible. She knew that from personal experience. She left a long-held regular job at a certain prestigious (but since bankrupt and gone) San Francisco law firm because she no longer liked it there. An older woman, she had trouble finding a new permanent position so she went temp.

The agencies loved her bank of experience and a firm she worked for liked her, too. But a manager there told her straight up that they would never hire her permanently because of the agency fee. I suspect it was more than that. Even with the premium a company pays for a temp in terms of hourly rate, it is probably still cheaper to have a temp than to pay wages and benefits to a "perm". She found that to be the case at several firms. So this secretary was now stuck for the rest of her career in agency limbo, her retirement savings cut short by the lack of benefits for temps.

A temp is basically a slave to the agency. I remember being asked to sub for six weeks for another agency worker who had to undergo an emergency appendectomy. The job paid well for the time, but was incredibly boring. I flipped through documents to make sure they were signed, dated and notarized. It was one of those jobs where one could feel brain cells collapsing from disuse. As I was going on my fourteenth week of this six-week assignment, I called the agency and asked to be replaced. I was told that although I had more than filled my commitment, replacing me would be an inconvenience to the agency and that if I left they would not feel they could use me anymore. I left and never heard from them again.

Agencies are never up front about the implications of a certain assignment if it's to their benefit not to be. I worked for a time at a law firm that handled a large number of asbestos cases, only to find out afterward that arcane conflicts rules rendered me ineligible to work at any other law firm that handled asbestos cases even if I were to work in another department. The agency did not inform me before I took the assignment that in so doing I was ruling myself out of future work with a significant part of the San Francisco businesses that hired temps! Undoubtedly, at least some likely candidates would refuse such an assignment, so they were better off not telling the workers.

Temp work slumps with the economy. When times were good, even someone like me had plenty of assignments. I would have to turn down jobs because I was already working. In down times, there was nothing. The fact that agencies were advertising for workers often meant they merely were trying to replenish their rosters after a long dry spell. When I spent two or three hours filling out forms and taking tests and heard no phone calls indicating employers were placing orders, I knew that I had just wasted a good part of my day. I was never called by several of the agencies I registered with. During those lean times, what savings I had I used up.

These were the things I thought of as I read that Times article, which is reporting that employers want to make a large portion of the labor force go the temp route as a way of life. That would be fine if we had single-payer health care that covered us whether we were working or not, if we had an unemployment compensation system that replaced our wages at 100% when we weren't needed, and if there were some retirement system other than the Social Security that the corporatists are taking apart. (I nearly wrote Republicans, but the Democrats are about as bad, just sneakier about their badness.)

Here is the truth that most people refuse to face: The economy does not need everybody to work full time, or at all, in order to produce the goods and services the nation needs. How many of you, in developed nations at least, face chronically empty store shelves? However, we still insist that everyone must “earn a living” or be supported by someone, preferably a parent or a spouse, who “earns a living”. If we otherwise don’t have a job, it is our fault! We are inferior, even evil, people!

Other tough truths: Employers view workers as costs to be contained. Competition creates losers even before the game begins. Work hard and play be the rules and you’ll succeed only works if you also have the right look and connections, and are the right race, age, gender, nationality and sexual orientation.

Do you know the words to “You’re in the Army now” ?

You’re in the Army now.

You’re not behind a plow.

You’ll never get rich

By digging a ditch.

You’re in the Army now.

At least those were the words I learned as a kid. I later found out that was the “G” version. The adult version is “You’ll never get rich, you son of a bitch. You’re in the army now!” And that is part of the biggest hard truth most people need to face. Not only will they never get rich, they are sliding closer and closer to destitution as corporate totalitarianism—Mussolini called it fascism—closes in on us. The military is the only viable option of a lot of youth, as temp work, now called contract work, is for the rest of us.

Despite the fact that not everyone is needed, everyone has bills that are constant. In other words, everyone charges us for goods and services but no one is required to hire us or retain our labor, or buy our goods or services if we are in business for ourselves. Neither capitalism nor socialism can solve the overproduction—unemployment problem, which has been turned into a form of asymmetrical warfare on the working class by the employing class.

We need to end monetary systems—the requirement that people work for money to pay for things—so as to let everyone work as they will according to their own talents, skills and inclinations, and for the only two legitimate purposes there are for work: To deepen our human experience and to provide goods and services to ourselves and our communities *as needed*. As I often tell people, “Abandon the idea of jobs and everyone will have work.” Producing so that people have jobs that give them money to spend so that other people will have jobs that give them money to spend so that other people, etc. is too taxing on the earth, especially given our population numbers.

Not having to work also gives people an opportunity to examine the moral quality of what they propose to do. I recently heard a black businessman from San Francisco lament the closure of the Hunters Point Naval shipyard, which once employed most of the young black men of the neighborhood. He said that today’s unemployed black youth were getting into trouble, including killing each other, because they did not have the jobs that their fathers

and grandfathers had. But by building weapons of war at a Naval shipyard, the previous generations had only moved the killing to another place. And they killed themselves rather than each other by exposure to toxic chemicals such as dioxin and asbestos.

Some people call for monetary reform. I say do away with it entirely. How will we exchange goods and services without money? By gift, barter, scrip that has no intrinsic value such as supermarket and newspaper coupons, lending and borrowing without interest, which is how we lend and borrow non-monetary items, and by ways we have yet to invent because we haven't thought to do so; we take the monetary system for granted. Imagine a world without scalpers and thieves. No sense scalping or stealing what is freely given.

To those who are concerned with the likelihood that there would be free riders in a world without money--people who take from the system and give nothing back—I ask this: If you are happy with what you are doing and getting what you need, why should you care if someone is not working? It's their loss for standing on the sidelines while other people are happily busy, and they'll realize that after a while. Do you really want to receive goods and services that are produced by someone because they had to, not because they wanted to?

Working while others don't is only unfair to the worker if one views work as a burden instead of as a joy. For many people who are working for a paycheck, at something they would not otherwise choose to do except for that paycheck, however small, work is a burden. Why should working for joy be only for a privileged few? Why should there be a lot of people for whom the work they do best is a hobby or a volunteer effort, which in a money-based society means they can only do it part-time or not very often, unless they have a trust fund or a supportive spouse who can work for two?

Money-based systems create scarcity, want, and exploitation of workers, consumers and the environment. We can continue going that way, with predictable results, or we can ask ourselves "Why must we pay to live on the planet we're born on?"

Think about it.

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