

Costs of Flexibility

As we celebrate the Feast of St Joseph the Worker we can be conscious of the advantages of increased flexibility in the labour force, but we should also be aware that sometimes this flexibility comes at a cost to workers and their families.

One of the costs of greater flexibility is the increasingly insecure and precarious nature of employment resulting from increases in the casualisation of the Australian labour force.

“Casual” employees are usually persons engaged on a *short term, irregular and uncertain basis*. Historically, casual employment was permitted in some awards to accommodate those industries which experienced seasonal fluctuations and/or unexpected increases in demand for labour. In recent decades, we have witnessed the steady growth of casual employment to around 27 per cent of the labour force. It is a matter of grave concern that between 1984 and 1997 over 60 per cent of new jobs created were casual jobs.

Long Term Casuals?

Another recent development has been the increasing number of employees being engaged as “casual employees” over an extended period. Sometimes, these workers are mistakenly referred to as “long-term” casuals when in fact they are more properly viewed as *full-time or part-time* employees. (See ACCER Tribunal submission, April 2001) They are engaged as “casual employees” but, in fact, work on a regular and systematic basis for long periods of employment, sometimes under the same pattern for years. Such employees often have the same workplace continuity as their permanent counterparts, yet are engaged without the same entitlements, such as sick leave, holiday leave and parental leave.

Casual employment can suit different workers at different stages of their lives, for example, students, travellers, and those seeking greater flexibility in their employment arrangements. Nevertheless, there is evidence that a high number of casual employees would prefer permanent employment on a full-time or part-time basis. For them, the benefits of flexibility are outweighed by the short-term, irregular and precarious nature of casual work.

Casual employment is concentrated amongst specific sectors of the labour force, particularly amongst women. In recent years, however, the highest rate of growth has been among working-age males between 25 and 54 years. While casual rates of pay appear to be higher, casuals in general earn less overall because they are employed at the lower end of the occupational hierarchy.

Security

One area where casual employees are especially disadvantaged compared to the permanent labour force is in relation to job security. Here, casual workers not only enjoy less security in the tenure of their positions, but also less “income security” as a result of a fluctuating number of hours worked each pay period, and less “working time security” because of changes to work shift times and rosters from week to week.

There are some suggestions that this insecurity is becoming more generalised across the workforce, with some permanent part-time jobs becoming more precarious. In a growing number of cases, permanent workers are engaged for a lower number of minimum hours with the expectation that they will only work extra hours if and when required. Along with their casual counterparts, these workers face uncertainty about the future of their positions and their prospects for career advancement.

Work is the Key to a Just Society

The Catholic Church has placed great stress on questions of work as the key to building a just society. This is why teachings about work and the rights and duties of workers have been central to the Church’s teachings about social justice. It has continued to call attention to the dignity and rights of workers, and to raise its voice in situations where that dignity and those rights are violated.

Working Conditions

As far as working conditions are concerned, arrangements should provide as extensive protection as is possible for the dignity, safety and health of workers, rather than being geared only towards the realisation of profits. These conditions of work should not be left to individual negotiation between worker and employer. Governments have a clear responsibility to pass laws which provide for adequate and just working conditions. Against those who would argue that the State should leave these questions to individual negotiation in the marketplace, Pope John Paul II wrote:

Yet the workers’ rights cannot be doomed to be the mere result of economic systems aimed at maximum profits. The thing which must shape the whole economy is respect for the workers’ rights within each country and all through the world’s economy. (Pope John Paul II, On Human Work, 1981, n. 17)

It is time to question whether casual employment is necessary in such high proportions and across such a broad range of industries. Australia cannot be described as a fair society if a growing number of workers are engaged on an uncertain, irregular and insecure basis without access to the basic rights of more permanent workers.

There is a place for casual employment but not as a substitute for ongoing employment. Workers need to be able to make a free choice between casual and permanent employment conditions.

Wherever practicable, casual employees should be entitled to advance rosters for the shifts to be worked in the week and month ahead.

We have to question whether casuals who are regularly engaged over a lengthy period should more properly be classified as permanent?

In the case of the apparently increasing number of permanent part-time employees, these workers should be entitled to fixed weekly hours, days and start and finish times. There should be provisions to ensure that part-time hours are sustainable with reasonable minimum hours worked.

The Australian Catholic Commission for Employment Relations has already supported the parental leave for so-called "long-term" casual employees and has more recently noted its concerns about the misclassification of employees as either "long term" or "short term" casual employees in its Senate submission regarding the Fair Termination Bill (2000).

Employers do benefit from conscientious workers who are secure in their employment relationship and as a result have every reason to demonstrate loyalty to their employer. The Church believes that employment security is a legitimate expectation of employees and should not be subject to the artificial manipulation of employment categories.

Bishop William Morris
Chairman
Australian Catholic Social Justice Council
Bishop of Toowoomba

For further information about casual work, contact:

- YCW Smart Casual campaign:
<http://www.turn.to/smartcasual/>
- Australian Catholic Commission for Employment Relations:
<http://www.accer.asn.au/>

The Australian Catholic Social Justice Council (ACSJC) was set up by the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference in 1987 as the national justice and peace agency of the Catholic Church in Australia. The Bishops Mandated the ACSJC to promote research, education, advocacy and action on social justice, peace and human rights integrating them deeply into the life of the whole Catholic community in Australia, and providing a credible Catholic voice on these matters in Australian society.



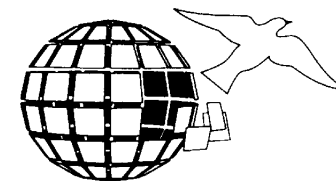
**Australian Catholic
Social Justice Council**

19 MacKenzie Street
North Sydney NSW 2060
Tel 02 9956 5811
Fax 02 9954 0056
Email admin@acsjc.org.au
www.socialjustice.catholic.org.au

A Pastoral Letter for the
**Feast of St Joseph
the Worker**

1 May 2002

**CASUAL
WORK:
THE COSTS OF
FLEXIBILITY**



Published by the
**Australian Catholic
Social Justice Council**