

Abstract for consideration in stream 11.2 'Fit for work? Health, Employability and Challenges for Activation in an Era of Crisis'

Access to sickness benefits in a liberal market economy

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ABSTRACT

Labour markets in a number of advanced European economies have undergone profound changes over the past quarter century that have affected the nature and organisation of paid work (Sunley et al 2006). Whether situated in the contested process of 'globalisation' or not, there has been a decline in manufacturing and a rise in service sector employment. Because of deindustrialisation, the number of people employed in traditionally male industries like shipbuilding, heavy engineering, coal, and agriculture has dramatically reduced (Alcock et al 2003). While the rise of services has offset industrial decline, it has been accompanied by a growth in forms of flexible work. Many jobs in services involve 'non-standard' forms of employment including part-time working, temporary work, self employment, zero hours contracts, home working and weekend work (Felstead and Jewson, 1999; Heery and Salmon, 2000).

Although this more flexible labour market has brought certain advantages for some workers - including opportunities to engage in part-time work - it has also brought disadvantages (Coyle, 2005). Non-standard employment patterns are more likely to be characterised by poor terms and conditions, relatively few benefits such as company pensions, and economic insecurity (Evans, 2007). Moreover, precarious employment is associated with an increased risk of stress and ill health (Zeytinoglu et al 2005; Ostry and Spiegel 2004; Quinlan et al 2001). In other words, people in insecure employment face a higher risk of becoming sick than people in permanent jobs.

In this paper we argue that changes in sickness benefit provision in Britain over the past two decades have exacerbated the insecurities facing workers on the margins of the labour market who become sick. As a result, the inequality between permanent and temporary workers in the labour market is reflected in an equivalent duality when people become too sick to work. Drawing upon a representative survey of 1,843 new claimants of incapacity benefits, we explore the duality between permanent versus temporary workers who claim incapacity benefits. Section 1 briefly sets the scene and outlines the structure and argument of the paper. Section 2 discusses the changes that have taken place in sickness benefit provision since 1980. Section 3 describes the survey data and methods. Section 4 presents the results from the statistical analysis. Section 5 sets out conclusions.

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