

PRECARIOUS WORK:



- Its dangers to workers
- How we can fight it

If you are looking for a job these days, then you already know all about *precarious work*. It's almost impossible to find a "normal" job: with steady, full-time hours, a decent wage, and benefits. Instead, most jobs seem to be insecure, short-term, and poorly-paid. There aren't many jobs out there – and most of the available jobs are pretty lousy.

What is Precarious Work?

A precarious job is employment that offers compensation, hours, or security inferior to a "regular" job. Precarious work comes in many forms:

Agency work: Instead of working directly for the employer, you work for an employment agency (who creams several dollars per hour off of your wages!).

Temporary work: The job only lasts for a few days, weeks, or months. It's "just-in-time" labour: you work only as long as the boss needs you.

Contracting out: Instead of having regular employees, jobs are contracted out to suppliers.

Casual or 'on-call' work: You're called in only at the employer's request – so you never know ahead of time when you'll be working.

Seasonal work: You're employed only in particular seasons when business is booming.

Home-work: You do your job from your own home – fitting work into "free time" around domestic duties (and paying for the building and utilities yourself!).

Self-employment: Instead of putting you on the payroll, you're paid to complete a contract – and considered "self-employed" but still depend on the boss for all your work.

Part-Time: Many part-time jobs offer precarious conditions and many "part-timers" would prefer full-time work, with regular shifts.

All these forms of precarious work have one thing in common: Workers are forced to bear the risk of any downturn in the employer's business (because workers can be disposed of immediately when they're no longer needed). Yet even when they are working, workers can't plan their lives or support their families: their hours and schedules are undependable, and their pay and benefits are rock-bottom. Many of these jobs fail to pay normal employment benefits like health, life insurance, sick pay, or pensions.



Who's Precarious?

Researchers believe that less than two-thirds of employed workers still enjoy a “regular” job (full-time, steady work with benefits). The rest have been forced into precarious jobs of one form or another.

In Canada today, almost one in five employed workers is part-time; that’s up dramatically over the last two decades. One in six workers are “self-employed,” many working in very poor conditions. Many more Canadians work in temporary or contract positions.

Women have always been most subject to precarious work. Employers take advantage of women’s struggle to balance worklife and family duties. But the goal is not making work manageable for women. The goal is cheap labour.

Workers of colour and new Canadians have also been very vulnerable to precarious work.

But precarious work strategies are now creeping into traditional sectors of the economy (like manufacturing), and affecting more men, too. For example, top global companies like Toyota now use contract workers to make up 30% or more of their workforce.

What is a Good Job, Anyway?

When we fight against the spread of precarious work, we are fighting to defend the standards of a “good job.” Our goal is a job that offers adequate income, security, and stability, so that workers can support their families and enjoy a decent, full life.

Here are the key things we look for in a “good job”:

- Decent pay that allows an adequate, secure standard of living for workers and their families, and full participation in society.
- Regular, predictable, year-round hours. No excessive overtime.
- Access to full-time hours for those who want them.
- Health, insurance, and pension benefits (including for part-time workers).
- Excellent health and safety conditions and training; comfortable working conditions.
- Workplace protection (including against arbitrary punishment or dismissal) and elected representation.
- Equal, fair treatment at work; freedom from harassment or discrimination.
- Paid time off work for holidays and vacation; family care needs and personal days; and life-long education and training.
- Meaningful and productive work, that allows for personal development.

Naturally, decent wages top the list of these features of a “good job.” But keep in mind: you could earn an hourly wage that *seems* attractive, yet you could be hurt by inadequate or unreliable hours, or because you have to pay for benefits out of your own pocket. So better wages are crucial to the struggle for good jobs – but that struggle must also address hours, benefits, security, and representation.



A Global Fight:

Unions around the world are fighting precarious work. For example, the International Metalworkers Federation (IMF), to which the CAW belongs, has made the fight against precarious work its top priority for organizing, bargaining, and lobbying.

October 7 was the *World Day for Decent Work*, supported by the CAW and unions around the world.

See www.imfmetal.org for more information.



Fighting Precarious Work at the Bargaining Table

Union members have a special opportunity, and a responsibility, to fight precarious work through collective bargaining.

Some of the contract clauses we fight for include:

- Wages sufficient to adequately support workers and their families.
- Benefits for part-time workers (eg. full health care coverage).
- Clear rules regarding hours of work, including maximizing hours (scheduled by seniority), limits on overtime, minimum call-in periods (at least 4 hours), and minimum notice of schedule changes.
- Provisions to convert part-time or irregular jobs into permanent, full-time jobs. Limit the number or ratio of part-timers.
- Recognition clauses must not exclude temporary or contract workers.
- Restrictions on temporary or contract workers, the abuse of “probation” periods, and out-sourcing.
- Health and safety training to ensure that everyone (including new or temporary workers) is safe.
- Protect good jobs during economic downturns through EI work-sharing.

If you have other examples of contract provisions that can put limits on precarious work, please send them to the CAW Research Department at cawres@caw.ca so we can share them with others!

Why Precarious?

Precarious work has grown dramatically in recent years, for many reasons:

Intense competition:

Employers, fighting to survive in a dog-eat-dog economy, squeeze every last cent out of their labour costs.

Globalization:

To compete with low-cost imports, of goods and services employers try to drive down their own workers to ‘third world’ standards.

‘Flexibility’:

In a volatile economy, employers hesitate to take on permanent employees.

Unemployment and recession:

When labour markets are weak, and unemployed workers are especially desperate, precarious work becomes more common. Employers know that workers will take *any* job, no matter how precarious.

Government neglect:

Governments have largely accepted the logic that employers should be free to set employment conditions, with very little regulation or oversight.

To prevent this kind of excess competition from driving down working conditions and the quality of work life, governments must play a more active role (see p.4).



We Can Stop Precarious Work!

The relentless expansion of precarious work is undermining the bargaining power and the working conditions of *all* workers. That's why the CAW is making it a priority: in our bargaining, our political action, and our education. We must monitor the expansion of precarious work, understand its dangers, and find ways to defend the ideal of a "good job."

To win this fight, we will:

- Strengthen our work with laid-off CAW members, through our Action Centres and other forums.
- Build alliances with community partners and other unions to fight for good jobs.
- Push governments to close the loopholes that allow precarious workers to be exploited.
- Protest the economic race-to-the-bottom that is dragging down all workers – for example, with the rallies planned for the G20 meetings in Ontario in 2010.

Join the fightback!
Contact your local union,
or visit www.caw.ca for
more information.

(See 'Precarious Work'
under 'Campaigns')

Fighting Precarious Work in the Political Arena

We fight at the bargaining table to protect our members against precarious work, with language on job security, contract work, part-time work, hours, and benefits. But the quality of our jobs also reflects trends in broader economic and social conditions. That's why it's essential for CAW members to be fully active in the political arena, fighting for economic and social policies that lift up employment standards and limit precarious work, for the benefit of *all* workers.

Here are some of the demands we will put to governments at all levels, to stop this precarious "race to the bottom":

- **Reduce unemployment, and strengthen Employment Insurance and social assistance:** Precarious work is more common in tough economic times, when desperate workers will take whatever employers offer.
- **Rules on hours of work:** Government employment standards should set out basic rules allowing for more stability and predictability in working hours – including minimum call-in periods (4 hours or more), and minimum notice for changing work schedules.
- **Regulating employment agencies:** Agencies profit from the desperation of workers, creaming outrageous amounts off their hard-earned paycheques. On average, agency workers make 40% less than the permanent workers they work beside. Standards must be implemented to stop this exploitation, and ensure basic fairness in agency work (including stopping illegal deductions, access to paid holidays and vacations, and having freedom to apply for permanent jobs with the same employer).
- **Legally clarifying the "employer":** Ultimate responsibility for the fair treatment of workers (including payment of wages and benefits, health and safety protection, holiday pay, and other standards) must lie with the final employer as well as with any employment agency. Employers can't "outsource" their moral and legal responsibilities to temp agencies.
- **Minimum wages:** It's not just minimum wage workers who benefit from a higher minimum wage. By boosting the minimum wage, wages increase across many other job categories, too (where wages are set in relation to the legal minimum).
- **Unionization:** It's very challenging to organize precarious workers, due to their rapid turnover, their extreme vulnerability, and the role of agencies. But it can and must be done. Labour laws should be reformed to give precarious workers the same collective bargaining rights as other workers.
- **Support good jobs:** With measures to support manufacturing (like Buy Canadian policies), expand public services and public sector employment, and other economic strategies to expand the availability of higher-quality green-friendly work, we can expand the options available to Canadian workers and limit the growth of precarious work.