At a time when unemployment has reached record levels, with little prospect of falling below 10% anywhere in Europe in the foreseeable future, the idea of work-sharing is resurfacing in public debate. Last seriously aired in Britain in the 1970s, this idea has an enormous immediate appeal to common sense. Why don't we just knock 10% off the standard 40-hour week, the argument goes, then we'll have created another two and a half million-odd jobs (on UK figures) which can be redistributed to the two and a half million registered unemployed people. Problem solved.

Unfortunately, things are not quite as simple as this. At the most basic level, the argument assumes that there is a match between the location and skills of the unemployed and the vacancies, and that labour markets work in a 'blind' way, without prejudice or preconceptions on the part of either employers or workers. In reality, of course, it is rare for a steel worker from Rotherham to be re-employed as a building society counter-clerk in Guildford, a weaver from Bolton to be recruited as a computer programmer in the City of London, or a redundant miner from Durham to be taken on as a typist in Norwich. Yet this is what would have to happen if the jobs which have disappeared over the past fifteen years were to be matched with the areas of the economy where employment has expanded or remained static and jobs are thus available for sharing.

Part of the problem is that British industry has undergone a massive restructuring since the 1970s. Only 4 million now work in production industries, compared with 8 million in 1975 and the collapse of traditional manufacturing and extraction industries has been accompanied by huge shifts in the geographical distribution of employment. Superimpose onto this the fact that there are usually strong sexual and racial stereotypes about what sort of person is suitable for any given type of job and superimpose onto that the accumulated effects of years of neglect of
education and occupational training and you have a situation where any
temporary boom (like that of the mid-80s in the South-east) manifests itself
not so much as a national reduction in long-term unemployment but as a
local skill shortage.

It is possible to imagine a situation in which such problems have been
partly alleviated - for instance by a massive investment in training, strong
regional policies underwritten where necessary by public subsidies to
declining regions, the introduction of stringent equal opportunities policies
and so on. Indeed many such demands already figure on the manifestos of
social democratic parties across Europe. However even this would, not, in
my view, make work-sharing a feasible option.

The reason for this is that the restructuring of employment we have been
living through in the Thatcher years has not merely been the result of the
decline of some industries and the rise of others; it has involved a
fundamental reorganisation of all industries. The idea of the 'normal
worker' as a family breadwinner with a permanent contract of employment,
working 40 hours a week (perhaps with some overtime when times are
good) likely to stay in the same occupation for life is increasingly
anachronistic.

In Britain we now have a situation where one worker in eight is self-
employed. Of the remainder, one in thirteen is a temporary or casual
worker and one in three is part-time. Nearly half the workforce is female
and nearly half the 10 million women in employment work part-time, but
part-time working is by no means a totally female phenomenon. Out of
approximately 6 million part-time workers, 1.2 million are men.

Taken together, these figures mean that out of a total British workforce of
27 million, only 13 and a half million - barely half - are full-time permanent
employees whose jobs are capable of being 'shared' in the way which is
advocated by proponents of work-sharing. If we were to rely on these jobs to yield enough hours to employ the nearly 3 million who are unemployed or on government training schemes, the simple arithmetic tells us that the hours would have to be cut by considerably more than 10% - by about 22% to be precise.

It is tempting for socialists to blame the casualisation of employment on purely political factors: on the removal of trade union rights, the dismantling of labour protection legislation, the introduction of compulsory competitive tendering and other forms of privatisation, the variety of material and ideological sticks and carrots which have been used to encourage the 'enterprise culture'. To do so is, in my opinion, very dangerous, because it implies that what has been done by political means can be undone as a result of a change of government; that what has been deregulated can be re-regulated, and what has been privatised can be re-nationalised.

In fact it seems most unlikely that the Humpty Dumpty of full-time permanent employment will ever be put together again. In fact in a broad historical and international perspective it can hardly be said ever to have existed as more than a small blip in the 1950s and 1960s in a few industrialised countries whose economies were still cushioned by the spoils of empire (if we leave aside the former Soviet bloc economies). Facilitated by the introduction of new information technologies and the spread of multinational corporations, the new division of labour has both an organisational and a spatial dimension and is world-wide in its scope. Let us imagine that a company in San Francisco, London, Frankfurt or Tokyo decides to reorganise an internal accounting process so that the information formerly collected expensively by a skilled administrative officer is now processed electronically. What are the job implications of this? It may well be that no jobs actually disappear in this hypothetical company's head office which is increasing its market share by keeping its costs low through
these innovative strategies. However some manufacturing jobs might be created making the new equipment - perhaps in South Korea or Mexico. The new procedures for the routine keying in of information might involve the creation of low-skilled data entry jobs in a subcontracting company, perhaps in the Caribbean or the Philippines, with a telecommunications link to the head office. Alternatively, homeworkers might be used to carry out this work. If any jobs can be identified as disappearing as a result of this process they will probably be in competing companies with less successful strategies, quite possibly based in another country.

In such a context, any attempt at a fair redistribution of work would need to be both international in scope and capable of responding at speed to rapidly changing circumstances. One of the features of recent developments has been a proliferation of new contractual forms for what has become known as flexible working. Thus we have annual hours contracts, 'on-call' contracts, 'min-max' contracts, new forms of agency work, subcontracting, franchising and payment by results and a huge range of different part-time, fixed-term and temporary contracts. It is not unusual for a large supermarket to have over a hundred different shift patterns in operation in any given week.

It could be argued that work sharing is already with us, albeit introduced by the market, rather than as an act of social will. It has, however, failed to bring about any redistribution of wealth. On the contrary, in many cases it has contributed to the creation of a secondary pool of insecure, poorly-paid workers who face formidable difficulties in developing effective forms of organisation.

It is often assumed by trade unionists who started their careers in the boom years of the sixties that casual workers are, by definition, unorganisable. A cursory glance at the history of their own organisations should be enough to show that this is not the case. Dockers, construction workers, actors and
film technicians provide a few examples of workers who have in their different ways built up strong and - until recently - effective mechanisms for protecting their interests against the employers. More recently, women homeworkers in India and Mexico have shown that it is possible even for the most isolated workers to combine effectively from a community base.

However the history of trade unionism also gives us another lesson. There are periods when it is necessary to move beyond the narrow demands which can be negotiated with a particular employer or group of employers and to raise general political demands on behalf of the working class as a whole. In the early years of this century, for instance, trade unions were campaigning for such things as state pensions, maternity grants, unemployment benefits and health care.

An effective trade union response to casualisation must, it seems to me, look to similar broad political demands. Any attempt to develop individual responses to every new twist in the employers' strategies for flexibilising work seems doomed to failure. As fast as one loophole is closed, half a dozen more can be opened. Furthermore, such a strategy places worker organisations permanently on the defensive, responding, always several paces behind, to initiatives which have come from the employer and - because the response to deregulation is always a demand for regulation appearing to be on the side of bureaucracy, inefficiency, control and inflexibility - sitting targets for anyone wanting to brand them as outdated and irrelevant. Attempts to introduce blanket controls over specific forms of casualisation also run the risk of alienating some groups of workers. Groups like the self-employed, temporary workers, teleworkers or part-timers are not unitary categories but contain within them many diverse occupational groups whose interests are not identical. For instance a demand that all homeworkers should have the right to employee status might gain the support of home-based clothing workers or data entry clerks but would be fiercely opposed by many home-based journalists or computer
programmers whose freelance status actually gives them some bargaining power because they have scarce skills.

Rather than addressing the mechanisms of casualisation, perhaps a more productive strategy might be to address its negative effects. Chief among these are low pay and insecurity. In Britain, these are often exacerbated by the poor fit between the structure of the labour market (which treats people as atomised individuals) and that of the benefit system (which treats people as members of households). This has created a series of anomalies and poverty traps which make it extraordinarily difficult for low-paid or irregularly paid workers to subsist. Low paid workers whose partners are unemployed, or who are on Family Credit, for instance, find that every extra pound they earn is knocked off the household's benefit giro, and they sometimes end up worse off because of the loss of other benefits, such as free school meals, as their earned income increases. Casual or self-employed workers often find it so difficult to produce proof of earnings that they forego claiming housing benefit or other means-tested benefits to which they are entitled. Such problems are multiplying rapidly with the spread of casualisation. The number of recipients of Family Credit rose to 420,000 in 1992-93 from 355,000 the previous year. In 1976-77, only 70,000 were claiming its predecessor, Family Income Supplement.

A strategy designed to address these effects cannot be effective if its scope is limited only to the labour market. It must also take on the tax/benefit system. Its focus, in other words, should be not the redistribution of work to ensure indirectly that everyone has an acceptable subsistence income but the redistribution of wealth to provide this subsistence income directly.

A radical reform of the tax benefit system, as currently proposed by the Citizens Income Research Group, to provide every man, women and child in the country with a basic, unmeanstested minimum income as of right would go a long way towards eliminating the worst effects of casualisation. With
such a system in place, workers' bargaining power with their employers would be greatly increased. No-one need be forced by desperation to accept starvation wages and there would be a direct relationship between the number of hours worked and the income earned.

Proponents of the citizens income argue that it could be paid for partly by the abolition of tax allowances, partly by redirecting existing benefits, partly by administrative savings. Its introduction would benefit not only low-paid workers but also other groups in financial hardship such as pensioners, students, single parents on benefit, full-time carers and the chronically sick and disabled, so it might be possible to build broad political alliances in its support. It is clearly no panacea. Much thought would need to go into planning its introduction to ensure that certain groups (for instance those currently in receipt of housing benefit or mobility allowance) would not lose out as a result.

The demand for a citizens income has united some curious bedfellows. Not only does it have widespread support among Greens and Social Democrats; it is also supported by many right-wing libertarians who see it as a way of unfettering market forces and letting them rip without restraint. However there is no reason in principle why it could not be combined with protective measures. The idea is, it seems to me, too important for socialists to relinquish for these reasons. However much they deplore it, most now recognise that employment cannot effectively be controlled by any one state in the present conditions of the world economy, if we acknowledge that the labour market is a market then perhaps our energies are best directed not to rearranging the stalls but to sending our workers out into it with a bit of cash in their pockets.

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