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More people than ever in insecure work, claims TUC

Annie Makoff   7 Feb 2017   💬 0 comments

Growth of gig economy sees use of seasonal and casual contracts rise dramatically, but experts are divided on the implications

The number of UK workers engaged in 'insecure' work contracts has increased significantly over the past five years, according to new research by the TUC – though experts remain divided over exactly what the term means in practice.

Three million people are now in what the TUC describes as insecure work, without guaranteed hours or baseline employment rights, compared to 2.4 million in 2011 – a rise of 27 per cent. The TUC – which defines insecure work as seasonal, casual, temporary or agency work, as well as those on zero-hour contracts and low-paid self-employed workers – the increase has been driven primarily by traditional sectors such as education and social care, and those working in pubs and restaurants.

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Notable rises were seen in the hospitality sector, with waiters accounting for one fifth of the increase and the number in insecure work across the sector up 128 per cent, while education (+42 per cent) and social care (+133 per cent) accounted for more than a tenth.

TUC general secretary Frances O'Grady said: "Insecurity at work is becoming the new normal for too many workers. It's happening across new and old industries, with workers forced onto shady contracts whether they're Uber drivers, bar staff or teaching assistants."

The research comes as low-paid gig economy workers have been giving evidence to the [Commons work and pensions select committee inquiry into self-employment and the gig economy.](#) Frank Field, chairman of the committee, told MPs that thousands of low-paid gig economy workers were being "tricked and mistreated" by big businesses.

Peter Urwin, professor of applied economics at Westminster Business School and director of the Centre for Employment Research, warned that while insecure work made it easier for employers to "hire and fire", many workers still experienced "dissatisfaction".

However, Samantha Hurley, director of operations at APSCo, told *People Management* that the TUC statistics did not take into account the differentiation between unskilled, potentially vulnerable workers who may be forced to work on a self-employed basis, and professional contractors who chose to.

She said: "Independent reports suggest there has been a significant increase in contracting within the professional sector as well as in lower-paid sectors. Rather than assume this is bad news, it's important to differentiate between these two very different labour markets and continue to look at the self-employed status and the 'safety net' that might be put in place for those in the lowest-paid roles."

Ben Willmott, head of public policy, CIPD, added: "While we should be concerned about those in insecure work who would like to find permanent work – and it should be the focus of policymakers to support these individuals – it's not helpful to look at those in insecure work as one cohort. Research by the Resolution Foundation in 2014 found that 8 out of 10 people reported self-employment as their preference. And in the wider context, the proportion of people in permanent employment in the UK is just under 80 per cent, and that hasn't changed in the last 20 years."

The TUC research coincides with a survey by Indeed.co.uk, which revealed that the over-50s are 22 per cent more likely to search for Uber-style jobs than millennials. Mariano Mamertino, EMEA economist at Indeed, said: "The gig economy has expanded well beyond the archetypal image of the Uber driver or bicycle courier. It has proved especially popular with people who have lost their job and need to start earning quickly, and among those who have a job but want to earn additional income. Baby boomers who are now in or approaching retirement age have valuable skills and experience they can deploy in the workplace, and the desire to keep earning even if they don't want to work in a conventional office setting."

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