

## **CUPE BC Precarious Workers' Working Group**

### **Report to Convention – April 2017**

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The Precarious Workers' Working Group (PWWG) was appointed in 2016. The Group met in person on April 4, 2016, and again by conference call on August 30, 2016 and January 30, 2017. Another in person meeting is scheduled for May 2017.

Precarious work has been identified by CUPE BC members as an important and emerging issue for working people for several years. Previous incarnations of this group have dealt with the issue of defining precarious work, and this group has adopted their work.

#### **Definition**

Precarious work is paid employment characterized by:

- Increased employment insecurity
- Reduced work continuity
- Low or inferior levels of pay
- Reduced worker control over the conditions and pace of work
- Limited or no access to health and welfare benefits
- Increased employer pressure for workplace “flexibility” leading to more part-time and term work, and less full-time “regularized” work

Precarious workers are those relying on precarious work for their livelihood. These workers experience difficulty making the transition to more secure forms of employment. They also have limited access to legal and other protections in their workplaces and communities.

Various terms have been used to describe precarious work – low autonomy work, contingent labour and vulnerable labour are some examples. Each term may carry subtle differences in meaning. However, they all point in a similar direction and reflect overall growth in non-regular and insecure employment.

Current research suggests that 25 to 35 per cent of all jobs in Canada share one or more characteristics of precarious work. Groups disproportionately affected by the rise of precarious work include women, recent immigrants, racialized persons, visible ethnic communities, Aboriginal workers, LGBT persons, youth, persons with disabilities, and persons with uncertain legal status.

Conditions giving rise to an increase in precarious work include the following:

- Four decades of economic globalization and the push to implement international trade agreements that increase the power of employers
- Pressure to cut costs and make businesses more competitive
- The loss of regular full-time jobs in manufacturing, services, private industry and elsewhere
- Mounting assaults by employers on the working conditions and living standards of workers and on their unions
- Governments reducing commitments to workers, families and communities and abandoning active roles to implement protections safeguarding workers' rights

### **Magnitude of the Issue (at a glance)**

In Canada, more than 15 per cent of working people work in a temporary job. Their job security lasts until the end of the assignment and that's it. Since 1989 the share of the workforce working in temporary jobs has doubled.

While temporary employees are one part of this group, there are others. These would include people who are self employed because they cannot find a job, people involuntarily working part-time and people working multiple jobs, each with few if any benefits. The lack of benefits, such as extended health and pensions, is an important feature of precarious work.

While many precarious workers have no union protection, some of them are our own members. CUPE British Columbia carries out regular surveys of its 85,000 affiliated members. In one of those surveys nearly a quarter of people who had been members of the union for less than two years reported they were temporary employees.

More than a third of CUPE BC members describe themselves as working part-time. In 2012 nearly one in five reported they had another part-time or casual job.

### **Impacts of Precarious Work**

The increase in precarious employment impacts affected groups of workers greatly.

These include:

- Rising poverty
- Reduced social and economic mobility
- Reduced access to education, social and community-level services
- Reduced ability to protect legal and civil rights
- Negative health effects, including those related to stress and mental health
- Negative impacts on families and communities stemming from poverty, isolation, pressures on personal time and marginalization

### **What do precarious workers want?**

In 2010 CUPE's BC Region called together a group of CUPE members employed as casual workers to ask them about their issues. Most felt there were many more positives than negatives to union membership. Job security and higher pay were seen as the most important benefits followed by extended health, hours of work and input into scheduling. But for others, constantly changing scheduling and lack of benefits remained a problem.

### **Next Steps – Precarious Workers Survey**

While previous surveys were very limited and general in their questions, they did identify a substantial and ever growing problem. So in order to obtain a true sense of the scope and magnitude of this very important issue, CUPE BC created the PWWG. The Group was given the task of defining what constitutes precarious work, researching the issue within our bargaining units and helping the Division develop policy that deals with the needs of these workers.

To assist with this work, the Working Group launched a survey in the Fall of 2016. The survey is being used to gather important information regarding:

- The nature and extent of precarious work within bargaining units
- The experiences and struggles of precarious workers (at work and in their personal lives)
- Barriers to precarious workers attaining regularized status and hours
- Perceptions of what can be done to reduce precarious work
- Ideas on how to better engage and represent precarious workers in CUPE and in the labour movement generally

The PWWG set a target of enlisting ten locals representing the diversity of work within our Union (Municipal, K-12, Libraries, Post-Secondary, Health, etc), and the various regions in our province. At this point the survey is underway in three locals, with one having already reached the 50% target participation rate.

Participation in the survey will provide real benefits to those locals who invest the time and commitment needed to make the project a success. It is a great opportunity to communicate directly with precarious members. Participating Locals will receive a custom report of the survey findings on precarious work within their own bargaining unit(s). This information will be invaluable at the bargaining table for Locals who are looking to achieve improvements for members in more precarious employment. If your Local might be interested in participating in this project please contact CUPE Researcher Sister Sarah St. John at [ssjohn@cupe.ca](mailto:ssjohn@cupe.ca).

CUPE BC has supported the work of the Group by donating Fitbits which will be given randomly to members who have completed the survey and by providing assistance to Locals in reaching out to their precarious members.

**Conclusion**

The Working Group would like to thank Brother John Malcolmson, who retired from CUPE Research in 2016, for all of his contributions to the work of the Group.

The PWWG will be continuing the survey relative to precarious work in our Union and hope to provide a detailed report to convention next year.

**Respectfully submitted**

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