

Unfinished business

The new agenda
for the workplace

Patricia Hewitt

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**Patricia
Hewitt**

About the author

Patricia Hewitt MP is the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry. This pamphlet was published for the Labour Party's 2004 Conference. The views expressed remain the responsibility of Patricia Hewitt and do not necessarily represent the views of ippr.

About the sponsor

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The new agenda for the workplace

The first two terms of this Labour government have seen the lowest unemployment in the UK for a generation with nearly two million more people in work than in 1997. There is still much more to do for people at work and those achievements must now become the foundation for tackling three challenges in the workplace.

First, there is still more to do in extending work to particular groups and neighborhoods where unemployment rates remain high. Second, there is a need to improve the *quality* and not just the quantity of work and to respond to people's growing concerns about stress in the workplace and their desire for more control and choice about their work. Third, inequality at work must be reduced.

Values

The priority Labour has given to employment stems directly from its progressive values of equality, dignity and opportunity for all and the role that work can play in delivering these things. The counterpoint to success in cutting unemployment has been the constant criticism, from left and right alike, of Labour's supposed obsession with the 'work ethic'. The goal now must be not just full employment, but fulfilling employment: not only more jobs, but better jobs.

Ten years ago, the report of the Institute for Public Policy Research (ippr) Social Justice Commission argued that we could never create a more equal society if all that we offered unemployed people and their families was a bigger and better benefit cheque. For most of us, the opportunity of a job

is the best guarantee against poverty, the best route to social and economic inclusion, the best chance of personal dignity and fulfillment and most likely to provide the best role model for children. Denying all that to millions of people should never be acceptable however generous the benefits system.

Faced with 1.6 million people claiming unemployment benefits, hundreds of thousands more out of work and close to one in five children growing up in households with no adult in work, it is absolutely right for progressives to be 'obsessed' with getting people into work.

For the great majority of people, who are already in work, there is a whole new agenda: the quality of life and work, the impact of work itself on the rest of their lives and the growing strain of balancing work and family life. Labour's agenda for a third term needs to put right these misperceptions, to develop a programme for social change that builds upon the successes achieved in reducing unemployment.

Quality of life

With seventy per cent of people of working age in employment, Britain is one of only four countries in the EU15 to have achieved the employment goal set at the Lisbon European Summit in 2000.

Earnings have grown twice as fast since 1997 and working families are better off today than they were seven years ago. Despite highly-publicised decisions about 'off-shoring', and the shift of many manufacturing and some service jobs to cheaper locations, the majority of employees feel secure in their jobs. With unemployment at its lowest level for twenty-nine years, most people are confident that, even if they did lose their jobs, they would soon get another one.

However, compared with the early 1990s, the majority of employees report that they are working harder, are less satisfied with their jobs and

more stressed at work. Women, in particular, are struggling to balance work and family: not only young children but, increasingly, elderly relatives too.

In the early 1990s around a third of men – from the lowest to the highest skill levels – were satisfied with their hours of work, as were around half of women. By 2000, that had dropped to only twenty per cent of men and twenty-five per cent of women. Over the same period, the proportion of employees feeling strongly committed to their employers has fallen, presumably reflecting the feeling that their employers are not particularly committed to their workforce.¹ A HSE report (1999) estimated that work-related stress costs employers over £350 million per annum and society between £3.7 and £3.8 billion.² Since these calculations were done, new research has shown that the number of days lost due to stress has more than doubled.³

Dissatisfaction with work is, at least in part, the result of the revolution of rising expectations. As customers and clients, we demand more. Growing competition in the private sector is paralleled by the pressure for higher standards and better value for taxpayers' money in the public sector. Those demands are directly translated into new pressures on employees and producers.

People also have higher expectations of work itself. Increasingly, we want not just fair pay but satisfying work and opportunities for advancement. We want more choice and more control over our working hours and the pattern of our working lifetimes.

The most privileged and powerful in the labour market can write their own contracts. If one employer is not good enough, they can choose another or set up in business for themselves. If they want to take some time off work, or 'downshift' to a different career, they have the financial freedom to do so, as well as the confidence that they can return to higher earnings if they choose.

The aim must be to extend to the many the opportunities previously enjoyed only by the privileged few and a priority must be to extend

people's choice and opportunities at work as well as in the public services, radically improving people's quality of life.

Inequality at work

By bringing people into work, and making work pay, some progress has been made in tackling inequality in people's incomes and, in particular, to reduce the number of children growing up in poverty. Despite these changes, in too many respects inequality in working conditions is increasing. Work is important to our health and well-being, as well as to our incomes. For this reason, it is no exaggeration to say that the workplace is becoming the new frontier in the battle against inequality.

Reducing inequality at work is vital if we are to create a fairer society. Because our work determines the success of organisations and, ultimately, the economy as a whole, improving the quality of work and workplaces will also directly help to raise productivity and standards of living. Better jobs and better workplaces mean better and more profitable firms and better public services.

In most dimensions – pay, access to benefits, training, control over work and working hours, job satisfaction – inequality of class, gender and race is deeply entrenched. People who already have the least educational qualifications are least likely to get further training at work. Women in full-time employment on average earn eighty-two pence for every pound earned by a man. Likewise, women working part-time earn a startling forty pence less. Fewer than sixty per cent of minority ethnic adults of working age are in employment, compared with seventy-five per cent overall. At every level of skill, minority workers are more likely to be unemployed and less likely to be well-paid than their white counterparts.

Most marked of all is the huge gap in conditions between the best and the worst employers. At one extreme are the people with the skills – and

the good luck – to work for the best run organizations. Of those employers voted by their workforce as amongst the one hundred best firms to work for, people report not only good pay and pension provision, but high levels of job satisfaction: a powerful sense of working as part of a team, enjoying the company of colleagues, above all doing a worthwhile job for a worthwhile organisation.

Employers like these are not ‘soft’. They expect dedication and high performance from their workforce – including the managers. As well as providing training and development – usually to all their people – they are often at the forefront of social change, particularly when it comes to working hours. Instead of imposing long and rigid hours on their workforce, they often understand that by giving their people more choice and control over working hours, they achieve higher productivity and better results.

High performance organisations come in every size and in every part of the economy, private, public and voluntary sector alike. One of the things they have in common is a powerful sense of respect and partnership between management and workforce. The partnership may be formally organized with a recognized trade union or through a works council; or it may be much more informal.

As the CBI and TUC concluded in their report on productivity: ‘A central feature in the mix is the adoption of an inclusive management style that encourages workers at all levels of the organisation to contribute. Management leadership and employee involvement are complementary features of the high performance/high commitment model.’⁴

Not surprisingly, these organisations are usually amongst the most successful in their sector. Indeed, the *100 Best Companies to Work For*, published by the *Sunday Times* and co-sponsored by the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) have consistently outperformed the FTSE All-Share index.

Sadly, too many employers are not like these. Too many employees feel that their contribution is not particularly valued, their opinion doesn't really count. For too many people, work is a source of stress rather than satisfaction.

At the extreme, we have the utterly unacceptable conditions in which thousands of people still work. Neo-liberals, championing an unregulated labour market, believe that any job is worth having. For social democrats, the aim is to get people onto the employment ladder but also to get them onto the second and third rung into better, more rewarding employment.

Since the Labour Government signed the European Social Chapter seven years ago, there has been substantial re-regulation of the British workplace. This does include the national minimum wage as well as other measures to protect employees and strengthen their unions. Despite wild predictions that the minimum wage alone would put a million people out of work, fairer standards in the workplace have gone hand-in-hand with more people in work.

Despite these advances, problems remain. Although Britain's health and safety record overall is one of the best in Europe, over 29,000 employees are seriously injured or killed at work each year (nearly 30,000 if the self-employed are included.) Many of the million or so home-workers in Britain are denied holiday and sick pay, some working for as little as one pound an hour.⁵

People with few skills and poor English are particularly vulnerable to exploitation. Failed asylum-seekers and illegal migrants are powerless against unscrupulous employers. When people desperate to make a better life for themselves fall into the hands of people-smugglers and traffickers, the result is young women and children enslaved in prostitution, or Chinese cockle-pickers killed on the sands of Morecambe Bay.

This degradation at the bottom of our labour market is abhorrent. It also damages the prospects of millions of other people who, although not trapped in the worst conditions, nonetheless lack skills and bargaining power and risk seeing their own wages and working conditions undermined.

Decent, law-abiding businesses – the great majority – risk being damaged by unfair competition from those who break the rules. The unacceptable behaviour of a minority of employers damages the reputation of all businesses.

For all these reasons, the next term must be characterised by policies aimed at protecting the most vulnerable and cracking down on unscrupulous employers. The Gangmasters Act, promoted by the Jim Sheridan MP and the TGWU, needs to be backed-up by concerted enforcement action, bringing together enforcement staff across government, including in the immigration service, the trade unions and the police.

Full employment

We can never take the defeat of unemployment for granted. In a global economy, jobs that seem secure today may be threatened tomorrow by new competitors and new technology. UK citizens cannot be safeguarded by pretending that protectionist barriers can be put up or that technological change will stop. Instead, the British economy needs to continue to grow new jobs even faster than old jobs disappear and measures put in place to ensure all of our people have the skills and opportunity to get those jobs. That is the essential ‘flexibility’ the British economy needs, the flexibility for business to create and people to move to new jobs.

Economic stability has helped to deliver record employment levels and this must not be undermined. As standards are raised for people in work, the creation of must an ‘insider\outsider’ labour market must be avoided. In other words, strengthening the rights of people with a job at the expense of a rising number of people with no job at all – a pattern found in some other European countries – is not a pattern the UK should adopt.

The experience of recent years has shown that it is quite possible to combine rising employment with rising standards of employment protection. However, at every stage, employers (including small businesses)

unions and other groups have been engaged in social partnership dialogue, building consensus and taking other steps to create a favourable climate for business and job creation. This needs to continue.

However uncomfortable it is for some on the left to admit it, government cannot simply introduce whatever employment regulations it wants, and assume that job creation will be unaffected. Well-designed employment laws should not only protect individuals, they should also help employers improve their performance. There are costs as well as benefits, particularly in the short term, as employers adjust to new legal demands. For smaller firms in particular, the costs of learning about and implementing new regulations can be high. We are relying upon those same small firms to generate the great majority of new jobs in future years.

So a commitment to full employment must continue to influence how employment which is more fulfilling can be achieved as well as the speed with which new employment rights are introduced.

The New Deal and now Job Centre-plus, have created in Britain one of the most successful welfare reform programmes in the world. To build on that more needs to be done to help those groups where unemployment – or the dispiriting round of low-paid, casual jobs – is still too high.

In particular, far more is needed to close the employment gap between some ethnic minority groups and their white counterparts. Recent Labour Force Survey data reveals that Britain's ethnic minorities are still nearly twice (and for some groups, nearly *three* times) as likely to be unemployed compared to their white counterparts – even after taking into account factors such as age, education and place of residence. In addition, government research has shown that even when ethnic minorities are employed, their occupational attainments and earnings are lower than one would expect given their educational achievements.⁶

This inequality is utterly objectionable in principle. It is also economically damaging. In today's economy, human capital is the most important

resource any country, or company, has. Increasing the UK's productivity and competitiveness – and therefore people's living standards – means enabling everyone to fulfill their potential. When ethnic minority workers are projected to account for over half the growth in Britain's working-age population this decade, more has to be done to tackle prejudice and discrimination.

As part of a drive to tackle inequality within the UK labour market, Labour has committed itself to specific targets to narrow the gap between ethnic minority employment rates and the overall national rate; to raise the self-employment rates of under-represented ethnic minority groups relative to that of other groups, and to reduce the incidence of racial discrimination at work reported by ethnic minorities. Resources – such as the Phoenix Development Fund – have been committed to achieving more enterprise in disadvantaged communities. The Ethnic Minority Employment Task Force of Ministers will oversee the implementation of a cross-government strategy to raise ethnic minority employment.

However, this is not an agenda for government alone. Race equality is a challenge and aspiration for us all and we must work with businesses to remove the barriers to participation and achievements in the labour market for ethnic minority groups. Following on from the work of the recent Race Task Force, chaired by Peter Ellwood, the DTI set up a high-level working group with business intermediaries – such as the Confederation of British Industry (CBI), Race for Opportunity, the TUC, the Black Training and Enterprise Group and the Asian Business Federation – to help identify the most effective ways of tackling race discrimination in the private sector.

The new Commission for Equality and Human Rights (CEHR) will, for the first time, bring the many strands of equality together with human rights into one organisation to greatly strengthen our ability to promote equality and social cohesion.

The DTI is also reviewing maternity, paternity and flexible working legislation and this will examine issues surrounding women and men's ability to balance work and family life. In addition, the new Women and Work Commission – chaired by Margaret Prosser and reporting to the Prime Minister next year – will examine the other key factors shaping the gender pay gap: education and skills, entry into employment, occupational segregation, full-time and part-time work experience, progression in the workplace, as well as discrimination.

There are still many sick or disabled people who would like to work if only they had the opportunity. Job Centre-Plus can now offer personal support to those who can and want to work, focusing on what people can do, rather than what they can't. Initially in pilot areas, personal rehabilitation programmes, which should start as soon as possible after someone becomes ill, will be matched by significantly improved financial incentives, including a forty pounds per week 'Return to Work Credit', payable on top of tax credits, when someone makes the step into work.

From autumn 2004, the Disability Discrimination Act is being extended to cover smaller employers (under fifteen employees) ensuring that all organizations take account of the needs of a sick or disabled employee or job applicant. Often, a fairly small change to working conditions, a reduction in working hours, or investment in new technology will make it possible for someone to start, or continue, working who would otherwise not be able to work at all. Smaller organizations, in particular, need to get the help and advice needed to meet the Act's requirements. At the same time, those who are unable to work should receive a level of benefit that offers them dignity and security.

Fulfilling employment

What do people want from their work? Fair pay, of course, including provision for retirement. Non-financial aspects are also increasingly

important. People want to feel their work is valued and valuable; they want some control over their work, colleagues they get on with, an employer who respects them and whom they can respect in turn.

Traditionally, employees have turned to trade unions to improve their pay and working conditions. Today, about one in five employees – more in the public sector, fewer in private firms – belongs to a union. Not surprisingly, union-organised workplaces generally offer better pay and conditions than others in their sector and the rights Labour introduced to union recognition have already helped produce around a thousand new collective agreements. But the shift in jobs from manufacturing to services, and from larger to smaller organisations, is creating a tough challenge to unions to increase their membership, even when employment is increasing.

At the same time, relationships within the workplace – like those in wider society – are becoming markedly more individualised. The best employers have always been able to choose their employees. Increasingly, the best employees – those with the skills, attitudes and experience that employers most want – can also choose their employers. Recent surveys indicate, for instance, that graduates with good degrees take for granted that they will get a well-paid job: what they are looking for, however, is interesting work that will open up exciting opportunities, excellent training, and an employer of whom they can be proud. Workers who are in demand – not only graduates – are, increasingly, able to act as consumers in the workplace, picking and choosing amongst employers, leaving for a new job or for self-employment if the old one doesn't suit.

Although people are earning more than ever before, too many are not getting anything like the satisfaction they seek at work – and their quality of life is suffering as a result.

It will never be possible for each of us, as individuals, to exercise the power and choice in the workplace that the most fortunate employees can

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do today. Through, the combination of government action, help for individuals in improving their skills, support for good employers and by reinforcing collective strength through unions, working people can have more choice, control and satisfaction in their lives at work.

Better skills

Thousands of people have moved from unemployment into work since 1997. There is now a need to place more emphasis on helping people already in work to move into better work. Investment in basic skills must be the first priority, tackling the scandal of the seven million working-age adults who cannot read, write and add up properly. Building on the success of Employer Training Pilots, far more people need to be enabled to secure skills that directly benefit both themselves and their employers.

Personal advice

There is also a need to look at how to provide personal advice and support to people when they need it. Unemployed people can turn to the highly successful personal advisers offered through Job Centre-Plus. The best-off employees rely on mentors, coaches and private career consultants. The goal should be to make available to everyone what only some can enjoy today.

The LearnDirect helpline deals with six million queries every year from people interested in improving their skills. ACAS helps a million or so employees and employers annually with problems on employment rights. And the New Deal for Skills has already helped many people improve their basic skills.

A personal adviser service for those in work, starting with a helpline but ideally able to offer face-to-face services where most needed, would help

people with skills and careers advice, as well as employment rights, pay and in-work benefits. It would also help people to get the right ‘work–family’ solution: advising on working time options, perhaps supporting an individual employee who wants to change their working hours, helping to find childcare or eldercare services where those are needed. The need – and the potential – are huge.

Strong, modern trade unions could respond to this growing need, becoming in effect ‘career counsellors’ to working people. Government could also help, creating an Advancement Agency (as suggested by John Denham MP) or a Parents Employed service (as proposed by Harriet Harman, Margaret Hodge and myself). There are many possible providers of such a service, including Job Centre-Plus, the trade unions and private and social enterprises. The cost of such a service will need to be balanced against other priorities but piloting such a scheme would test out the effectiveness of different models.

Working time

Lack of control over working hours is one of the main reasons for dissatisfaction and stress at work. Incorporating the Social Chapter has given every employee a legal entitlement to at least four weeks’ paid annual holiday, the first time paid holidays have been provided in law, benefiting some two million people.

This entitlement should now be extended to include bank holidays, adding eight days’ paid holiday to the basic legal entitlement. Most employers already offer this benefit, but a new legal right would give around two million people more time for themselves and their families.

Important working time reforms have been introduced by Labour to help families with young children. Higher maternity pay, longer maternity leave, paid paternity leave and the right to request family-friendly

working hours are all making a real difference to British families. In the first year alone, nearly one million parents – an astonishing one in four of those eligible – asked to change their working hours. With around eighty per cent of requests granted in full, and a further ten per cent in part, this ranks alongside the minimum wage as a major advance for working families.

More is needed. If parents are to have a real choice about how they balance earning a living with bringing up children – and not merely a theoretical choice that only the rich can exercise in practice – then they need the support of government. Not government dictating how parents should lead their lives, but government extending choice.

The goal must be to give parents the practical choices they want, including the choice to look after their children themselves, either with one parent staying home full-time for some time or both working part-time (as a small, but growing minority are already doing). High quality child care, with a strong educational element, is extremely important for children's development – particularly children from disadvantaged backgrounds – and is often what parents themselves also want access to, to enable them to work. Most parents do not want full-time childcare, particularly when children are very young: they want, and should be offered, services flexible enough to meet different families' different needs.

In the past, Labour's focus on getting people into work has sometimes created the impression that in our eyes, the only good mother is one with a job and that the best childcare is provided outside the home. The challenge is to get away from the perception that we have to make a choice between helping mothers stay at home and driving them all to work. The real aim must be to support both mothers and fathers to get the choice of working hours and services they need.

Practical measures are needed to ensure that this will not threaten successes in reducing unemployment and creating thriving businesses and

there are a number of credible ideas coming out of both DTI consultations and the Labour Party's Big Conversation.

Firstly, doubling maternity pay from the present six months to twelve and making part or all of the second six months available to either father or mother. Secondly, early indications are that disappointingly few fathers are using the fortnight's paternity leave; so another suggestion is raising the level of payment from the current one-hundred pounds to ninety per cent of earnings (in line with mothers). More men need to take the lead. It is time we started asking men in senior positions, and not just women, how they combine a career with their family. More men at the top of business need to start taking the leave they are entitled to. The right to three months' unpaid parental leave – introduced five years ago, following a European directive – is little known or used and needs to be reviewed to make it more helpful to families.

Family responsibilities, of course, are not confined to children. As people live longer, more and more working-age adults are also helping to look after older relatives. Extending the right to request flexible working beyond parents to carers would dramatically increase the number of people benefiting, and encourage far more employers to look at how reorganizing working time could benefit their business as well as their employees.

As with other changes in this area, there is a need to bring together the CBI, TUC, small businesses and family organizations in a social partnership dialogue.

In line with the commitments already given to business, the law should not be changed on family-friendly working until 2006 following a review of their operation.

Working hours for Britain's full-time employees steadily increased between 1992 and 1997. Since then Labour has implemented the European Working Time Directive, launched the Work Life Balance

Campaign in 2000 and introduced the Flexible Working Laws in 2003. The increase has now halted and started to reverse.

Some now argue that further changes are needed to prevent individuals 'opting out' of the normal forty-eight-hour limit introduced in line with the European Working Time Directive. That would be the wrong approach. Most of those routinely working longer hours say that they would not want shorter hours if the result was lower earnings. A rigid limit would restrict their choice and damage their living standards. Because families often decide, when a child is born, that the father should work longer hours, while the mother reduces hers or stays home. Banning longer hours would undermine the aim of giving greater choice and support to parents. Some employers might respond to a limit by finding other ways of organising work more productively; others would struggle to cope with the extra burden, thus jeopardizing jobs.

The power of working people should be further strengthened to enable them to make a real choice about working hours. For instance, employers should be stopped from including the working time opt-out in the contract of employment and review any individual opt-out each year or allow it to be cancelled without any detriment to the individual. Averaging the forty-eight-hour week over a year would also give employers greater flexibility to organize working time to meet the needs of both employees and customers, without needing to rely on individual opt-outs. Building on our family-friendly measures, which have already proved so successful, is a far better way forward than a one-size-fits-all approach.

Conclusion

There is an argument that the work agenda of the future should look back to the past. Either by removing the hard fought protection for employees or by returning to the industrial relations and employment laws of the

1970s. There is another more forward looking agenda. This begins with asking how best to help working people – including the most vulnerable – to achieve their desires for more satisfying and better-paid work, for a better balance between work and family, for more control over their lives and a better quality of life and work.

The Labour Party's Policy Forum at Warwick in July 2004 pointed a way forward. The agreement reached at Warwick, between government, trade unions and constituencies, decisively rejected the old agenda and embraced the new.

Choice, diversity and personalised services need to be extended to the workplace. People must be given more power in their working lives, through better skills, fairer employment standards and through the collective strength of modern trade unions. This will both advance the cause of social justice and ensure that Britain remains competitive in an increasingly competitive global economy.

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In *Unfinished Business* Patricia Hewitt MP, Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, offers a practical vision for the twenty-first century workplace, addressing three key issues:

- extending work to groups and areas still suffering from high unemployment;
- improving the *quality*, not just the quantity of work, and responding to growing concerns about workplace stress;
- extending equality for ethnic minorities, women and the disabled, and increasing diversity.



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