

Part-time USA

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Jobless claims jumped 34,000 last week to a seasonally adjusted 386,000, according to the US Labor Department. The official US unemployment rate remained steady in June, at 8.2 percent, the 41st consecutive month it has hovered above 8 percent.

All signs point to a continued slowdown in the US economy, as long-term unemployment persists. Only 80,000 jobs were added to payrolls last month, fewer than economists had forecast and the third straight month of sub-100,000 job growth.

Even these bleak figures, however, paint a rosier picture than the reality. More than 8 million Americans are working part-time—not by choice, but because they cannot find full-time employment. The number of involuntary part-time workers has risen by more than half a million since March alone. These “underemployed” are nevertheless counted as working.

While 2 million more workers are employed in the US than in June 2002, there are 4 million more part-time workers today than there were a decade ago. And even with these 4 million part-timers counted, there are 4 million more people unemployed now than there were 10 years ago.

This means that there are 2 million fewer full-time workers today than in 2002—an unprecedented change. Over the course of the last decade there has been what can only be described as a seismic shift in the composition of the American workforce, as employers make a calculated move to bring on more workers on a part-time basis instead of hiring them full-time.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), in June 2012, 8,210,000 people were working only 1 to 34 hours a week due to “economic reasons”—which include “slack work or unfavorable business conditions, inability to find full-time work, or seasonal declines in demand.” Government, private sector, and agricultural workers are all included in this count.

In the three years since authorities trumpeted the end of the recession, part-time workers have become one of the mainstays of the tepid job growth in the so-called recovery, taking their places beside temporary and contract workers, auto and other workers whose wages have been halved, and workers toiling for longer hours for less pay.

In the wake of the economic crisis that erupted in 2008, corporations are sitting on a giant cash hoard worth trillions of dollars and are refusing to make any substantial investments in job creation. The Obama administration’s minimal stimulus package has long-since dried up, and state and local governments are shedding workers by the hundreds of thousands. When companies do hire, they are increasingly turning to part-time, temporary or contract

workers.

A recent article in the Wall Street Journal (“It’s Good Work if You Can Get It—and Especially if You Can Keep It”) points to the perks for employers hiring part-time workers. “For companies, hiring part-timers and contractors carries multiple benefits. Part-timers generally don’t receive health care or other benefits, making them less expensive, and they are usually easier to fire if business takes a turn for the worse.”

The Journal quotes Brett Good, senior district president with the staffing firm Robert Half International, who notes that hiring workers on a part-time or project-specific basis “gives companies more flexibility.” He adds, “It’s a ‘try before you buy,’ mentality.”

For the growing ranks of part-time workers, however, reduced working hours, lack of benefits and job insecurity are driving greater numbers into debt, foreclosure and social misery.

The youngest generation has been the hardest hit by the shift to part-time working. According to a recent report from the John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development at Rutgers University, among those who graduated from high school in 2009-2011 and did not go on to college, only 16 percent were employed full-time. Another 22 percent were working part-time, largely because they could not find full-time work.

While part-time workers tend to be younger than those working full-time, and are concentrated in industries such as retail, social services and food services, workers across all sectors of the economy and among all age groups are represented, according to the BLS. A disproportionate and growing number of the part-time employed are older workers, at or near retirement, who have lost their jobs and can only find part-time work.

Part-time workers are often forced to work two or more jobs. In July 2011, some 6.8 million people held multiple jobs—shuttling from one part-time, low-wage job to the next, with little time for their families or other obligations. Despite working multiple jobs, the majority of these workers still do not have medical or other benefits.

While the part-time workforce swells, companies are squeezing more production out of full-time workers—all while cutting costs. With the support of the unions and the backing of the White House, poverty wages are being imposed on wider layers of the American workforce. As a direct result of the 2009 auto bailout, for example, Chrysler was able to reduce its labor costs by 35 percent between 2006 and 2010.

According to figures released in June by the Federal Reserve, the real median wage of US workers fell by 7.7 percent between 2007 and 2010. The Obama administration’s vision of “insourcing” spells a further deterioration of the wages and working conditions of US workers as companies seek to impose auto industry-style wage slashing on wider sections of the working population.

The expansion of part-time work is a key component of the drive by big business and the government to impose these conditions. Part-time workers—many holding down two or more jobs, without benefits—are pitted against full-time workers who are working harder for less pay, and who also face the constant threat of unemployment.

The inability of the capitalist system and its political representatives in the two big-business parties to provide full-time, decent-paying jobs is an indictment of the profit system. The

right to a job—one of the most basic social rights—can only be fought for by rejecting the pro-capitalist program of both the Democrats and Republicans and building an independent political movement of the working class based on a socialist program.

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