

## **Low-Wage Temporary Employment: The Structural Demobilization of Human Agency in Labour Market Advancement**

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**M**Y INTEREST IN THE STRUCTURE OF TEMPORARY EMPLOYMENT BEGAN while observing two relatively low-wage temporary clerical workers (database entry positions) at one of my former jobs. I noticed the excessive workload the less-experienced worker (Anne) undertook to impress managers in the workplace. The two workers had different levels of seniority: Tracy had been in the department for two years and Anne for one year. Anne voluntarily took on more tasks for multiple projects, whereas Tracy assumed fewer tasks for fewer projects. As a result, Anne was invited to a staff retreat with the department's permanent employees while Tracy was excluded. The day following the retreat, Tracy complained about the lack of invitation and felt the managers acted disrespectfully by not inviting her despite her seniority. The hiring managers were not obligated to invite any temporary workers to the retreat, but may have seen it as an opportunity to enforce an illusive mentality of *reaping the fruits of your labour*. This system of exclusion within the context of temporary employment creates a new form of exploitation.

The above scenario is problematic in that it presents the illusion that temporary employees can advance into full-time permanent employment if they simply work hard enough. However, Parker (1994) found that though temporary clerical workers express a preference for full-time, year-round employment, the extent to which they successfully transition is significant-

ly overstated by the temporary help industry. The disparity between the expectations and realities of temporary workers' advancement opportunities forms the foundation for this paper: temporary workers are capable of asserting agency for advancement in the labour market; however, corporate restructuring places workers in precarious employment environments that limit flexibility and mobility into permanent employment.<sup>1</sup> I argue that the changing social structure of employment relations limits individual agency through occupational stigma, deskilling of labour, and dispersion of labour.

While debates exist over whether low-skilled temporary employment is "beneficial" or "detrimental" to the employee, my argument follows the latter perspective. Barley and Kunda (2004) have presented two divergent views on contingent employment: the *institutional perspective* and the *free agency perspective*. The institutional perspective argues that contingent labour is detrimental to the labour force overall because it threatens the job security and system of social welfare premised on full-time employment, and undermines the bargaining power of unions. The free agency perspective argues that individuals are free agents for whom contingency is a choice rather than a constraint: its flexibility encourages individuals to develop and market their skills to the highest bidder, allows them to make more money than permanent employees, and enhances flexibility and personal control. However, both perspectives fail to address the exploitation of low-skilled employees in the workplace.

The institutional perspective provides a module for understanding how the labour market may lose a generation of highly-skilled permanent employees while simultaneously forgoing security and welfare. However, this perspective does not apply to low-skilled temporary workers in the *peripheral sector* who are not valued like high-skilled workers and, therefore, do not qualify as a "loss" to the workforce. The free agency perspective is only relevant to workers with marketable skills. Since low-skilled workers are perceived as skills-deficient, they are more exploitable than the highly-valued high-skilled temporary employees. While some highly skilled temporary workers are in a favourable position, temporary jobs are dispropor-

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<sup>1</sup> Corporate restructuring describes the shift from the standard employment relationship (SER) to the temporary employment relationship (TER) (Parker, 1994; Vosko, 2000).

tionately lower wage jobs with little employment security, limited access to social, medical and dental benefits, vacations, pension and retirement benefits, and minimal chances of occupational advancement and limited opportunities to utilize existing skills (Bowles & MacPhail, 2007; Fuller & Vosko, 2008; Parker, 1994).

Vosko (2000), Smith (2001), and Parker (1994) have offered three alternatives to Barley and Kunda's (2004) argument, by critically approaching the question of temporary employment from the employees' perspectives. Vosko has argued that the temporary employment relationship is a highly precarious model of employment which reflects the *feminization of employment*.<sup>2</sup> Rather than delivering the promise of flexibility, temporary workers find themselves trapped in uncertain employment environments, unable to move beyond their temporary status. Smith has argued that corporate restructuring creates a divide between the contingent and the stable workforce. Contingent employees (i.e. temporary workers) experience insecurity, risk, and poverty, while "permanently" employed workers enjoy job security and living wages (Smith, 2001).

Parker's (1994) argument emphasized two aspects of the temporary employment relationship: *exploitation* and *deskilling* of temporary workers. Temporary employees can be exploited due to the lack of solidarity produced by their inability to unionize in assigned workplaces (Parker, 1994). In addition to varied schedules and daily working conditions, temporary workers also face relative isolation as they do not remain with the same employer for extended periods. Granted the temporary workforce's inability to organize and mobilize collective struggles,<sup>3</sup> managers can easily exploit workers in isolation. Secondly, while the temporary employment relationship offers corporate firms the flexibility to "hire" and "release" unskilled

2 Feminization of employment entails an increase in *static jobs* with limited potential for mobility as opposed to *progressive jobs* that encourage occupational mobility, and has been tied to women's mass entry into the labour force. Feminization of employment emphasizes the employers' desires for a more disposable labour force with lower fixed costs (see Vosko, 2000).

3 Likened to Marx and Engel's (2003) description of class struggle: they explained that the key component to the success of proletarians' struggle against the bourgeoisie is the "growing unity of the workers" (p. 132). They further explained that this achievement is improved by technological advancements in communications, bringing workers from different localities into contact with each other.

temporary workers, it also creates a deskilled workforce “that steadily witnesses the transference of traditional craft skills and scientific knowledge to new managerial positions and modern production technologies” (Parker, 1994, p. 150). Drawing upon Braverman’s (1974) theoretical framework,<sup>4</sup> <sup>5</sup> Parker (1994) has argued that this deskilling process renders contingent workers incapable of replacing workers with firm-specific skills (i.e. permanent employees). Like Vosko (2000) and Smith (2001), Parker has posited that the over-simplification of temporary worker positions leaves them vulnerable to impromptu replacement or disposal.

Using the theoretical frameworks of Vosko (2000), Smith (2001), and Parker (1994), I argue that although low-skilled temporary employees are able to exert human agency to increase their chances of transitioning into full-time employment, they are severely constrained by the structures of hierarchical exclusion. Such social structures include occupational stigma (e.g. implementing colour ID badges, thereby stratifying employment status), deskilling of labour, and dispersion of labour inhibiting the collective organization of workers.

## DEFINITIONS

Scholars have defined temporary employment differently depending on situation and context, and no single definition is widely accepted (Bowles & MacPhail, 2007; Fuller & Vosko, 2008; Parker, 1994). Bowles and MacPhail (2007) have used the umbrella term *casual work* to capture “various forms of work which result in workers experiencing greater economic insecurity, compared to the standard permanent full-time and full-year work” (p. 2). Parker (1994) used the term *contingent worker* and sub-classified different

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4 Although Braverman did not comment directly on temporary employment, his insights are far-reaching. He asserted, given the capitalistic control of the workplace, that there has been and continues to be a long-term tendency toward the mechanization, fragmentation and rationalization of work, setting the stage for workers selling their labour power to another. The result becomes deskilling of labour, workers surrendering their interest in the labour process, and alienation from the labour process (Braverman, 1974).

5 Many other scholars have also applied a Marxist framework to understand capitalist exploitation of corporate restructuring (Barley & Kunda, 2004; Parker, 1994; Vosko, 2000). They adopt the view that temporary employees are not treated as *human resources*, but as *commodities*.

forms of contingent workers as: day labourers, guest workers, service workers, temporary clerical workers, temporary industrial workers, part-time workers, involuntary part-time workers, and temporary workers. Fuller and Vosko (2008) have identified the need to treat *non-standard work* as a heterogeneous term rather than a “catch-all” phrase, because it does not elucidate variations between different types of non-standard work with relation to standard work. Consequently, Fuller and Vosko have adopted the Survey of Labour and Income Dynamics’ (SLID) sub-classification of temporary employment into four types: seasonal jobs, contract jobs, casual jobs, and work done through temporary help agencies. According to SLID (2003), a high proportion of contract workers held high-skilled jobs while the majority of seasonal workers were men, with relatively low education levels. Casual employees were mostly women and often worked part time, and temporary workers hired through employment agencies sometimes had high levels of education, but worked in generally lower-skilled occupations (SLID, 2003). While there are similarities across working definitions, I too adopt the SLID’s definition and sub-categorizations of temporary employment, as my discussion pertains to generated data obtained from the same source.

### **FINDINGS IN THE CANADIAN CONTEXT**

Temporary employment is gradually becoming a key element of corporate restructuring in the U.S. labour force. In the 1990s, between one-quarter and one-third of all employees were part of the contingent workforce—temporary workers increased by 175 percent, part-time workers grew by 21 percent, and subcontracted employees grew by 70 percent in the business services industries over this decade (Belous, as cited in Parker, 1994, p. 1-2). Parker (1994) has characterized contingent employment as a practice which “provid[es] U.S. businesses with greater flexibility and other benefits, but [also] implies several negative effects for workers, including lower wages and the loss of such fringe benefits as health care protection, vacations, pension, and retirement benefits” (p. 2). Scholars have often debated the extent to which temporary employment should be seen as a personal choice or involuntary condition caused by demand factors such

as globalization and neoliberal government policies (Bowles & MacPhail, 2007). The *demand* argument contends that corporate restructuring created employer demands for temporary employees, thus involuntarily imposing “flexibility” upon employees who lack alternatives. The *supply* argument contends that employees enter into temporary employment because they value the “flexibility” that it offers. However, accumulating evidence of temporary workers’ lower wages and lack of benefits strongly corroborates the demand argument both in the U.S. and Canada (Parker, 1994; Smith, 2001; Vosko, 2000).

In Canada, we find characteristics of insecurity, lack of benefits, and low wages in temporary employment. Corporate restructuring occurred throughout the 1970s and 1980s (Vosko, 2000). In 2000, temporary work comprised 15.3 percent of the entire Canadian Labour Force (see Table 1). The distribution of temporary work between males and females was relatively equal. Approximately 41 percent of temporary employees were employed as contract workers; 29 percent worked in seasonal jobs; 28 per-

Table 1. Sub-Classifications of Temporary Work

	Total	Male	Female
<b>Seasonal Job</b>	600,000	367,000	233,000
<b>Temporary, term, or contract job (non-seasonal)</b>	854,000	412,000	441,000
<b>Casual Job</b>	595,000	247,000	348,000
<b>Work done through a temporary help agency</b>	48,000	21,000	27,000
<b>Temporary work subtotal</b>	2,097,000	1,047,000	1,049,000
<b>Total</b>	13,721,000	7,105,000	6,166,000
<b>Percentage of temporary work in Canadian Labour Force</b>	15.3		

Note: Adapted from *Benefits by work and demographic variables (PE\_SLID-A2)*, Gender and Work Database, York University (2009).

cent worked in casual jobs; and 2 percent obtained work through temporary help agencies. Of the Canadian temporary employees, only 26 percent received additional medical/health insurance plans, compared to 74 percent of permanent employees (see Table 2). Twenty-two percent of temporary employees received additional dental benefits, compared to 69 percent of permanent employees (see Table 3).

Individuals in permanent employment are more likely to be *economically independent* than those in temporary employment. *Economic independ-*

## LOW-WAGE TEMPORARY EMPLOYMENT

Table 2. Medical Benefits by Forms of Employment

	Number of Workers with Medical Insurance	Total Number of Workers
<b>Full-time permanent</b>	7,046,000	9,480,000
<b>Part-time permanent</b>	443,000	1,537,000
<b>Full-time temporary</b>	350,000	1,368,000
<b>Part-time temporary</b>	89,000	781,000

Note: Adapted from *Benefits by work and demographic variables (PE SLID E-3)*, Gender and Work Database, York University (2009).

Table 3. Dental Benefits by Forms of Employment

	Number of Workers with Dental Insurance	Total Number of Workers
<b>Full-time permanent</b>	6,534,000	9,480,000
<b>Part-time permanent</b>	406,000	1,537,000
<b>Full-time temporary</b>	300,000	1,368,000
<b>Part-time temporary</b>	78,000	781,000

Note: Adapted from *Benefits by work and demographic variables (PE SLID E-3)*, Gender and Work Database, York University (2009).

Table 4. Average Earnings by Income Decile

	Male average annual earnings (\$)		Female average annual earnings (\$)	
	Full-time permanent	Full-time temporary	Full-time permanent	Full-time temporary
<b>Lowest Decile</b>	7,650	1,158	5,249	1,366
<b>Second Decile</b>	19,038	4,163	12,506	3,216
<b>Third Decile</b>	26,373	6,837	17,484	5,015
<b>Fourth Decile</b>	32,591	9,938	22,040	6,832
<b>Fifth Decile</b>	38,381	13,418	26,371	9,363
<b>Sixth Decile</b>	43,973	17,847	30,204	12,374
<b>Seventh Decile</b>	50,287	22,510	34,662	15,970
<b>Eighth Decile</b>	58,260	30,036	40,632	21,042
<b>Ninth Decile</b>	68,179	40,798	49,592	29,677
<b>Highest Decile</b>	112,852	74,678	74,433	43,595
<b>Total</b>	457,584	221,383	313,173	148,450

Note: Adapted from *Wages by work and demographic variables (PE SLID G-2)*, Gender and Work Database, York University (2009). Bolded numbers indicate earnings below LICO.

*ence* here refers to the ability to earn above the Low Income Cut-off Rate (LICO). According to Statistics Canada (2007), in 2000, the LICO for a single person living in an urban area with a population of 500,000 or more was \$15,362. As Table 4 indicates, roughly 45-55 percent of male full-time temporary employees and 55-65 percent of female full-time temporary employees fell below LICO.<sup>6</sup> Comparatively, roughly 5-15 percent of male

<sup>6</sup> Due to the abnormal distribution of average annual earnings, percentages are only best-guess approximations.

full-time permanent employees and 15-25 percent of female full-time permanent employees fell below LICO. Based on the data, full-time temporary employees were several times more likely to fall below the LICO than full-time permanent employees. Differences persisted even between low-wage permanent employees and low-wage temporary employees. The lowest earning male full-time permanent employees earned on average 6.6 times more than the lowest earning male full-time temporary employees. The lowest earning female full-time permanent employees earned, on average, 3.8 times more than their temporary counterparts. Looking at the highest decile, high earning male full-time permanent employees earned, on average, 1.5 times more than high earning male full-time temporary employees; high earning female full-time permanent employees earned, on average, 1.7 times more than high earning female full-time temporary employees. Although the wage gap decreased moving up the decile ladder, there was still a significant earning difference between full-time permanent employees and full-time temporary employees.

With the majority of Canadian full-time temporary employees earning annual salaries below LICO, coupled with a lack of medical and dental benefits, and questionable job security, temporary employment is less than ideal. Despite its flexibility, the dismal outcomes of temporary employment suggest that workers are unlikely to voluntarily pursue low-wage temporary positions as supply theorists argue. Rather, they are pressed into less desirable employment environments by employer demands. While quantitative data lays the foundation for my thesis, it does not explain the extent to which low-skilled full-time temporary workers are able to transition into full-time permanent employment, thus increasing their chances of becoming more economically independent, gaining medical and dental benefits as well as job security. Using qualitative data and case studies, I discuss how temporary workers' agency is severely limited by structures of colour stratification, deskilling of labour and dispersion of labour inhibiting the collective organization of workers.

**CREATING A STRUCTURE OF HIERARCHICAL EXCLUSION**

The source of stratification between permanent employees and temporary agency employees lies in disparate hiring processes. Barley and Kunda (2004) have explained that managers engaged highly-skilled contractors through the purchasing department and permanent employees through the human resource department. Permanent employees are perceived as “humans” worthy of respect, whereas temporary employees are reduced to “commodities” or “warm bodies” (Parker, 1994). I intentionally use the term *structure of hierarchical exclusion* to reflect permanent employees’ more privileged positions in relation to temporary employees of comparable job descriptions. When temporary employees lose their “human” qualities and assume “product” status, they are perceived as limited in skills and highly disposable. Negative perceptions of temporary workers’ value and abilities impede their transition into permanent employment.

In this structure of hierarchical exclusion, temporary employees are stigmatized because of their position within the company, the colour of their ID badges, and their less than ideal office space (Barley & Kunda, 2004; Goffman, 1963; Henson, 1996). These factors alienate temporary workers from permanent workers, creating a sense of isolation and indifference. The perception of low-skilled temporary employees as having a limited skill set further promotes their deskilling, limiting their chances of transitioning into permanent employment (Parker, 1994; Smith, 2001; Vosko, 2000). Finally, the dispersion of labour into different companies and organizations inhibits workers’ ability to collectively organize unions to advocate for better wages, medical and dental benefits, and other rights (Kalleberg, 2000; Parker, 1994; Vosko, 2000). Ultimately, because they are unable to organize, temporary employees cannot bargain for company investment in training and other tools that will facilitate their integration into the company as permanent employees.

## **Creating Stigma in the Workplace: Inherent Perceptions, Colour Badges and Office Space**

*By definition, of course, we believe the person with a stigma is not quite human. On this assumption we exercise varieties of discrimination, through which we effectively, if often unthinkingly, reduce his life chances. We construct a stigma-theory, an ideology to explain his inferiority and account for the danger he represents, sometimes rationalizing an animosity based on other differences, such as those of social class. (Goffman, 1963, p. 5)*

Occupation is the social identity/identifier of an individual. In most adult social gatherings, one often introduces himself or herself to another individual and asks, "What do you do?" The person who responds with a desired occupation is awarded with prestige, whereas the individual who responds with an undesired occupation is attached with stigma. In an example from Henson (1996), Lillian, a college educated low-wage and low-status worker, recalled social embarrassment when her parents commented, "Oh, you're doing temp work still, Lillian? Can't you get a job?" (p. 145). Another temporary worker discussed facing constant reminders of how embedded we are in a status society every time someone enquired about her occupation:

Talking to friends of mine that I went to college with about their jobs and 'Oh, they've just been promoted to this and this. Now what are you doing?' 'Well, I'm still temping now.' 'Oh. Well...' It's kind of feeling that they're moving so far with their career and I'm just kind of staying temping. (Henson, 1996, p. 146)

These are examples of occupational stigma eroding individual employees' self-esteem on a social-interactional level through personal conversations. However, stigma also has a covert effect in the workplace.

Stigma decreases the chances of temporary workers integrating into the workplace and feeling at ease with permanent co-workers. The enforcement of coloured ID badges is a covert strategy of enforcing the prestige and stigma statuses within a work environment. This environment is what Smith (2001) has called *colour hierarchy*: "the colour-coded system means that space, movement and activity are perpetually monitorable: it

is very easy to single out a person whose badge colour doesn't entitle them to be in the area or corridor in which they are located" (p. 93). Barley and Kunda (2004) made similar observations of colour badges enforcing a colour hierarchy. In their examples, they noted that permanent employees often "alter[ed] their behaviour on the basis of colour, especially when they did not know the contractor personally" (Barley & Kunda, 2004, p. 184). Respondents stated that if they saw another contractor (someone wearing differently coloured ID badges) while discussing their projects with permanent employees, they would alter their behaviour and topic of discussion so that they did not inadvertently disclose project information to contractors, thereby running the risk of compromising the project (Barley & Kunda, 2004). A colour hierarchy thus enforces a system where permanent employees must alter their behaviour in the face of highly skilled contractors who may inadvertently or intentionally leak highly contentious information. Similarly, permanent employees may alter their behaviour when they encounter low-skilled temporary employees, socially alienating temporary workers from the work environment. By assigning temporary workers different coloured badges from permanent workers, employers entrench a social and spatial hierarchy.

De-prioritizing the temporary employee's workspace is another covert strategy of reinforcing spatial alienation. Companies typically prioritize the needs of their permanent employees ahead of the needs of their temporary employees. Accordingly, the quality of one's workspace represents *status* in organizations (Barley & Kunda, 2004). In my personal observations at various workplaces, temporary workers (often clerical) are often assigned inferior spaces in an office and sometimes isolated from permanent employees of the same department. The further a temporary employee is physically isolated from colleagues and managers of the same department, the greater the spatial alienation. Systemic spatial alienation limits the workers' ability to develop useful social networks with permanent employees who could help facilitate a smoother transition into permanent employment.<sup>7</sup>

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7 Pierre Bourdieu (2001) postulated that social networks are integral to accumulating social capital, which provides individuals with memberships in a group, along with "the backing of the collectively-owned capital, a 'credential' that entitles them to credit in the various senses of the word" (p. 103).

Whether the assignment of colour badges and inferior workspaces is inadvertent or purposeful, it nonetheless perpetuates discrimination between temporary and permanent employees. These practices enforce the structure of hierarchical exclusion, in which permanent employees further alienate temporary employees from the work environment. According to Goffman's (1963) definition of stigma, 'normal' individuals exercise a variety of discriminations to reduce the life chances of the stigmatized other. In the context of the workplace, permanent employees discriminate against temporary employees in order to reinforce the hierarchical status structures within an organization.

Temporary employees' statuses are made clear to them: they are "just the temp." "Temporaries, like the occupants of lower-status roles prefaced with the qualifier 'just,' are identified exclusively (or as) their devalued occupational category" (Henson, 1996, p. 146). Temporary employees are conflated with their low occupational statuses and viewed as incapable of occupying other social statuses, qualifications, abilities and characters. Even the most skilled temporary employees cannot prove their worth if stigma causes their employer to refuse to entrust them with higher profile or challenging work.

Goffman (1963) has indicated that stigmatized individuals learn normative views through the socialization process—acquiring normative identity beliefs and later internalizing these qualities to become "normal." Likewise, in order to protect themselves emotionally, temporary employees devise strategies to deflect stigma by emulating the permanent employees' skills and abilities in order to impress their employers, taking on more work to demonstrate that they belong with the company and that they are more than "just the temps." In my opening example, Anne worked harder than Tracy and took on more tasks for more projects in order to impress the managers. By doing so, Anne successfully dissociated herself from the stigmatized group and was rewarded by being included in the social circle of permanent employees. Tracy, who made no special efforts to manage her stigmatized status as a temporary worker, continued to be excluded.

### Deskilling and the Creation of “Warm Bodies”

*We perform a function. We're not actually human beings. We're tools that perform functions. I think that many of us are tremendously underutilized. God knows I am, but I don't think that's unique to me as I talk to my colleagues [at the call centre]. We are all, in fact, capable of all kinds of stuff. But the system isn't designed to use that. The agency doesn't want it because [the customer] is given your name only so that you can perform a particular task. They have no idea you could do other things ... that's the nature of temping. (Vosko, 2000, p. 157)*

The structure of the nonstandard employment relationship creates the perception that temporary employees are low-skilled workers, thereby promoting their deskilling. As the epigraph indicates, temporary employees often possess more skills than those outlined by their job requirements. Inconducive to viewing temporary workers as human resources, the structure of the nonstandard employment relationship constrains employees to performing only highly specific tasks. The prevalent belief that employees possess a limited skill set reifies discrimination against temporary workers. One temporary clerical worker stated: “when you are sent out to a job, a lot of people look down on you. They think that temporaries are very unskilled or poor people” (Parker, 1994, p. 112). Other temporary workers reported concern over the lack of varied and interesting assignments (Parker, 1994; Vosko, 2000). Ultimately, the structure of the nonstandard relationship creates the perception of temporary agency employees as “warm bodies” (commodities) so low-skilled that they do not require human capital investment.

Negative perception of temporary employees as low-skilled “warm bodies” can discourage employers from investing in their training. Applying Becker’s (1975) Human Capital Theory to temporary employees in Belgium, Forrier and Sels (2003) contended that temporary employment leads to under-investment in human capital.<sup>8</sup> Becker assumed that investment in

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<sup>8</sup> Human capital refers to the knowledge, information, ideas, skills and health of individuals. Utilizing Becker’s (1964) human capital theory in the context of work, human capital gain is realized through schooling or on-the-job training.

training results from rational decision-making, where workers and employers would only willingly carry the costs of training if they expected greater returns. Since temporary employees have a higher exit rate, Forrier and Sels hypothesized that employers would be less inclined to fund programs for temporary employees whose contract periods are insufficient to recoup training expenses. They found that most temporary employees received only one type of training, while permanent employees participated in multiple forms of training. Temporary employees were also less likely to receive employer-funded training than were permanent employees. Of all temporary employees Forrier and Sels surveyed, 67.7 percent did not receive any financing for training from their employers. Permanent employees were found to be 60 percent less likely to finance their own training than were temporary employees. Employers' lack of investment in temporary employees' training does not enable temporary workers' upward mobility in the labour market. Limited in their capacity to increase skill sets via employer funded training, temporary workers have tremendous difficulties transitioning into permanent employment.

Immigrants to Canada face cultural and racial barriers to finding permanent employment. Upon arrival, immigrants are told by employers that they need *Canadian experience* (Vosko, 2000, p. 190). Consequently, immigrants turn to temporary employment as a means of gaining this experience. This is problematic for immigrants who are highly educated and highly skilled, as they must settle for low-skill, low-wage temporary employment to obtain "experience" that is without definition or tangible unit of measurement.

There was this one particular instance of this individual... from a Third World country... This guy had more degrees and doctorates than I've ever seen. This is one of the most highly educated people that I've ever seen and he was stacking shelves for us at \$7 an hour. He'd been in Canada about two or three years... (Vosko, 2000, p. 192)

Vosko (2000) has asserted that a racialized division of labour is created when over-qualified immigrants are "placed in [low-wage temporary] workplaces with no prospect for permanent work where immigrant workers dominate" (p. 192). Regardless of immigrants' education and experience in

their home countries, they are confined to work in temporary employment because they lack Canadian experience.

Not only do temporary workers receive a lack of training and experience arbitrary assessment of their “Canadianness,” their ability to integrate into permanent employment is further hindered by the structure of *labour queues* (Reskin & Roos, 1990). Smith (2001) has argued that working as a temporary worker does not necessarily equal deskilling and degradation. Smith examined the “degree of temporaries’ integration into the participative system” as an indicator of which temporary employees were given opportunities to make on-the-spot decisions and confer with one another to problem-solve (p. 100). During an interview with Smith, a CompTech manager stated that he wanted to know why production gets held up, but did not want the assemblers (temporary workers) to expect him to solve the glitches. Therefore, in addition to assembling units, assemblers had to calculate time tables and schedules for completing orders, handle parts shortages, remedy product or process defects, replenish inventories, and assign workers to particular jobs. Many respondents shared the view that temporary employment at CompTech constituted “getting your foot in the door” so that they could integrate into permanent employment (Smith, 2001).

Using Reskin and Roos’ (1990) queue theory, Smith (2001) has argued that temporary workers must wait for long periods of time in a queue for permanent positions to become available. Similarly, Waldinger (1996) argued that within an ethnic enclave, “growth pulls the topmost group up the totem pole, lower-ranking groups then seize the chance to move up the pecking order; in their wake, they leave behind vacancies at the bottom, which employers fill by recruiting workers from outside the economy—namely migrants” (p. 3). Although temporary employees at CompTech may have been able to train themselves on the job, making themselves more marketable to the company, their efforts were nonetheless subject to a labour queue. As permanent employees at the top of the corporate ladder leave their positions (e.g. through retirement), lower-ranking permanent employees within the company move up the ladder, and low-ranking temporary employees fill in the vacancies. However, low ranking permanent job

vacancies may take years to open up, which creates internal competition and division amongst temporary employees.

### **Dispersion of Labour: Inhibiting Collective Organization of Workers**

Temporary employees from the same temporary agencies, dispersed among different companies or different departments within the same company, lack the ability to organize collectively, thus making them more vulnerable to employer exploitation. Because temporary employees are scattered across different workplaces they face legal barriers to unionizing. They cannot easily lobby for better wages, medical and dental benefits, and other improvements in working conditions; nor can they bargain for company investment in skills training and other tools that would help them become more marketable for permanent positions. The dispersal of temporary employees is problematic because it reduces solidarity (Parker, 1994). Since they do not remain with the same employer over time, temporary workers are often subject to inconsistent work schedules, variable working conditions and workplace isolation. Temporary workers' employers are not accountable to a union, and so it is easier to exploit individual employees. Collective organizing would therefore be crucial to giving temporary workers a voice for rights advocacy in the workplace.

Examining immigrant integration in the United States and Canada, Bloemraad (2006) has argued that political organizations (in the context of work, unions) provide political benefits as they concentrate community resources, bring people together on a regular basis, and facilitate sustained collective action over time. Similarly, Putnam (1993) argued that voluntary associations generate trust because they create dense networks of repeated interaction. Furthermore, membership in voluntary associations produces civic communities in which members generate social capital in the forms of dense networks of civic engagement, norms of generalized reciprocity, and universal trust amongst members lacking intimate knowledge of each other (Putnam, 1993). In the employment context, temporary workers' inability to collectively organize through unions limits their ability to forge social ties with one another and to advocate better working conditions, wages, and continuing education.

Employment through temporary agencies results in *triangular employment relations*, which complicate the question of whom temporary employees can collectively bargain with. Since temporary employees are dispatched by temporary agencies (their employers of record) and work under the supervision of an on-site employer, it becomes difficult for unions to organize and identify the employer with whom they should bargain (Kalleberg, 2000). If several temporary employees wanted to bargain for more vacation time, the on-site employer is more likely to grant time-off when approached by a group rather than by an individual. Temporary agency workers are isolated from one another by their dispersal into different companies. Although temporary employees in different workplaces may share the same need, they lack the internal organization to collectively bargain for additional time-off. The structure of triangular employment relations inhibits temporary employees from advocating and bargaining for better working conditions.

Temporary employees are legally unable to form unions for collective bargaining because they do not fit under the provincial and federal definitions of what constitutes a *community of interest*. Consequently, collective bargaining must take place at the worksite. However, it is difficult for temporary workers to unionize because they work in multiple locations, have shorter job tenure than permanent employees, and belong to a wide array of occupational groupings (Vosko, 2000). Since temporary agency workers are dispersed into different companies, they are unable to organize collectivities for concerted bargaining (Vosko, 2000). The structure of dispersal undermines temporary employees' agency in collective organizing.

Collective organization and advocacy are important because they allow temporary employees to barter for better rights in the workplace. However, within the structure of triangular employment relations and spatial dispersion into different companies, temporary employees' capacity for advocacy is limited. In the absence of unions, temporary employees are unable to address the problems of deskilling by bargaining for more employer-funded training. Lack of collective bargaining power limits the prospect of temporary employees transitioning into permanent employment.

## CONCLUSION

In Canada, the majority of full-time temporary employees lack medical and dental benefits, and most fall below LICO. Temporary employees strive to achieve occupational mobility by securing permanent employment, but face structures that inhibit labour advancement. Social structures such as stigma, social and spatial alienation (coloured ID badges and inferior work spaces), overt discrimination, perceptions of temporary employees as low-skilled workers, lack of Canadian experience, the labour queue, triangular employment relations, and workplace dispersal work simultaneously to confine temporary employees to unfair working conditions. The advent of corporate restructuring shifted the pecking order by creating a new rung at the bottom of the occupational ladder. The hierarchy remains in place but the prestige of employers and permanent employees is enhanced by introducing low-wage temporary employees as the lowest status level. The key to bridging the hierarchy gap between temporary employees and permanent employees lies in reintegrating temporary employees into permanent employment.

The further we head into a technologically advanced workplace, the more easily disposable labour becomes, leading to deskilling of a permanent workers' duties and facilitating the expansion of temporary work. While Marx and Engels (2003) postulated that technological advancement provided new means for communication to unite workers from across nations in a class struggle, it has also become a means for replacing workers. Ironically, Braverman (1974), a Marxist, observed that the introduction of automated office systems required less and less need for clerical workers to exert discretion at the workplace, thereby deskilling clerical work and making their jobs insecure and vulnerable (to be disposed of). Braverman foresaw this capitalistic tendency to mechanize and fragment labour before corporate restructuring occurred, thereby alienating workers from the labour process. The inherent argument lies in Barley and Kunda's (2004), Parker's (1994), and Vosko's (2000) assertions that temporary employees are not treated as human resources, but as disposable commodities. As more work is replaced by technology, work becomes increasingly deskilled,

creating more room for precarious and unstable temporary employment in the years to come.

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