

Job insecurity, intensification of work damage British workers' health

Josie Armatrading
7 September 1999

A report commissioned by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, *Job Insecurity and Work Intensification*, gives an insight into the impact these factors are having on workers' health in Britain.

The research to determine the causes of occupational stress was undertaken by the Economic and Social Research Council's Centre for Business Research and the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences at the University of Cambridge. Over 300 men and women employed in a wide range of industries and occupations were interviewed.

The report states that job insecurity amongst professional workers has become more intense in the 1990s. More than 60 percent of employees claim that the pace of work and the effort they have to put into their jobs has increased over the past five years. Fear of redundancy is not the only aspect of job insecurity. Although many employees are not unduly worried about losing their jobs per se, they are extremely worried about the loss of valued job features, such as their status and opportunity for promotion.

The report concludes that job insecurity and work intensification are associated with poor general health and tense family relationships. Employees who enjoy high levels of supervisory support are healthier than others. But while supportive relationships between managers and employees ease the symptoms of the workplace stress, they do not remove the cause.

More than 40 percent of employees think that management can be trusted "only a little" or "not at all". Three quarters of those interviewed believe that "management and employees are not on the same side"—and this amongst high-grade professions.

The report concludes that the root cause of job insecurity and work intensification lies with the reduced staffing levels pursued by senior managers, in

response to market pressures from their competitors and dominant stakeholders.

When looking at the question of stress, a steady increase in many related diseases can be seen. A study by the American Academy of Family Physicians states that two-thirds of office visits to family doctors are prompted by stress-related symptoms.

An article on the *drkoop.com* medical web site entitled "Ways Stress Affects Individuals" explains: "The long-term effects of stress on one's health are quite significant. Stress is more than just a nuisance or something that occasionally makes people feel nervous or anxious. Very stressful events have been associated with a dramatically increased risk of a heart attack. For instance, in the days following an earthquake the incidence of heart attacks increases significantly, presumably because of the stress of the earthquake.

"Chronic, ongoing stress, even when it is not so dramatic, can affect one's health in very significant ways. One common example of this is the effect of a very stressful job. Several large studies have demonstrated that a stressful job more than doubles one's risk of a heart attack. A stressful job might lead to cigarette smoking, obesity and lack of exercise, all of which increase one's risk of a heart attack. It is also the stress itself that directly leads to an increased risk. Stress has been associated with the risk of many other diseases, ranging from the common cold, to chronic pain, to some types of cancer."

After stating that stress is not always a bad thing, the article goes on to warn, "Stress can increase performance, but only to a point. When one's stress exceeds a certain limit, additional stress will detract from performance." (http://www.drkoop.com/condition/s/stress/page_18_63.asp)

This confirms the conclusions drawn by the Rowntree

researchers: "In the short term, the drive to reduce costs and/or increase profits may well have increased 'efficiency'. But, in the long term, the forces currently driving British industry have worrying implications not just for individual employees and their families, but also for Britain's future growth rates and the health of its 'social environment'".

The survey says there is a "pressing need for policies aimed at regulating both the labour and capital markets in which individual employers operate." The results of the survey show, however, that rather than being a product of individual policy decisions on the part of this or that employer, the intensified exploitation that is causing increased health problems for workers is a product of the development of capitalist production itself.

Researchers investigated changes in levels of perceived job insecurity over the last three decades. The results show a gradual increase in job insecurity between 1966 and 1986, with the trend most pronounced for blue-collar workers during the late 1970s and early 1980s.

It was in this period that Britain's industrial base was largely destroyed under the impact of globalised production. Previously nationally protected industries such as steel and coal were decimated.

Of even more significance is the report's conclusion that even in the 1990s "many people continued to worry about their jobs even after the economy recovered".

Comparing the 1986 Social Change and Economic Life Initiative (SCELI) data and the 1997 Skill Survey, the researchers conclude "feelings of job insecurity in the late 1990s are higher than at any point in the post war years."

As the main source of profit increasingly shifts from production to stock market speculation, major corporations are embarking on massive downsizing and increased productivity for those workers who remain. The very processes that the Rowntree Foundation is warning about are enriching the corporate executives to the detriment of the lives of ordinary working people.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact