

Millions of workers in the US face a life of part-time, precarious employment

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The Bureau of Labor Statistics monthly job report for October 2017 released on November 3 revealed that a staggering 4.8 million American workers are stuck working in part-time, precarious positions when they would prefer full time work, referred to officially as “involuntary part-time workers.”

Involuntary part-time workers often must piece together two or more jobs just to make ends meet. Often, these jobs are low wage and do not offer benefits, or if they do, the benefits they offer are out of reach financially for many workers. This type of life leaves many workers mentally and physically exhausted. Rushing from one job to the next, often outside of normal hours, leaves little time for family life, leisure, education, or even the ability to look for a better job.

Data from the BLS report shows that the total number of workers in this category decreased by 1.1 million over the past year, to 3.4 percent. However, this is still a high number for an advanced country, and far higher than the pre-2008 crisis level of 2.9 percent. A report in the Chicago Tribune noted that the failure to return to pre-crisis levels “worries” some economists.

What mainly “worries” these economists is that the growing economic crisis in the US will further fuel opposition of masses of workers to the profit system based on the rule by the corporate oligarchs and the banks. Indeed, the reliance of the profit system on the labor of part-time, low-wage workers has created a situation in which, after ten years of so-called “economic recovery,” the US economy has not returned to its pre-2008 employment levels.

A report by Lonnie Golden, a senior research analyst on the Project for Middle Class Renewal at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, found that the trend of underemployment is more pronounced in

some Midwestern areas, with Illinois having nearly doubled in its number of underemployed since 2008. Golden also remarked that 40 percent of all workers nationally, including those who work full-time, are feeling starved for enough work to make ends meet due to declining wages and the rising cost of living.

Three other revealing aspects from the BLS report point to the reality of US economic decline. First, the labor force participation rate, which is the number of workers who are working or actively seeking a job aged 16 years and older, dropped 0.4 percent to 62.7 percent from September to October. This is a very low number for an advanced economy like the US, and significantly lower than pre-2008 labor force participation rate of about 66 percent.

Second, the number of long-term unemployed, those unemployed for 27 weeks or more, dropped from the previous month by just 0.7%, accounting for 24.8% of the total unemployed, compared to the pre-2008 level of about 18 percent. However, the number of discouraged workers, that is workers who have given up looking for work, rose by 25.5 percent from September, a rise that offers a different perspective on the official unemployment rate of 4.1 percent.

Although the official unemployment rate has reportedly fallen to a 17-year low, the reality is that the shrinking of the labor force, the growth of long-term unemployment and the fall in wages and high level of involuntary part-time employment, points to an overall employment crisis in the US.

In October, the US added a total of 261,000 jobs, higher than the 150,000 benchmark required for the US economy to be considered “expanding.” The report admits, however, that much of this “growth” came from the adding of jobs lost temporarily during the month of September after Hurricanes Harvey and Irma

that ripped through the states of Florida and Texas. Had the addition of these jobs not been counted in, real job growth numbers would likely show that the US economy is stagnant, or even shrinking.

The food and drinking places sector, which tends to rely more heavily on part-time and low-wage jobs, added a total of 89,000 jobs in the month of October, the most of any of the section of industry. But if one factors in the loss of approximately 98,000 jobs from this sector in September, mostly due to the hurricanes, it amounts to a net loss of 9,000 jobs.

Other industries that netted the highest amounts of job growth were business and professional services and manufacturing, with 50,000 and 24,000 jobs, respectively. Healthcare was third with 22,000 jobs, with the majority coming from the growth in low-wage ambulatory services that pay workers an average of \$9.80-\$16.57 per hour, according to the website [payscale.com](https://www.payscale.com).

In manufacturing, corporations and unions have worked together to implement second and third tiers of workers, most notably in the auto industry, where older, higher-paid workers are laid off or pushed into retirement and replaced with “Temporary Part-Time” (TPT) workers who sometimes start working at less than half the standard wage rate and must often work for years before being able to move into full-time positions. The brutal conditions of exploitation faced by these workers was highlighted by the apparent suicide of Jacoby Hennings, a 21-year-old TPT autoworker at the Ford Woodhaven stamping plant south of Detroit.

Overall US wages fell by about \$0.01 to an average of \$26.53 per hour. With the rising cost of healthcare, transportation, food, and housing, this amounts to a deep pay cut for the majority of workers in the US. Most of the jobs added in to the economy were in low-wage sectors, such as food service and hospitality, and the growth of low-wage jobs within previously higher-paying sectors, such as the manufacturing industry.

Despite the declarations by President Trump that the economy is “roaring,” and previous statements Obama who declared that the US economy was doing “great” after the recession, the figures presented by the BLS give a very different picture. The stock market has soared while millions of American workers remain stuck in low-wage, precarious jobs that offer little

chance for advancement.

Corporations rely on the growth of the precarious, part-time, “gig” economy to keep labor costs low in order to boost stock prices and to pay back their enormous debts to the banks and Wall Street.

Unions like the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) promote campaigns to raise the minimum wage to \$15 per hour as an answer to the crisis. These campaigns do not challenge the profit system, and are aimed at keeping mass opposition from the working class at bay. They have achieved little to nothing, as evidenced by the fact that wages are actually falling and underemployment remains high. Furthermore, a wage of \$15 per hour does not guarantee benefits or full-time employment, and is still far from an adequate amount and well below the average US wage rate. Such a raise would still allow corporations to remain highly profitable, and in reality would ensure that \$15 per hour becomes the new maximum wage.



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