Unions and Temporary Help Agency Employment in Canada

Proposal Submitted towards the Thematic Call for Papers, Interuniversity Research Centre on Globalization and Work

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Temporary help agency employment is an increasingly important labour market phenomenon in Canada. Table 1 illustrates that between the years 1993-2005 growth in temporary help industry revenues significantly surpassed the growth rate in total labour income in Canada. Assuming that industry revenues provide a stable proxy for the monetary value of underlying labour supplied by the industry, the share of total Canadian labour income performed under these arrangements grew by 128%.

Table 1 – Temporary Help Services Industry: Revenues in Proportion to Total Labour Income (billions)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Temporary Help Industry Revenues</th>
<th>Total Labour Income</th>
<th>Industry Revenue/Total Labour Income</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>$1.4 ²</td>
<td>$394.815</td>
<td>.354 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>$5.602 ²</td>
<td>$694.041</td>
<td>.807 %</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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While there is some existing literature documenting the rise of the temporary help industry and its contribution to precarity in the labour market generally (Vosko, 2000; Underhill, 2004), there is limited research assessing linkages between unionization and temporary help agency employment. Some prior studies examine the correlates of employer use of agency workers, including correlates of “unionization” (Houseman, 2001), or “legal factors” in general (Autor, 2003; Mitlacher, 2007). Vosko (2000) explains how bargaining unit determination rules in Canadian labour law impose barriers to unionization for agency workers. Other studies have discussed the difficulty of identifying the “true” employer in these tripartite arrangements (Trudeau, 2000), and the lack of unionization amongst agency workers, particularly at the level of the agency (Notebeart, 2006). Bartkiw (2009) argues that various aspects of Canadian law restrict agency workers’ access to unionization, and may simultaneously erode access of other, non-temporary workers as well.

Little research exists probing the extent of union agency and the role of union actors within the context of growth in agency labour. As key actors, union choices may be independently important determinants. The research in this paper employs qualitative methodology (interviews, reviews of union policy, records, and documents, etc.) to probe the range of strategic responses to temporary help agency employment, broadly defined. The work is partially guided by the interpretive framework of alternative union responses developed by Heery (2004) in his analysis of UK union responses to temporary agency work.³ This typology acknowledges the range of alternative strategies available to union actors in responding to the growth of temporary help agency work in their areas of jurisdiction. These may include direct organizing strategies, as well as substitute strategies aimed at either expansion of the union effect, or a protection against the undercutting effects of temporary help agency employment. In my study, I seek understanding of the effect on unions of growth in agency employment in their

¹ See Hamdani (1993).
² This amount is based on the statement published by Statistics Canada that in 2005, temporary help services accounted for 78% of the revenues for the “employment services industry”.
³ Heery (2004) identifies four broad categories of union responses: exclusion, replacement, engagement and regulation. Under exclusion, unions adopt strategies intended to drive agencies and agency workers from the labour market. Under replacement, unions accept the existence of agency workers, but seek to have agencies replaced with more acceptable labour market intermediaries. Engagement involves an embrace of both, and an attempt to represent agency workers through a “negotiated accommodation” with agencies. Finally, regulation describes the scenario where unions don’t seek to represent agency workers directly, but rather strive to regulate their terms and conditions in some manner to prevent undercutting of their core membership.
own “landscapes”, what sorts of organizational responses have been undertaken, and insights into causal relations around these responses. I also specifically try to probe the question of whether and to what extent these phenomena are determined by the manner in which temporary help agency employment is regulated by law, as opposed to other factors. Due to resource limitations, data gathering was focused on the province of Ontario. Interviews have been performed with representatives from ten major unions representing a broad range of occupations and industries, as well as from the Ontario Federation of Labour, and the Workers Action Centre (a non-profit organization in Toronto, Ontario actively involved in advocacy on behalf of agency workers).

In the context of certain recent “baby steps” in Canadian law reform in this area (Bartkiw, 2009), this research may prove useful to further policy analysis in this area. It may possibly also assist union actors in deliberation and strategy development around this phenomenon. Given its focus, I see this paper proposal as fitting well within the “Conference Theme number 2” listed in the Call for Proposals: “Assessing the response of collective actors to wider changes at work and in their societies and the impact of different representative systems on their ability to respond to those issues.”

References


