

Protection for temps could mean fewer jobs; OPSEU launches campaign to draw attention to problems of casual and part-time workforce

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Provincial legislation aimed at protecting temporary workers could mean fewer jobs for them, say some agencies that employ those people.

But the labour groups say the new legislation doesn't tackle the bigger problem, which is that temporary workers are being used for what should be full-time jobs.

The legislation introduced yesterday will prevent the workers hired by temp agencies from being charged fees for resumes or interviews, for example. It will also try to ensure those agencies don't make it difficult for companies to hire those workers from temp agencies on a full-time basis.

The province is also moving to ensure that temporary workers get public holiday pay based on the hours they work, have the same rights as regular workers to severance and know their rights under the Employment Standards Act.

Steve Jones, president of the Association of Canadian Search, Employment and Staffing Services said the intent is good but parts of the legislation could increase the cost of labour.

Jones said most temporary agencies already provide holiday pay to people who work for three months or more. But this will mean that even the people who are working the most transient jobs will be entitled to that pay.

He estimates that in some situations, it could increase the labour cost by as much as seven per cent.

"If a manufacturer needs 20 employees to work for 30 days to help them out, and this is the thin wedge to getting their machines working again . . . putting in a seven per cent increase in labour costs means they will probably not win the contract," he said.

That means fewer jobs for the most vulnerable workers, and it will also hurt many agencies, he added.

"Without some substantial improvements between now and royal assent, many staffing companies will no longer exist and those that do survive will have an increase in their costs," Jones said.

Chris Perkins, manager at Grand River Personnel Ltd. in Kitchener, said in many cases, the temporary work is "a foot in the door" to full-time jobs and his company tries to help people get good jobs.

But the agencies also have costs to cover and the margins on placing these workers are very slim, he added.

Helen Jowett, who runs McDonald-Green Personnel in Cambridge said she thinks good agencies will survive.

"We have some great clients who treat temporary employees the same way that they treat permanent employees and we like to be lined up with them," Jowett said. "

Labour Minister Peter Fonseca said that in passing this legislation, the government is trying to give temps the same rights enjoyed by other workers. "It think it's about fairness and protecting those workers."

But the people running the job action centres that help laid-off factory workers, say too many employers use temp agencies to fill the full-time jobs.

Sherry Landry, an employer outreach co-ordinator at the Focus Action Centre for Lear and Ledco workers in Kitchener, said employers might pay a temp agency \$14 an hour for each person, and the agency then pays the worker \$9 an hour, with no benefits.

Then, before the three-month probation is over, they let them go and fill the job with different temp workers in order to avoid the cost of benefits.

"They just keep rotating newly laid off workers into these jobs. They'll have them working for 59 days and then boot them out and have a whole other group of people to pick from," Landry said.

Frank Nemeth, formerly the co-ordinator at the now closed BF Goodrich Action Centre, said years after that plant shut down, "some people are still bouncing around, from job to job."

Wayne Samuelson, president of the Ontario Federation of Labour, said the problem isn't just with temporary help agencies. Even in government, there are people who work for years from one casual contract to the next, never building any seniority, he added.

At the Liquor Control Board of Ontario stores, about 60 per cent of the workers are in "casual" or part-time jobs where they get less pay, no benefits or pension plan, said Paula Soussi of the Ontario Public Service Employees Union, which is launching a campaign today to draw attention to the problems of that casual and part-time workforce.

She prefers to work on her own, teaching Spanish. "It is way better. I know I can make money without paying to work."