

The Future of Work

Rachel Mackintosh © 10 April 2016

When I was 10, I saw a terrifying programme on TV. I recall a scene outside a secondary school, kids milling around, in school uniform, jumpers, schoolbags, looking normal, waiting for their buses ... kids living their lives, friendships, fears, jealousies, exams, misunderstandings, understandings, learning, growing up.

The programme was about how these kids, unlike their parents -- who would have been in a scene pretty much the same at the same age -- could expect to have trouble finding work when they left school. It was predicting unemployment.

I lived in a house with two adults and four children. I knew that the work of the adults paid for the house, the food, the clothes ... the trips to the zoo. That's how life worked.

This TV programme was about how that life wouldn't work any longer.

I didn't sleep well that night.

Then Thatcher got elected. Then Reagan. Then Roger Douglas (David Lange and the rest of us who thought we were electing a Labour government missed something big.)

Reagan broke the air traffic controllers union and launched Star Wars.

Thatcher said there is no such thing as society and broke the miners.

Roger Douglas took the power we had given him and handed it over to those he trusted with it -- the apparently anonymous forces of global capital. Anonymous, but actually with names: Fay, Richwhite, Hawkins Some of the people attached to those names ended up in jail. Some of the things they did actually counted as fraud and cheating. But a lot of the wealth that they sucked up was not considered ill-gotten. A young man called John Key started to do rather well for himself.

When I was 23, I was on the dole. I had a university degree. For each job I applied for, I was in competition with 70-odd others. The jobs I was applying for were library assistant jobs - mostly shelving books. Sometimes, the jobs went to people who had smiled in the interview more than I had (that was the feedback I got in one rejection phone call). Sometimes, the jobs went to people with post-graduate degrees. These were not employment selection processes that make any sense -- you don't need to smile or have a post-graduate degree to shelve a book.

I was the vanguard of today's precariat -- those whose existence is made precarious by the inability to find secure, reliable, useful work that pays enough to live on. I was living the waking nightmare I had had at the age of 10. Global capital had no use for my skills. I felt a kind of dread that I would never be able to find paying work.

But I didn't have a student loan, and the dole paid enough to live on. Today's precariat have it considerably worse.

Then we had another change of Government. Enter Ruthanasia. Unemployment was still high. I left the country (with borrowed money), the government cut the dole to an unliveable rate and changed the law so that people, joined together in unions, could no longer negotiate to deliver wage growth to all working people. The people employing people cut pay overnight. The elites took more and more wealth. What they had begun under Douglas, Thatcher and Reagan, they continued under Ruth Richardson and her counterparts around the world. They took it not only from people, but also from the natural resources of the planet. For them, income was disconnected from work. There is no amount of work that could "earn" the kind of wealth that was taken by the elite. For the rest of us income was also

disconnected from work. Income was dependent not on the value of work, but on the ability of an individual or group to negotiate or beg from whoever was in economic control.

In the words of Helen Kelly, former President of the CTU, it was by design.

In the words of Australian band, the Midnight Oil: "the rich got richer; the poor got the picture."

The fear that I had experienced at the age of 10 about what was predicted became daily, living grind for people who had no work that was paid for, or not enough hours, or not enough pay.

So, considering that this talk is called "the future of work", you may have noticed quite a bit of the past, so far. Don't worry. I am about to get to the present. Maybe even the future.

The world we are in is a system that is producing the exact results it is designed to produce. It's by design.

I have recently attended part of the Labour Party's Future of Work conference at AUT.

Swedish academic Goran Roos talks about how the middle is disappearing out of the employment world. Employers are using technological advances to replace skilled work. They are cutting the jobs of machine operators, printers, accountants, fitters, mechanics, researchers and data processors. Very low-skilled work is increasing. Very high-skilled work is increasing. There is a growing demand for highly technical skills that are constantly changing with technological advances. There is an increasing demand for creative problem-solving skills and for interpersonal skills.

Tech business mentor Ruth McDavitt, from Wellington, echoes Roos's views. She says we need skills in science, technology, engineering and maths; but also we need teamwork, listening, problem-solving and lifelong learning.

Jan Owen, from the Foundation for Young Australians, says that what used to be called "soft skills" – interpersonal, teamwork, problem-solving – are becoming increasingly recognised as important in work. She argues that we should train young people in "soft skills" just as much as in literacy, numeracy and current technical skills.

Jane Bryson, from Victoria University points out that much of the conversation about the future of work is based on the "bleak assumption that people exist to be productive economic units".

Bryson has done research in New Zealand on what workers want and has found that, where work is concerned, people want five things:

- 1 - Security and safety
- 2 - Skill
- 3 - Relationships
- 4 - Recognition
- 5 - Autonomy

She expands on each of these elements.

Security and safety:

People want

- Work that is safe and healthy in the short and long term
- Workplaces free from harassment and discrimination
- Work where their job security is good

Regulation is required to ensure these things. That's what we have governments for. These wishes won't change.

Skill:

People want

- Work that lets them develop their skills and abilities
- Work where they receive the training necessary to do the job effectively
- Work that uses their skill, knowledge and experience
- Work that is interesting

Relationships:

People want

- Work where the people they work for treat them with respect
- Work where communication is good among the people with whom they work
- Work where the people they work with are friendly and helpful

Recognition:

People want

- Work that pays well
- Work that gives them a sense of accomplishment
- Work where they receive recognition for work done
- Work where their chances of career advancement are good

Autonomy:

People want

- Work that allows them to form and join civil organisations and solidarity groups, including unions
- Work that allows them freedom to do their job
- Work that allows them to participate in decision-making
- Work where they can choose their own schedule within established limits
- Work that allows them to balance their work and family and personal lives
- Work hours that let them participate in the community

What Roos, McDavitt and Owen see through a lens of economic productivity – the need for relationship skills – is not a million miles from what Bryson sees through the lens of what workers want.

So why the disconnect? Why is there not more decent work? Why do people feel so insecure?

Partly because of the aspect of the Future of Work conference that I haven't yet spoken about. Many of the speakers talk about the increasing "flexibility" in work. Flexibility sounds fine, but until we address the legacy of Thatcher, Reagan, Douglas and Richardson, flexibility is all one way. In practice, it means a person is required to be so flexible that they cannot plan any life outside work; it can mean their income is so "flexible" that they cannot pay rent or put food on the table, it can mean and that they cannot get a mortgage, cannot keep their kids in one school, cannot have a decent life. Like any other economic input, they must be available when required and only when required. Flexibility of labour works against most of the things Bryson's research shows that workers want. Flexibility of labour entrenches and perpetuates the disconnect between work and income. It works against people forming or joining unions. Flexibility can only exist if you commodify labour - consider it just one more economic input to a system designed for maximum productivity.

We have choices.

We can choose to create our society out of (in the words of Jane Bryson again) "a concern for human flourishing through achievement and well-being rather than economic utility."

Economist Shamubeel Eaqub was at the Future of Work conference. He called for us to "put public back in public policy." Invest in education and welfare. And I would add, education and welfare that gives people dignity and allows them to develop, individually and as part of a collective, rather than education that simply fills people with narrow skills, and welfare that keeps people hopeless and dependent.

With jobs so rapidly transforming and disappearing, we have an opportunity to decide what kind of work might be useful. One of the things workers want is work that gives them a sense of accomplishment. We can expand on this concern for individual accomplishment – and decide what we want to accomplish, collectively.

We can design and do work that will get us there.

Author and poet, Ursula Le Guin, in her novel, *The Dispossessed*, says, "It is useless work that darkens the heart."

Let us do useful work.

How?

The labour movement argues for what we call "a just transition". The notion of a just transition was developed with environmental policies in mind – with the aim of avoiding the chaos and suffering of economic upheaval – so that a transition from dirty to clean industry is managed in a just way.

Just transition is equally applicable to the upheavals brought about by globalisation, commodity price collapse and technological change. It is equally applicable to the transition of a society that is choosing to accomplish new things.

The features of a just transition are designed to respect people and create decent work in a changing world:

1. Investments in new, sustainable technologies, involving consultation with everyone affected, and respecting human and labour rights
2. Social dialogue between unions, employers and communities to establish what each community can and should accomplish
3. Local economic diversification plans that support decent work and provide community stability in the transition
4. Training and skills development to facilitate the work of achieving whatever goals the community has set
5. Social protection – welfare – along with active labour market policies

These things are all a matter of public and political will.

The New Zealand Labour Party, in its Future of Work commission and conference, has prompted a conversation. The conversation includes those who see increasing labour flexibility as inevitable. It also includes those who see decent work and decent incomes as vital to the future of work. The conversation is not finished.

When we put the public into public policy, when we act for the good of all people and the environment we exist in, when we choose to accomplish worthwhile goals, we can create decent work.

I began this talk on the future by talking about my past. I will finish by going back even further into the past.

Because decent work gives us a sense of accomplishment and a good income, I close with these words from the song inspired by the 1912 Lawrence Textile Strike in the US:

"Hearts starve as well as bodies.
Give us bread but give us roses."

