

research snapshot

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Racialized Groups Are Harshly Impacted by More Flexible Work Standards

What is this research about?

There have been some employment and labour law reforms that have sought to improve employment standards for workers in precarious jobs. At the same time, the goal of keeping a “free” market has also jeopardized the rights of workers. Employment standards often define the minimum targets that employers are required by law to meet. They usually impact the most vulnerable workers, including those who are racialized- that is, judged through socially constructed hierarchies based on race. Today, employment standards reforms have increased the exposure of workers to market forces. As a result, workers see greater economic insecurity, while employers have more flexibility in setting workplace standards and conditions.

What did the researcher do?

The researcher looked at neoliberalism as an economic and social policy that supports the growth of the free market. Neoliberalism has been highly influential in shaping reforms for employment standards and employee rights. He used the province of Ontario and its Employment Standards Act (ESA) as a case study. The researcher looked at the impact of the ESA and

What you need to know:

Neoliberal reforms to employment standards have allowed for more flexible terms of work. These changes have a severe impact on racialized groups, making work and financial security unstable.

Bill 147, which:

- Increased the number of weekly maximum hours to 60.
- Removed employer expectations to apply for permits for excess hours.
- Relied on employee “consent” for overtime hours.

The researcher also noted the different ways in which these reforms have sustained patterns of marginalization for racialized groups and the employment conditions they may experience.

What did the researcher find?

Bill 147 and a nine-year minimum wage freeze held the potential to widen the income gap between high and low income earners. This

is because the income earnings of racialized groups were only 85% of the average amount that the rest of Canadians earned. The ESA does not cover all forms of employment, allowing for more “flexible” terms for temporary, contract-based or domestic work. The consequences of these exclusions are felt most by racialized groups, especially for migrants working as live-in care givers, agricultural and garment workers. Finally, the ESA reduced the time allotted for workers to file a complaint for standards violations to 6 months. The researcher found that this made racialized groups more vulnerable due to language barriers, immigration status, and economy insecurity. For example, a worker might not feel safe to report a workplace violation if it meant the risk of being deported.

Overall, the researcher found that neoliberalism has re-shaped the labour market such that employers gained greater power over employees. Reforms like those seen in Ontario’s ESA have supported this transformation. Also, the researcher found that there is now more pressure on the individual worker to report employment standards violations, rather than proactive efforts by government inspectors to enforce minimum employment standards.

How can you use this research?

This research may be used by policymakers in the fields of labour relations and social services. It sheds insight on how current employment standards affect people who are the most vulnerable, as well as their limited application to many jobs in the labour market today. It may also offer ideas on how to improve conditions of work experienced by those in precarious jobs.

About the Researcher

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