



## GOOD WORK

An Amicus Agenda for Better Jobs



# Amicus Agenda for Better Jobs - Summary

With employment in the UK at record levels there is a need to consider the quality of work experienced by those in employment. Work is likely to become more central to people's lives and 'good work' needs to be at the centre of the policy and negotiating agendas. The Amicus Agenda for Better Jobs presents five key elements that need to be considered in the pursuit of improving the quality of people's working lives. They are:

- A safe and healthy workplace
- Control over the working environment
- Secure and interesting work (including support for skills and learning)
- Fairness and dignity at work
- A trade union voice

This is an aspirational agenda for workers, employers and government.



## Introduction



Derek Simpson,  
Amicus General Secretary

Work is a crucial part of people's lives. Not just as a means of economic survival, but as part of their overall well-being.

With record levels of employment in the UK, we need to look at what happens when we get to work. What is the quality of working life for those in employment?

This is important for two reasons. Firstly, dissatisfaction at work affects people's health and well-being. Secondly, there is a link between work, well-being and organisational performance. Thus, there is also an economic case for higher quality employment.

Amicus strives to help meet our members' aspirations for fulfilling jobs that optimise their talents and potential, lead to high-performing organisations and ensure national economic success.

The Amicus Agenda for Better Jobs identifies the key issues that need to be addressed in meeting those aspirations.

*Derek Simpson*

# Why work is important

Work matters. And the importance of work is not just about having a job.

Dissatisfaction with the work we do affects people's well-being. Furthermore, it affects productivity through higher rates of absence and turnover and low motivation in the workplace.

With employment in the UK at an all-time high there is a need to consider the quality of work experienced by those in employment, looking at what happens when we get to work. There has already been some debate around improving the quality of work and this is welcome <sup>1</sup>.

The 'Warwick Agreement' between the Labour Party and affiliated trade unions (in which Amicus played a leading role) includes a commitment to developing 'good employment standards'. But at the time of writing government progress on this has been slow. There is now a need to move towards a clearer focus to improve the quality of working life in practice.

Fulfilling employment has a major part to play in the quality of our lives, the effectiveness of our organisations and the economic performance of the nation. Work is likely to become more central to people's lives. And 'good work' needs to be at the centre of the policy and negotiating agendas.

## Job Satisfaction: a cause for concern

Most people are satisfied with their job. However, behind this general finding, there is cause for concern. Significant numbers of workers are dissatisfied with their jobs and the problem seems to be getting worse.

Evidence from the Working in Britain survey suggests that levels of job satisfaction are declining with workers less satisfied with work today than ten years ago <sup>2</sup>. Employees' satisfaction has declined in every facet of their job, especially in the areas of pay, prospects and training.

Findings from the most recent Workplace Employment Relations Survey (WERS 2004) show employee job satisfaction varies markedly across a number of factors, with it lowest in respect of 'involvement in decision making' and 'pay' <sup>3</sup>. Satisfaction levels in these areas has remained unchanged since 1998.

WERS also examines workers' job related well-being. Here again, a general picture of satisfaction contains some stark areas of concern. One in five employees (19%) reports that their job makes them feel tense most or all of the time and 47% say that their job makes them feel worried some, most or all of the time.

Some clear themes stand out when considering workers' dissatisfaction with their jobs. Firstly, they feel that they have less control over their working experience. Secondly, workers say that they are having to work harder. Finally, large numbers of workers also feel insecure in their jobs.

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, ACAS, *The Model Workplace* (ACAS, 2005); David Coats, *An Agenda for Work* (The Work Foundation, 2005); Patricia Hewitt, *Unfinished Business – the new agenda for the workplace* (IPPR, 2004); Nick Burkitt (ed), *A Life's Work : achieving full and fulfilling employment* (IPPR, 2001)

<sup>2</sup> Robert Taylor, *Britain's World of Work – Myths and Realities* (ESRC, 2002)

<sup>3</sup> Barbara Kersley, et al., *Inside the Workplace : First Findings from the 2004 Workplace Employment Relations Survey* (DTI, 2005)

<sup>4</sup> Michael Moynagh and Richard Worsley, *Working in the Twenty-First Century* (ESRC, Future of Work Programme and The Tomorrow Project, 2005)

# How has work changed?

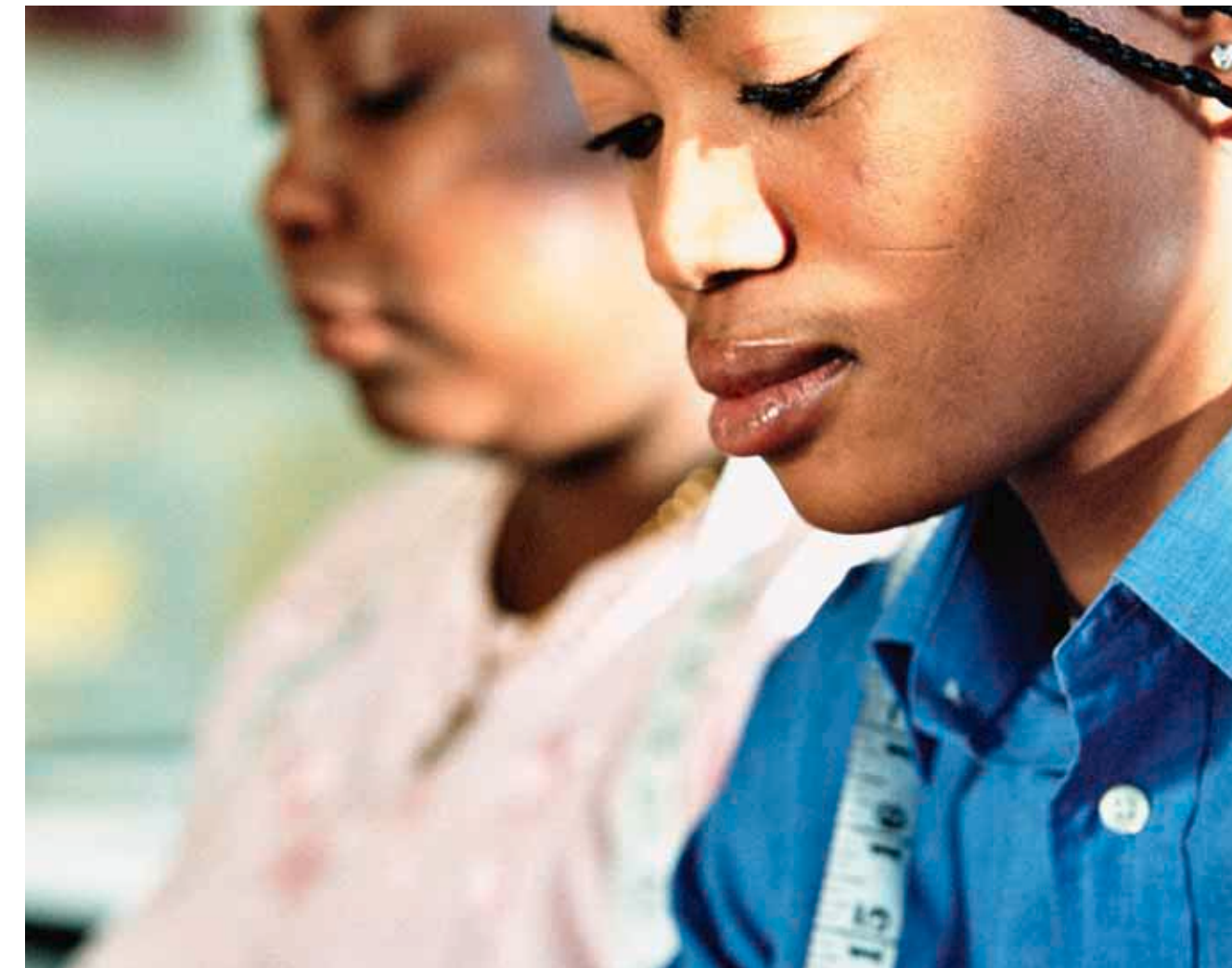
Let us consider what has happened - and is likely to happen - in the labour market. What types of jobs are we going to have to improve?

Drawing on research from the Future of Work programme, *Working in the Twenty-First Century* describes the development of an 'hour-glass' economy, with more 'good' (higher skill, higher wage) jobs, more 'bad' (lower skill, lower wage) jobs and a contraction of 'middling' jobs <sup>4</sup>.

Managers, professionals and hi-tech workers in business services and finance have swelled the number of well-paid jobs. At the lower-paid end, employment has been concentrated in retail distribution, hotels and catering, and healthcare. Many of the jobs 'hollowed out' in between have been in manufacturing – mainly process operatives and machine operators.

The report suggests that this polarisation is likely to increase with globalisation and international competition. How far Britain moves up the value chain will influence whether the drift in intermediate jobs will be towards higher-paid, higher-value work or to the bottom end of the market.

But this is not just about income. Even 'good' jobs can suffer from a bad working environment. Those at the top are not immune from the pressures of the modern world.



# Organisational change

There is no question that organisations are subject to increasing pressure through intensified competition, developing technology and globalisation. How organisations respond to these has very real implications not just for the health and welfare of their employees, but for their own organisational success.

Trying to squeeze more from workers through greater command and control is not the way forward. It makes for sick and less productive workers and sick and less productive organisations <sup>5</sup>. Rather, good work organisation and job design, along with effective channels for employee engagement, such as trade unions, are the best way to cope with the forces of modern economic life facing the workplace.

## What is 'good work'?

It doesn't take long to identify things that might make for a 'bad job': unsafe working conditions, poverty pay, bullying and harassment, no training, lack of respect, monotonous and repetitive work to name but a few.

There is also little disagreement about the effects of 'bad jobs' on people's health. Workers in 'bad jobs' are more likely to suffer from mental and physical illness. Evidence also shows the importance of work organisation and job design on workers' health <sup>6</sup>.

From here it is not too difficult to start to map a vision of 'good work'. One of the most comprehensive attempts at this presents the elements that constitute a 'good' labour market and challenges policy makers to articulate their account of 'good work' <sup>7</sup>.

Having a job is more important for people's well-being than the kind of job that it is <sup>8</sup>. Those without work are more likely to suffer from physical and mental health problems and be less satisfied with all aspects of life. Unemployment is also bad for the economy and fosters social unrest. Sustainable full employment must be the priority. It is the starting point from which everything else follows.

'Good work' is rewarding, fulfilling and in balance with the rest of our lives. For employees it can improve overall well-being and performance. For employers it can increase productivity and attract and retain talent. For government it has a vital role to play in key policy agendas such as 'high performance workplaces' and 'health, work and well-being'.

The Amicus Agenda for Better Jobs presents five key elements that need to be considered in the pursuit of improving the quality of people's working lives. They are :

- a safe and healthy workplace
- control over the working environment
- secure and interesting work (including support for skills and learning)
- fairness and dignity at work, and
- a trade union voice.

These are now explored in a little more detail.

<sup>5</sup> David Coats and Catherine Max, *Healthy Work : Productive Workplaces* (The Work Foundation, 2005)

<sup>6</sup> Michael Marmot, *Status Syndrome* (Bloomsbury, 2004)

<sup>7</sup> David Coats, *An Agenda for Work* (The Work Foundation, 2005)

<sup>8</sup> Richard Layard, *Good Jobs and Bad Jobs* (CEP Occasional Paper No 19, 2004)



# A safe and healthy workplace

Everyone wants to work in as healthy and safe a working environment as possible.

Amicus strives to ensure that organisations meet their responsibilities in respect of health and safety at work. We also offer training, information and advice to representatives, members and employers to ensure that best practice is followed (see [www.amicustheunion.org/healthandsafety](http://www.amicustheunion.org/healthandsafety) for further details).

Workplace safety, sickness absence and health promotion are important issues. But it is vital that consideration of work and health goes further and looks at work organisation, job design and management standards.

Why are these important? Because there is a 'social gradient' in health whereby workers in lower status jobs experience worse health and lower life expectancy than workers in higher status jobs – a phenomenon known as 'status syndrome' <sup>9</sup>. This is not just about the type of work people do. Status syndrome exists within employment grades.

Workplace factors are important because they influence perceptions of status, not least in respect of the control people have in their working environment. Workers with different amounts of control and autonomy display different rates of disease.



# Control over the working environment

People feel that they are losing control over their working experience.

WERS 2004 reports that only 38% of employees declared themselves 'satisfied' or 'very satisfied' with their level of involvement in decision making. And while 57% are content with the 'influence they have over their job', over two-in-five are not (with 14% saying they were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied).

Workers also say that they are having to work harder. Increasing numbers are saying that they are "working under a great deal of tension" and that their job requires them to "work very hard" <sup>10</sup>.

Giving employees autonomy and influence over their work reduces stress. It also allows them to contribute to the effectiveness of their organisations.

One key area of concern is working time. Workers are increasingly dissatisfied with their working hours and are finding it difficult to reach a proper work-life balance <sup>11</sup>.

Long hours is one of the things that UK workers are most unhappy about and recent data shows that, apart from Latvia, UK full-time employees work the longest weekly hours in the EU <sup>12</sup>. Working long hours cannot only harm an individual's health, it can also have detrimental effects on productivity.

Legislation has a role to play here. Amicus is campaigning to remove the "individual opt-out" in the UK's Working Time Regulations, which allows individuals to agree with their employer that more than 48 hours a week can be worked. We also support the extension of the Working Time Regulations to cover all groups of workers.

But the problem is not just about the number of hours worked, it is also about the way they are structured. Recently announced improvements to flexible working regulations and maternity and paternity provisions are to be welcomed. But there also needs to be a change in organisational culture and business practice.

A report published by the DTI in association with the CBI and TUC demonstrates how tackling long hours and reforming working patterns can benefit individuals, families and organisations. It contains case studies, some featuring Amicus, demonstrating the importance of involving employees <sup>13</sup>.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Marmot, *Status Syndrome* (Bloomsbury, 2004)

<sup>10</sup> Francis Green, *The Demands of Work*, in Richard Dickens, et al. (eds), *The Labour Market Under New Labour* (Palgrave, 2003)

<sup>11</sup> Madeleine Bunting, *Willing Slaves* (Harper Collins, 2004)

<sup>12</sup> European Foundation for the Improvement in Living and Working Conditions, *Working Time Developments 2003* (2004)

<sup>13</sup> DTI, *Managing Change – practical ways to reduce long hours and reform working practices* (2005)  
[www.dti.gov.uk/erl/work\\_time\\_regs/LONGWORKINGHOURS.pdf?pubpdfload=05%2F1421](http://www.dti.gov.uk/erl/work_time_regs/LONGWORKINGHOURS.pdf?pubpdfload=05%2F1421)

# Secure and interesting work

A survey by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development found that 41% of workers in the UK said that they were unsure about the future of their job even if they performed well <sup>14</sup>. WERS 2004 also finds just 63% of employees satisfied with their job security, with 38% either neutral or dissatisfied.

In certain areas – manufacturing, for example - this feeling of insecurity is well founded. Amicus believes that the Government is paying insufficient attention to the problems facing the manufacturing sector. (To find out more about the Amicus Rebuilding UK Manufacturing Campaign visit [www.amicustheunion.org/rebuildingmanufacturing](http://www.amicustheunion.org/rebuildingmanufacturing)).

However, on average, job tenure (the length of time people spend in a job) has hardly changed in the last 15 years <sup>15</sup>. But feelings of insecurity can be associated with the rapid pace of change that is taking place in organisations exposed to a number of challenges. Once in employment, people want security. Insecurity adds to feelings of stress, anxiety and detracts from organisational commitment.

Much has been made of the supposed shift from ‘a job for life’ to ‘employability for life’. But confidence in employability requires access to appropriate development and support. To quote one report: *“Employers need to re-invent job security through a real commitment, supported by structures and career development processes, to employability for life, and put the effects on employees of restructuring at the heart of their thinking and planning so as to minimise the impact on ‘felt’ security”* <sup>16</sup>.

It has also been noted that ‘employability for life’ can be a poor substitute if it lacks the wider benefits associated with ‘employment for life’ such as a reasonable income, a secure retirement pension and the support of a trade union <sup>17</sup>. Pensions are a key part of employees’ terms and conditions and security. Amicus believes that employers need to support pension provision and is campaigning for employers to be required to make contributions to their pension funds. We welcome the recent Pension Commission’s recognition of this principle.

If one of the characteristics of a ‘bad job’ is monotonous and repetitive work, then it stands to reason that making work more interesting is a key factor in improving the quality of work. Organising work in a way that allows people to use their initiative and work with others can not only improve individual performance through greater job satisfaction but taps into employees’ experience and expertise for the benefit of their organisations. Employees often have valuable insights as to how things can be done better.

One of the most obvious ways to support people’s working experience is to ensure that they are equipped with the appropriate skills to do the job. Lack of appropriate training not only adds to the pressure that employees feel, with consequent impacts on health and well-being, it is inefficient.

As highlighted above, skills also provide part of the security that workers need to respond to the changes of modern economic life. This includes access to retraining for workers who face the biggest disruptions from structural change. Workers should be assisted in developing their employability and not abandoned in economic hard times.

One of the biggest barriers to workers accessing learning opportunities is lack of time <sup>18</sup>. That is why Amicus is campaigning to make paid educational leave a legal right. (For more information about Amicus’s paid educational leave campaign see [www.amicustheunion.org/pel](http://www.amicustheunion.org/pel))

<sup>14</sup> OECD, *Employment Outlook* (OECD, 2001)

<sup>15</sup> Robert Taylor, *Britain’s World of Work – Myths and Realities* (ESRC, 2002)

<sup>16</sup> Nick Isles, *The Joy of Work?* p24 (The Work Foundation, 2005)

<sup>17</sup> John Denham, *Making Work Work* (Fabian Society lecture, 2004)

<sup>18</sup> Time for a ‘work-learn’ balance, says new TUC survey, TUC Press Release, 2 June 2005

# Fairness and dignity at work

An essential element in feeling valued at work is being treated with respect.

People should not be discriminated against on account of their gender, race, sexuality, disability or age.

Workplaces should be free from bullying, harassment and intimidation, which cannot only have a devastating effect on individuals, but is bad for business.

Amicus, with the support of the Department of Trade and Industry, is running the world's biggest anti-bullying project, seeking to eradicate bullying and create a culture of respect in the workplace. For more information see the Dignity at Work website at [www.dignityatwork.org](http://www.dignityatwork.org).

WERS 2004 reports that pay is one of the things that employees are least satisfied with in their job. Whilst it is not surprising to hear of worker discontent over pay, this is not just about earning more money. It is also about fairness.

Thirty-five years after the Equal Pay Act, the gender pay gap persists with women still earning less than men. An Amicus Guide to Equal Pay, setting out the union's policy and action points, is available on the Amicus website at [www.amicustheunion.org/PDF/equalpay.pdf](http://www.amicustheunion.org/PDF/equalpay.pdf).

In addition, pay inequality between the highest and lowest earners has grown in the UK. The continued spiralling of executive remuneration, often with questionable links to performance, has fuelled concerns about imbalances in the effort-reward bargain.



# A trade union voice for workers

Positive social relations can help protect people from crises, uncertainty and low status. That is why access to social support networks (sometimes known as social capital) is important.

In the workplace trade unions are a valuable source of social capital giving workers a 'collective voice'. They can both unite workers in solidarity and provide an independent link with their employer (examples of 'bonding' and 'bridging' social capital, to use the jargon).

This 'collective voice' also wields a 'sword of justice'. Trade unions compress the gender pay differential, cut industrial accidents and are more likely to be associated with equal opportunity policies and family-friendly policies in the workplace <sup>19</sup>. Trade unions clearly make a difference.

The new regulations on information and consultation of employees also recognise the importance of high levels of employee involvement in delivering 'high performance workplaces'.

Proper consultation is essential if change is to be managed successfully and be seen as legitimate by employees.

Trust is the cement that not only pulls many of these constituent elements together but makes them sustainable through difficult times.

People are more likely to feel a greater sense of control, confidence and motivation where there are high trust relationships between employers, workers and their representatives. And high trust relations can lead to improvements in job satisfaction and productivity.

One of the most effective ways that managers and workers can work together is through collective bargaining between employers and trade unions. A survey of Amicus members in the finance sector found that members report better experiences on a whole host of key issues, such as job security, job satisfaction, utilisation of skills and work-life balance, where management is positive about the union in their workplace.

<sup>19</sup> David Metcalf, *British Unions: Resurgence or Perdition?* (The Work Foundation, 2005)

# Conclusion - Raising and meeting aspirations

People not only want to work, they want to work in decent jobs.

Workers want a rewarding working life. This is not just about fair pay and meeting basic standards of employment. It is about enjoying working life, achieving job satisfaction and maximising potential.

Improving the quality of people's working lives not only enhances individuals' personal well-being but it can lead to better, more successful organisations.

This is an aspirational agenda for workers, employers and government. And Amicus is working to help meet those aspirations.



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