Workfare Temporaries:
Workfare and the Rise of the
Temporary Employment Relationship in Ontario

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Résumé :   *Le marché du travail contemporain est marqué par la dual-
isation : d'une part, dans la relation d'emploi «normale», l'employé(e)
travaille à temps plein pour un temps indéfini pour un seul employeur.
L'employé(e) jouit de la sécurité et de la stabilité d'emploi. D'autre part,
les formes d'emploi qui ne correspondent pas à cette norme, à savoir les em-
plois temporaires, à temps partiel et à contrat, se distinguent souvent par
leur précarité. Si les politiques de l'État-providence évoluent parallèlement
au marché du travail, leur jumelage a fait l'objet de trop peu d'études sa-
vantes. Cet article examine la symbiose entre les tendances des politiques
sociales et celles de l'emploi par le biais de l'étude d'un programme de
«workfare» en Ontario, Workfirst. Il s'agira de montrer que ce programme
social conditionne les prestataires de l'aide sociale, tout en aggravant les
conditions de travail en bas de l'échelle de l'emploi pour tous les travailleurs.*

The Canadian welfare state is in transition.[1] Policy-makers are increasingly
embracing a new model of economic growth, one that explicitly aims for flexi-
bility in labour market policy and implicitly demands a "new" type of welfare
state form. To fulfill these objectives, both the federal government and provin-
cial governments are reshaping the design and delivery of Canada's social
programs. They are gradually abandoning welfare-oriented policy models con-
ventionally associated with the Keynesian Welfare State (Bakker and Scott,
1997; McFarland and Mullaly, 1996; White, 1995) and embracing workfare-
driven policies that reflect what some scholars label "workfarism," a labour
market re-organization strategy that involves privatizing the administration
and delivery of employment training and placement and marketizing welfare
policy (Jessop, 1995; Peck, 1996).[2]

Alongside this apparent paradigm shift at the level of the welfare state,
important changes are also occurring in the labour market. Since the mid-
1970s, Canadians have experienced a dramatic rise in non-standard forms of
employment and the coincident erosion of the standard employment relation-
ship typical of the post-World War II era (Economic Council of Canada, 1990;
Krahn, 1995; Lipsett and Reesor, 1997). These employment trends are highly
significant since they are perpetuating and exacerbating dualism in the labour
market such that more and more workers are engaging in precarious forms of

employment. On the one hand, the standard employment relationship entails the employment of workers for wages where the worker has only one employer, works full-time on the employer's premises and expects to be employed indefinitely (Muckenberger, 1989; Schellenberg and Clark, 1996). It is marked by security and durability. On the other hand, non-standard forms of employment, such as part-time, contract and temporary work, often entail a high degree of instability (Cordova, 1986; Polivka and Nardone, 1989; Rogers and Rogers, 1989: 2).

Despite the convergence of these developments, there is a dearth of scholarship examining changing welfare state forms and shifting employment norms as twin processes. Still, their parallel evolution merits careful scrutiny, especially since a growing number of State-supported policies and programs build upon both developments. An Ontario-based welfare-to-work initiative known as "Workfirst" is one such program. Formally initiated in the Regional Municipality of Peel in 1995, *Workfirst* belongs to the workfare-style *Ontario Works* program, falling under the provincial government's employment placement stream. This program involves a "partnership" between the municipal social assistance department and an employment agency that is experienced in the provision of temporary help workers to private sector employers. In this way, it offers a rich case study in examining the parallel rise of workfare-style programs and non-standard forms of employment.

Probing the mutually-reinforcing relationship between new directions in social policy and prevailing employment trends through a case study of *Workfirst*, this article makes the following twofold argument: first, it argues that *Workfirst* is conditioning "employable" social assistance recipients for an increasingly volatile labour market by making it mandatory for them to register with temporary help agencies and engage in temporary help work. Second, it contends that this program, particularly given its current practice of placing selected social assistance recipients into two narrow categories of temporary help work, is contributing to lowering the bottom of the labour market in Ontario. In this way, the consequences of this new-style workfare program have the potential to extend well beyond the group of "employable" social assistance recipients that it targets to a larger group of low- and middle-income workers.

To elaborate this argument, the article is divided into four sections. Section 1 describes shifting employment norms, highlighting the core components of the standard employment relationship, introducing the notion of the "temporary employment relationship" and providing evidence of the growth of the temporary help industry. Section 2 traces the origins of *Workfirst* and the broader *Ontario Works* program to which it belongs and connects it to the movement away from welfare-oriented towards workfare-driven social policy in Canada. Moving to the heart of the case study, Section 3 explores the design of *Workfirst* at the level of municipal policy, focusing specifically on

the degree to which it reflects the emergence of workfare-driven social policy in Canada. Section 4 then turns to examine the delivery of *Workfirst*. By detailing the half-day orientation sessions initially hosted by officials from the temporary help industry, where social assistance recipients are socialized to accept the temporary employment relationship as a new employment norm emerging parallel to the standard employment relationship, it describes the conditioning process built into the design of *Workfirst*.[3] The article concludes by addressing some of the larger implications of the emergence of programs like *Workfirst* which link the provision of social assistance to participation in precarious forms of non-standard employment.

1. Shifting Employment Norms

Due to the drive towards "flexibility"[4] in the labour market the nature of employment is changing.[5] The clearest signs of change are the contraction of the standard employment relationship, the normative model of employment associated with the Keynesian Welfare State,[6] and the proliferation of non-standard forms of work. While the standard employment relationship typically entails a permanent, full-time, full-year job where a worker has only one employer and one workplace, non-standard forms of work are conventionally defined as "those which differ from the traditional model of a full-time, full-year job" and fall below a 35-hr/per week threshold (Advisory Group on Working Time and the Distribution of Work, 1994: 27; Economic Council of Canada, 1990: 12). Unlike the standard employment relationship, non-standard forms of employment are structurally heterogeneous. However, considered as a group, they are characterized by a higher degree of instability than the standard employment relationship partly because many involve atypical employment contracts (ILO, 1997).[7] Even though the degree of job security varies from one form to another, the accelerated rise of non-standard forms of employment amounts to considerably greater insecurity for many workers (Polivka and Nardone, 1989; Rogers and Rogers, 1989).

Labour market trends suggest that non-standard forms of employment, such as contract, part-time, temporary, on-call, home-based and self-employment, have the collective capacity to undermine the hegemony of standard employment relationship as a normative model of employment. While they do not threaten to supercede it completely (at either a normative level or in real terms), their spread signals growing dualism in the labour market and, therefore, the coexistence of a growing number of competing employment norms. Still, the growth of certain non-standard employment relationships is particularly pivotal to the present expansion of precarious forms of employment at the bottom of the labour market.

The accelerated rise of the temporary employment relationship, epitomized by the employment relationship associated with the temporary help

industry,[8] is a case in point for two distinct reasons. First, and most concretely, the temporary help industry has experienced considerable growth over the last two decades both in Canada and other industrialized countries (Carre, 1992; Hamdani, 1996; Mangum, Mayall and Nelson, 1989).[9] While industry analysts attribute the temporary help industry's initial emergence to the mass entry of married women into the labour market in the 1950s and 1960s, they credit the industry's recent growth to firms' desires to abdicate responsibilities conventionally associated with the standard employment relationship such as those pertaining to hiring and dismissal, as well as to the payment and administration of benefits (Hamdani, 1996). Consequently, in sharp contrast to the standard employment relationship, the temporary employment relationship is based on a highly precarious model of employment. Temporary help workers rarely qualify for social benefits such as employment insurance and maternity leave because of the intermittent nature of employment, or company pension plans and extended health coverage because of continuous service requirements. Furthermore, their average hourly wages are highly vulnerable to fluctuations; for example, average hourly wages in the temporary help industry dropped from a high of $12.13/hr in 1991 to a low of $11.17/hr in 1995. Second, due to its triangular nature, the temporary employment relationship contradicts *all* three core features of the standard employment relationship: the worker establishes occupational connections with several employers rather than one, is rarely party to an indeterminate contract of employment and often may be dismissed at-will (Cordova, 1986: 641; Vosko, 1997). Moreover, workers engaged in temporary employment relationships are rarely unionized and/or covered by collective agreements in contrast to many of their counterparts engaged in standard employment relationships. Additionally (and highly notable in light of this article), the temporary help industry is actively cultivating relationships with social policy-makers involved in designing and implementing workfare-style programs in Canada. The emerging partnership between officials in the temporary help industry and the social assistance department in the Regional Municipality of Peel, which serves as the basis for *Workfirst*, provides evidence of this trend. The remainder of this article probes the nature and potential consequences of *Workfirst* by examining its origins, design and delivery.

2. Origins

Workfirst is one of several municipally operated programs that falls under the *Ontario Works* scheme. Hence, prior to discussing the design of the program, it is useful to review the legislative measures facilitating the introduction of workfare in Ontario and the provincial policy guidelines flowing from these measures that link *Ontario Works* to the shift away from welfare-oriented towards workfare-driven social policy in Canada.

Ontario Works was first legally established under Regulation 537, a general regulation to the *General Welfare Assistance Act* (1958) of Ontario. Since the scheme was introduced, however, there have been significant legislative changes to the provision of social assistance in Ontario, changes that are dramatically re-shaping the design and delivery of social assistance in the province. As of May 1, 1998, the *Ontario Works Act* (1997) replaced the *Family Benefits Act* (1967) and the *General Welfare Assistance Act* (the two pre-existing welfare laws in the province) and formally created Canada's first workfare program (Bezanson and Valentine, 1997; Ministry of Social Services, June 12, 1997; National Council on Welfare, 1997: 69).[10]

With respect to the arguments advanced in this article, specifically the contention that programs like *Workfirst* threaten to expand the existing pool of precarious workers located at the bottom of the labour market in Ontario through increasingly coercive means, the introduction of the *Ontario Works Act* is significant for three reasons. First, and most centrally, the Act formally introduces a harsher and more punitive social assistance regime, which confers a more onerous set of obligations on social assistance recipients and institutes a more imposing application procedure. For example, the Act allows municipalities to establish a system of fingerprinting applicants for welfare (although it does *not* require that such measures be implemented) and it also allows them to require *all* adult dependents of welfare applicants (e.g., spouses and children residing in the same household) to sign application forms and consent forms before processing applications (Community Social Planning Council of Toronto, 1998: 5; Ministry of Social Services, June 12, 1997: 4). Second, it undermines the rights of social assistance recipients by, for example, replacing the Welfare Appeal Board with a small tribunal with reduced scope (National Council on Welfare: 69; Ministry of Social Services, June 12, 1997: 4). Third, the Act establishes an explicit legal framework for the privatization of welfare services to an extent that was not legally possible previously, a component of the Act that the provincial government claims will assist in streamlining delivery at the municipal level.[11] The introduction of this last measure was particularly crucial to establishing *Workfirst* at the municipal level given its requirement for a private sector broker to deliver core components of the program.

Building on these and other related legislative changes, the Ontario Works scheme is composed of several streams that form a continuum of workfare-type programs that range from "pure" workfare programs to "new-style" workfare programs. "Workfare" is conventionally defined as mandatory work in exchange for welfare payments (i.e., "pure" workfare).[12] However, in Ontario, the term is also increasingly used to refer to a broader set of work-related obligations such as training, job-seeking, schooling and community work (i.e., "new-style" workfare), where the social assistance recipient either receives direct or indirect income transfers from the State.[13] Thus, in the case of the

Ontario Works scheme, the notion of a *Workfare* continuum is useful as a conceptual tool since it has the potential to encompass the wide-range of programs linked to the restrictive work incentive strategy presently emerging in Ontario (Lightman, 1995).

The three streams incorporated into *Ontario Works* are community participation, employment support and employment placement. The set of programs most closely resembling "pure" workfare fall under the community participation stream (McCrossin, 1997). This stream involves the direct exchange of unpaid work for welfare benefits from the State; under the current provincial guidelines, social assistance recipients must work for up to seventy hours per month in either a project created by the municipality or a private non-profit organization (Ministry of Community and Social Services, August 1996: 9–11). In contrast, the employment support stream entails structured job-search assistance activities, which include basic education or job-skills training programs in exchange for welfare benefits and basic assistance with job-search as well as the provision for expenses (i.e., child care and travel) required to actively engage in a job-search (Ministry of Community and Social Services, August 1996: 2). These support programs target those social assistance recipients who face formidable barriers to entry into the labour market. Finally, employment placement programs, the focus of this article, deal with "employable" social assistance recipients who are first prepared for unsubsidized private sector jobs in exchange for welfare benefits, and then are forcefully directed into these jobs (Ministry of Community and Social Services, August 1996: 16). This third stream of *Ontario Works* encourages municipal social assistance departments to enlist the services of private employment agencies to help place social assistance recipients in paid employment.[14] The selected agencies are compensated, "on a performance basis using a *share* of the funds that would otherwise be paid out in social assistance to the participant" (Ministry of Community and Social Services, August 1996: 2; my emphasis). In effect, they are awarded a percentage of the savings incurred from matching social assistance recipients with employers.[15]

Regardless of the stream to which they are assigned, under the *Ontario Works* guidelines, eligible social assistance recipients are obligated to participate in some form of workfare and they are strongly encouraged to sign a participation agreement in order to continue to receive their social assistance benefits. This "voluntary" agreement outlines the new conditions for receiving social assistance in Ontario and serves as a tool for monitoring the progress of social assistance recipients involved in any municipally-operated program that falls under *Ontario Works*. While a standard participation agreement exists, case workers have a significant degree of discretion in tailoring agreements to individual social assistance recipients. Municipal officials may also design participation agreements to suit the parameters of specific projects or

programs under any of the three streams (Ministry of Community and Social Services, August 1996: 23).[16]

3. Design

Initiated in the Regional Municipality of Peel in 1995, *Workfirst* falls under the employment placement stream of Ontario Works. Besides the participation agreement that normally exists between the social assistance recipient and the social assistance department, the program involves a service agreement between the municipal social assistance department and a private sector broker that is "experienced in the provision of labour to private sector employers" (Human Services Committee, January 30, 1996: 2). Together with the participation agreement, this agreement confers responsibilities (and obligations) on three parties: the municipal social assistance department, the broker and the "participant."

As the public administrator of *Workfirst*, the municipal social assistance department was initially charged with designing and implementing a program to reflect Regulation 537 to the *General Welfare Assistance Act*, which allowed *Ontario Works* to emerge. As interpreted at the municipal level, Regulation 537 first required people receiving social assistance, except people with disabilities, seniors and sole support parents, to accept offers of community placement, training and/or employment support or placement as an ongoing condition of eligibility (Ministry of Community and Social Services, August 1996: 1–2). However, with the passage of the *Ontario Works Act*, the obligation to participate in the *Ontario Works* programs, such as *Workfirst*, expanded to include a larger group of single parents formerly eligible for Family Benefits and people who are 60 to 64 years of age (Community Social Planning Council of Toronto, 1998: 6). Since the mandate of *Workfirst* is to match "employable" social assistance recipients with temporary help agencies, for the social assistance department, adapting first to Regulation 537 and then to the *Ontario Works Act* itself has meant making it mandatory for a specified group of "employable" social assistance recipients to register with temporary employment agencies in their job search process (Human Services Committee, January 30, 1996: 1). The work of the social assistance department initially involved selecting a private sector broker to administer the program and then overseeing the program as it was phased in. However, as the program becomes self-sustaining, the municipal government predicts that the role of the social assistance department will diminish. If the government's predictions come to fruition, ongoing responsibilities of the department will fall mainly on case workers who will assign social assistance recipients to the program, monitor their participation and advise the broker when "participants" are no longer receiving social assistance. In the long run, municipal authorities expect that

the administrative branch of the department will be involved only in paying the broker and undertaking periodic reviews of the *Workfirst* program.

Unlike the role of the municipal social assistance department, which aims ultimately to limit its involvement in administering *Workfirst*, the responsibilities of the broker are far reaching. At the time that the research for this article was conducted (August 1996–July 1997), the broker was responsible for providing regular orientation sessions on temporary help work to "participants," registering them with at least three local temporary help agencies, tracking their success at being placed in temporary help work and reporting to the social assistance department on the success of placement (Human Services Committee, January 30, 1996: 5–6). As set out in the initial legal agreement, the broker's services included providing three pre-approved training facilities to host the orientation sessions, appropriate staffing and materials for half-day orientation sessions, confidential computerized referral and tracking to temporary help agencies, computerized reporting to the region, and training and certification in basic health and safety procedures for selected "participants."[17]

The obligations conferred upon social assistance recipients selected for *Workfirst* are far more extensive than under pre-existing municipal welfare guidelines. Reflecting provincial regulations first introduced under Regulation 537 and later entrenched in the *Ontario Works Act* as well as policy guidelines established at the municipal level, all social assistance recipients selected for *Workfirst* were initially required to attend a half-day orientation session, register with at least three temporary help agencies recommended by the broker within five working days of the session and be "willing to accept any work which the agency recommends is suitable" to remain eligible for social assistance (Human Services Committee, January 30, 1996: 3). Since the inception of *Workfirst*, the obligations of the "participants" have changed slightly because the contents of the half-day orientation sessions are now incorporated into two briefing sessions, one from case workers and another from the broker itself. However, the tenor of the obligations conferred upon "participants" remains the same: they must register with the temporary help agency and accept the work that they are offered or face punitive sanctions.

It is these penalties for non-compliance established at the provincial level and implemented at the municipal level which make the requirements binding on "participants." Under all three streams of Ontario Works, the refusal to accept work, referral to a placement, or an offer of a placement, are grounds for a loss of entitlement for up to three months for a single social assistance recipient or a reduction in entitlement for social assistance recipients with dependents (R.R.O., 1996: Reg. 537 s. 4.3 (7) and (9)). Under *Workfirst*, social assistance recipients are also subject to sanctions if they quit temporary help work or they are fired without an acceptable reason. For the single social assistance recipient, the penalty for quitting without a justifiable reason or

being fired for an unacceptable reason is ineligibility for three months. For the social assistance recipient with dependents, the penalty is a reduction in their entitlement for three months. Furthermore, if "participants" refuse to accept employment, referral to a placement or an offer of a placement more than once, they become ineligible for social assistance for six months (General Welfare Assistance Policy Directive, August 1, 1996: 3).

Given the penalties for not complying with *Workfirst* rules, it is hardly surprising that the municipality expected to reduce its social assistance expenditures drastically through *Workfirst*. Initially, the municipality outlined three potential sources for expenditure reduction. The first source was indirect: the income that "participants" receive from placement in employment would reduce the sum total of social assistance payments. The second source was to result from "participants" failing to attend a *Workfirst* orientation session and/or subsequently registering with a designated temporary help agency. The third source was to come from participants found ineligible for *General Welfare Assistance* because they refused work (Ministry of Community and Social Services, August 1996: 41). During the first eight months of the program (August 1996 to April 1997), the broker placed 269 "participants" in temporary help work and reduced social assistance payments by $200,000.[18] According to the municipality, these reductions were obtained both through employment placement and by temporarily disqualifying "participants" from social assistance due to their failure to attend a *Workfirst* orientation session and/or to subsequently register with a designated temporary agency (Human Services Committee, April 16, 1997).[19]

The potential for expenditure reduction for the municipal social assistance department makes taking part in the delivery of *Workfirst* a lucrative venture for the broker. As the provider of the service, the broker receives a percentage of the value of the reduction in social assistance credited to *Workfirst*; this percentage is calculated based on savings resulting from increased earnings only. The terms and conditions of *Workfirst* currently entitle the broker to 10% of the first $1,894,150 saved in increased earnings and 12.5% thereafter (Minutes of the Human Services Committee, January 30, 1996: 6). Furthermore, general program guidelines for *Ontario Works* permit brokers participating in the employment placement stream of the provincial scheme to charge supplementary fees, "if the Ontario Works participant is retained by an employer other than the employment placement agency and is retained as a direct result of the actions of that agency" (Ministry of Community and Social Services, August 1996: 41). In other words, the provincial guidelines do not require the broker/agency to alter its typical fee structure. In this way, flowing from the provincial workfare guidelines, the design of *Workfirst* is intended to generate a range of short- and medium-term financial benefits for both the public sector administrator of the program and the private sector delivery agent. On the surface, it is these relatively immediate financial

benefits that make the design of this new-style workfare program so very enticing to both sets of actors. However, at a deeper level, other long-term objectives of the program are also attractive to the municipal social assistance department, which is seeking to reduce the number of services and programs that it provides, and to officials in the temporary help industry, whose overriding goal is to stimulate the spread of the temporary employment relationship.

While *Workfirst* is not "pure" workfare, the design of this "new-style" welfare-to-work program is consistent with the movement towards workfare-driven social policy in Canada. The new provincial legislation formally establishing workfare in Ontario, the *Ontario Works* guidelines, the municipally devised policies and the legal agreements surrounding *Workfirst* reflect the harmonization of training policy and welfare policy and the marketization of welfare. Together, they are contributing to reconfiguring the institutional forms and forces immanent in the Canadian labour market. Central to the larger argument of this article, the design of *Workfirst* also reflects shifting employment norms; it reinforces the contraction of the standard employment relationship as a norm and introduces a "new" and highly precarious model of employment in its place.

The design of *Workfirst* makes participation in training, registration with temporary help agencies and accepting temporary help work compulsory for selected "employable" social assistance recipients. It therefore denies social assistance recipients the right to refuse work and/or training for welfare. As Scott McCrossin (1997: 177) aptly notes, "[t]here is an inherent lack of voluntariness in this arrangement." It also signals an attempt by provincial and municipal governments to alter what is perceived to be not only acceptable but ideal employment for social assistance recipients in Ontario. Under the *General Welfare Assistance Act*, social assistance recipients in Ontario have *always* been legally obligated to seek and accept any full-time, part-time or casual employment which they are physically capable of undertaking. However, the activity of placing social assistance recipients into temporary help work has never before been institutionalized in social assistance design in Ontario. In this way, the design of *Workfirst* signals an important shift in emphasis on the part of the State, one that has significant consequences for the growing number of unemployed and under-employed workers drawing on various sources of government support ranging from training subsidies to Employment Insurance and social assistance. Prior to the design of *Workfirst*, social assistance administrators normally viewed securing a permanent job as the ultimate goal of the welfare-to-work transition. However, the design of *Workfirst* turns the assumption that a permanent job (ideally, one with benefits) is the *most* suitable alternative to welfare on its head by making temporary help work the *object* of the program.[20]

In addition to casting temporary help work as a more legitimate alternative to social assistance than in the past, *Workfirst* also privatizes social

assistance in several crucial respects. Most centrally, it opens the delivery of social assistance to private sector actors and engages a broker to provide training and placement to social assistance recipients. Moreover, while the legal agreements between the social assistance department and the broker recognize that they have distinct roles to play, standard-setting is essentially devolved to the private sector in the design of *Workfirst*. The broker orients participants to the domain of temporary help work, determines where (i.e., in which types of employment) "participants" are best placed and matches them with its customers.

Finally, by simultaneously reducing the role of the State in the provision of social assistance and elevating the temporary employment relationship as a desirable alternative to social assistance, the design of *Workfirst* also contributes to lowering the level of social protection accorded to many workers during the Keynesian era. As indicated in Section 1, temporary help workers rarely have access to the full range of social security benefits attached to the standard employment relationship. The relatively low wages, the degree of insecurity and the legal arrangements conventionally associated with temporary help work make the temporary employment relationship highly precarious. Still, one of the central mandates of *Workfirst* is to pose the temporary employment relationship as a suitable alternative to social assistance and thereby to provide an expanded pool of workers for the temporary help industry to draw upon. Faced with the potential loss of entitlement for refusing temporary help work, this pool of workers is likely to be forced to accept lower wages and even worse conditions of employment than the existing pool of temporary help workers currently enjoy, not only lowering the bottom of the labour market as a whole but also the bottom of the temporary help industry itself.

4. Delivery

Having examined the design of *Workfirst*, it is now useful to investigate its delivery. Does the delivery of the program take the precarious nature of the temporary employment relationship as given? If so, what methods does the broker use to socialize the participants into this "new world of work"?[21] The questions can be answered by describing and interpreting the model used in the orientation session for the first two and a half years of the program and the response of "participants" to *Workfirst*.[22]

When *Workfirst* was first introduced, the broker held half-day orientations to acclimatize participants to temporary help work. Prior to attending the orientation, selected social assistance recipients were assigned to a specific session and told that they must attend the orientation and register with three temporary help agencies in order to continue to receive social assistance.[23] At this stage, they were offered only limited information on the design of

the program and how it reflected larger changes in the provision of social assistance in Ontario. As one "participant" noted:

> They don't tell you anything. You just get this little thing in the mail telling you that you have to report on such and such a day to such and such a place and that's it . . . I mean it's really threatening. It tells you that you either do it or you don't get any money . . . If you don't go, you're cut off for three months apparently. (P1)

Thus, the broker was left to explain the purpose and the guidelines of the program at the orientation session.

The three-hour orientation session was divided into three distinct parts: Introduction and Check-In; The Pre-Interview Process; and The Employment Agency Interview. While "participants" were encouraged to ask questions, the bulk of the session was reserved for a presentation from the instructor.

4.1. Introduction and Check-In

The substantive portion of the orientation to *Workfirst* commenced after the instructor took attendance. The instructor began these sessions by describing the state of the economy and how things have changed over the last twenty-five years. In this part of the session, the emphasis was on dispelling the myth of the "life-long job'. One instructor introduced his session by noting: "We are out of work not because of a stupid government or a stupid employer but because of a global phenomenon. You can parallel it to the industrial revolution. Lifetime jobs used to be the norm but now they aren't" (Fieldnotes, February 7, 1997). Another noted, "You guys are going to have to hustle. Be prepared to look for work over and over again over the years" (Fieldnotes, February 7, 1997). In this part of the session, "participants" were not blamed for their unemployed status yet they were encouraged to adopt a particular view of the labour market, one that required them to take a new approach to the job-search process. This view of the labour market involved understanding that there are at least three types of employment today: core jobs, which are the closest thing to the life-long job, full-time and part-time contract work, and full-time temporary help work. The "participants" were told that, "the core is a synonym for the part of the operation that gets benefits, eye plans, health plans and pension plans" (Fieldnotes, February 7, 1997). They were also told by instructors that the next best thing to being part of the core is being on contract and then there are "the people that are rented out from agencies" (Fieldnotes, February 7, 1997).

While getting into the core was touted as one possible outcome of participating in *Workfirst*, instructors asserted that attaining this outcome involved a great deal of commitment and investment and a lot of luck. They also indicated that the best way to get into the core is by recognizing that there is a hidden job market. They stated repeatedly that very few employers advertise

for personnel in the newspaper anymore and even fewer accept hand-delivered resumes. Rather, most employers deal with private employment agencies to fill their vacancies or they search for the suitable candidate inside their own operations. Consequently, one of the best ways to get access to the core is by working through a temporary help agency. One instructor noted accordingly:

> There is always a way to get into the core. The core is always a living, breathing thing. It's always evolving. People die, get sick, get promotions or move. That's your chance. This is your opportunity when you are working for an agency. This is your chance to impress someone. Usually, she [the human resource manager] can't advertise. It's more likely that she'll hire internally . . . Only one per cent of people who work at agencies get to work in the core but it's still a chance. It's still better than buying a [Lottery] 6/49. It's one in a hundred not one in a million — now this is my estimate. I know one guy who got one. Core jobs are out there. They do happen. (Fieldnotes, February 7, 1997)

Thus, "participants" were urged to monitor company job boards for permanent positions when placed in a temporary assignment because internal advertisements have the potential to give them access to the core. In this way, instructors still posed the standard employment relationship as an elusive goal while simultaneously casting the temporary employment relationship as an emerging normative model of employment.

Once the instructors established the similarities and differences between core jobs and temporary help work, they described the role of temporary help agencies and attempted to dispel myths about these agencies. For example, they assured the "participants" that employment agency personnel are honest business people. While the client pays the agency a fee, the worker is not directly penalized. One instructor noted: "There is this idea that employment agencies skim things off the top. Not true. There is a fee — agencies don't work for charity — but the clients pay. You won't be paid less than if you were hired directly by the company" (Fieldnotes, February 3, 1997). Despite efforts to make "participants" comfortable with registering with temporary help agencies, instructors also repeatedly reinforced the differences between private employment agencies and public employment services. Private employment agencies were depicted as businesses geared to their customers, not to the workers that they place.

Instructors also encouraged "participants" to unlearn many of the outdated job-search methods prescribed by the social assistance department, indicating that *Workfirst* was contracted-out to a private employment agency because agencies are more efficient at direct placement than the public employment service. Throughout the orientation sessions, "participants" were told that the social assistance department is in the payment business, to provide financial support for people who are either experiencing short bouts of

unemployment or people with long term disabilities, not in the placement or skills-matching business.

4.2. Pre-Interview Process

After introducing *Workfirst*, instructors devoted a significant amount of time to positioning the temporary employment relationship as an alternative to social assistance. Central to the delivery of *Workfirst*, the pre-interview process was where the conditioning process was most apparent. During this component of the orientation session, instructors raised "commonsense" issues such as dressing appropriately, arriving on time and making eye contact; several "participants" reported that these discussions were degrading (P1; P2).

At the outset of the pre-interview component of the orientation session, "participants" were given a check-list to use in preparation for the interview; this check-list was intended to remind the participant to bring a resume, a *Workfirst* registration form, a social insurance card, photo identification, the location of the employment agencies and a pen to fill-out the application to the interview. Once the instructor went over the check-list, s/he identified several key issues to keep in mind when preparing for the interview with the agency such as the importance of arriving on time and, in general, making a good first impression. Instructors were particularly concerned with "appropriate dressing and grooming habits". "Participants" were told to "wear clean clothes," "shower and use deodorant" and women were told to "avoid excessive jewelry" (Fieldnotes, February 3 and 7, 1997). These instructions were reinforced with a hand-out given to all "participants" entitled "Dressing and Grooming." Instructors asserted that dressing appropriately is particularly important for women since they are likely to be placed in clerical positions where they are required to deal with the general public. For example, one instructor noted: "In the summer, ladies could wear open-toed shoes so long as they match their dress" (Fieldnotes, February 7, 1997). Later in the session, the same instructor joked about fancy attire stating that employers, "have a problem with people who are richer than they are" (Fieldnotes, February 3, 1997). As well, participants were told to wear the clothes that they would wear on the job because they "could be johnny-on-the-spot" and be required to take up a position immediately following the assessment, a practice which is acceptable under the program guidelines (Fieldnotes, February 3, 1997). As a general rule, men were encouraged to dress in casual work clothes since they would most likely be placed in light industrial work and women were to "dress for the office," mirroring the internal sex-segregation common to the temporary help industry. The overt gender-bias in these dress instructions is highly significant given that more women, especially single mothers formerly exempt from Ontario Works, are now being introduced into programs like *Workfirst*. Not only do these instructions have the potential to reinforce

the sex-segregation in the temporary help industry, whereby women comprise the majority of clerical workers and men the bulk of industrial workers, they highlight the real danger of positioning women social assistance recipients in highly segmented areas of the labour market where there are few prospects for job advancement.

4.3. The Employment Agency Interview

The conditioning process continued when instructors discussed the employment agency interview, the last substantive part of the orientation session. In this segment of the session, instructors talked about "the art of interviewing," which involved preparing "participants" for commonly asked questions, providing strategies for discussing one's strengths and weaknesses in the interview-setting and coaching "participants" on how to express their willingness to learn new skills. In this segment of the session, instructors stressed the importance of differentiating between "skills" and "experience." They had "participants" identify so-called hidden skills, skills that are often omitted from resumes. For example, one instructor suggested that female participants would be wise to tap into skills associated with "women's work" and emphasize all of their household duties, which might include answering the phone, balancing budgets and other organizational skills related to running a household (Fieldnotes, February 3, 1997). Standard to the orientation session, the discussion of "hidden skills" was riddled with stereotypical assumptions about social assistance recipients. Combined with a discussion of "appropriate dressing and grooming" and "arriving on time," discussing hidden skills served to remind "participants" of their "place" in the labour market. It reflected an additional, yet somewhat concealed, objective of *Workfirst* and one that complemented elevating the temporary employment relationship as a suitable alternative to welfare; namely, to place social assistance recipients in particularly precarious forms of temporary help work.

Once instructors concluded the orientation to the employment agency interview, they placed a list of potential jobs in front of "participants." This list only included jobs that fell under the categories of so-called light industrial work and clerical work.[24] There was no space on the agency application form for *Workfirst* "participants" to register for jobs outside these two narrow categories, which reflect the most precarious form of the temporary employment relationship. In one session, the following exchange took place between an instructor and a participant. It represents a clear example of how *Workfirst* socializes "participants" into accepting employment in specific segments of the labour market, even if they have extensive skills, qualifications and experience.

Participant:	I am an engineer. I was an engineer in India.
Instructor:	I have a lot of people like you. Through the agencies, they don't help you a lot in this kind of work. You might have to go through other professional agencies. Use the Yellow Pages to find them.
Participant:	They always ask for Canadian experience. How can I resolve these problems?
Instructor:	Right now, you're going to have to accept this [the possibility of obtaining a light industrial placement] and continue to look for other ones. You have to try. That's all that I can tell you . . . Also, sometimes it pays to have two resumes — because sometimes companies will say that you are over qualified — one with simple qualifications and another with all your qualifications. (Fieldnotes, February 3, 1997)

After this exchange, the instructor proceeded to describe a situation where a former *Workfirst* "participant" worked for free for two weeks in order to prove that he was the best person available for a temporary light industrial job. By telling this anecdote, the instructor was sympathizing with the "participant's" situation while, at the same time, reminding him that he must accept any type of work in order to maintain his entitlement to social assistance. Thus, under *Workfirst*, the only option for "participants" is to apply for either light industrial or clerical positions and the orientation leaders were careful to make "participants" aware of this rule.

Still, throughout the entire *Workfirst* orientation session, instructors reminded "participants" to think positively. With the moral consensus about the desirability of forcing social assistance recipients into the labour force behind them, they acted as cheerleaders whose roles were to encourage "participants" to find temporary help work and to remind them of the penalties involved in refusing *any* type of work which is on offer. Although instructors provided "participants" with a sense of optimism on the surface, this optimism was tempered with another message about the changing nature of employment. Every orientation session was designed to include a reference to the following quotation from Charles Handy's popular book *The Age of Unreason* (1991): "It has been said, that by the end of the decade, less than half of the work force in the industrialized world will have full-time jobs, the rest will be part-time, temporary workers or unemployed" (Fieldnotes, February 3 and 7, 1997). As with the rest of the session, this quotation aimed to condition participants into accepting the increasingly precarious nature of employment, to encourage them to use private employment agencies and to begin to accept the temporary employment relationship as an employment norm.

During the various components of the orientation session, instructors delivered all the mandated content set out in the design of *Workfirst*. However, they delivered several other messages as well. Reinforcing the contraction of

the standard employment relationship and the rise of non-standard forms of employment, one message is that social assistance recipients must recognize and accept the increasingly volatile nature of the labour market. Another equally important message is that they have no choice but to accept their location at the bottom of the labour market: low-waged, casual light industrial work and de-skilled clerical work are among the few *suitable* employment alternatives currently available to social assistance recipients. Thus, *Workfirst*, as it is delivered by the broker, matches and elaborates upon its design. Although it is not a "pure" workfare program, it is consistent with the movement towards workfare-driven social policy in Canada. While the design of *Workfirst* creates a State-sanctioned space for the temporary employment relationship in the labour market, the delivery of *Workfirst* — both the orientation session upon which it was first based and the streamlined orientation process which is now in place — is a means of introducing unfamiliar forms of compulsion into the eligibility criteria for social assistance. Through its delivery, *Workfirst* reconstitutes welfare as workfare to social assistance recipients themselves by turning what was once a loosely enforced requirement of social assistance recipients (i.e., the obligation to seek and to accept whatever type of work is on offer) into a structural component of the regulation of marginalized workers. It introduces "participants" to the so-called new world of work, where the standard employment relationship is presented as an anomaly and employment relations are characterized by growing insecurity.

5. Conclusion

Workfirst represents one among many new provincially-based welfare-to-work initiatives that reflects the paradigm shift that is currently taking place at the level of the welfare state in Canada (for other examples, see: Low, 1996; McFarland and Mullalay, 1996). However, the significance of the design and delivery of this program goes beyond the coercive/restrictive work incentive strategy upon which it is based. What is particularly notable about *Workfirst* is that it ties "employable" social assistance recipients' eligibility for benefits to their willingness to compete for and accept temporary help work and it therefore signifies the Ontario government's affirmation of the temporary employment relationship as a *model* employment relationship for workers situated at the expanding margins of the labour market.

There is little doubt that the temporary employment relationship is a far more precarious model of employment than the standard employment relationship; temporary help workers generally earn lower wages, receive fewer employment-related benefits, have limited access to collective bargaining rights and enjoy considerably less security than standard workers. Nevertheless, *Workfirst* conditions "participants" to view the temporary employment relationship as a realistic alternative to social assistance in light of shifting

employment norms. In so doing, this program contributes to altering the institutional bases of labour market regulation dominant since the advent of the Keynesian Welfare State by legitimizing a highly precarious model of employment. It openly abandons the basic employee-employer relationship as a model and introduces a triangular employment relationship that erodes the guarantee of a minimum level of employer-accountability associated with the standard employment relationship.[25] Thus, in ushering in a new State form, *Workfirst* is perpetuating growing dualism in the labour market as a whole while simultaneously exacerbating precariousness at its margins.

NOTES

1. The author would like to thank the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for its financial support as well as Kate Bezanson, Judy Fudge, Gerald Kernerman, Paul Leduc Browne and two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this article.

2. Scholars sympathetic to Regulation Theory generally associate workfarism with the decline of the Keynesian Welfare State and the rise of the Schumpeterian Workfare State. As Peck (1996: 191) notes: "broadly speaking, these strategies promote innovation and structural competitiveness in economic policy (hence Schumpeter) and flexibility and competitiveness in economic policy (hence workfare)." In contrast to these scholars, this article takes a somewhat different view of the changes taking place at the level of the welfare state; it suggests that the emergence of workfare-style social policies neither represents a radical break from past practices nor the emergence of a completely new State form. Rather, in the Canadian case, the State has historically deployed a range of strategies to move social assistance recipients off the welfare rolls; the primary distinguishing feature of the present period is that social assistance recipients no longer have the formal right to refuse work for welfare formerly accorded to all Canadians under the now defunct *Canada Assistance Plan*, leaving considerable space open for intensifying the coercive nature of welfare. Despite this qualification, this article borrows the term "workfarism" from Jessop (1993, 1994, 1995) and Peck (1996), since it has considerable salience as a tool in describing and analyzing new directions in social policy.

3. The discussion of the delivery of *Workfirst* is based primarily on in-depth interviews with program participants and fieldnotes from two orientation sessions that I observed. This research was conducted in the Regional Municipality of Peel between August 1996 and April 1997.

4. The term "flexibility" is normally used to refer to two distinct, yet often compatible, strategies linked to labour market restructuring. First, the term is often used as a shorthand for a popular managerial strategy formally labelled "flexible specialization"; when employers adopt this labour re-organization strategy, they increase the size of their peripheral work force and minimize the size of their core work force (Atkinson, 1988; Piore and Sable, 1971). Second, other more critical analysts refer to labour market flexibility in discussing macro-economic policy trends that involve State de-regulation in the labour market (Stanford, 1996: 3–4).

5. Although this article takes the "changing" nature of employment as its point of departure, it recognizes that many contemporary employment trends are in fact reminiscent of earlier historical periods. While it is not feasible to discuss the relationship between continuity and change in labour market relations here, this relationship is a central theme in some of my other research (see also: Broad, 1991; MacDonald, 1991; Pollert, 1988).

6. In casting the standard employment relationship as a normative model of employment and linking it to the Keynesian era, I am merely suggesting that it served as a model against which to measure all other forms of employment in this period. Indeed, the standard employment relationship has never reflected the reality of all workers in advanced capitalist welfare states. While scholars often claim that it was once the norm for most workers, the standard employment relationship represents a (white) male standard. Thus, even at the height of the Keynesian period, women, immigrants and people of colour largely lacked the social entitlements associated with the standard employment relationship.

7. In depicting how atypical employment contracts deviate from standard employment contracts, a recent study conducted by the ILO (1997: 42) notes that they:

> may take that the form of temporary employment contracts, offering no more security than would follow from one large order for work placed with a worker who is classified as self-employed. . . . [or they] may be part-time, leaving the worker with the need to find more than one such job in order to earn a full-time wage. The hours of work may even be unspecified with the worker being paid only when work is available and the business risk thus shifting from the employer to the employee, as it would if the employee were running a separate business.

This study also demonstrates that these contracts are particularly common in countries like Canada where law permits private employment agencies, especially temporary work agencies, to "act as brokers or market-makers . . . trading in contracts of short duration" (ILO: 42).

8. This employment relationship involves three central actors: a temporary help agency that acts as the formal employer, a client firm that supervises workers on-site and a temporary help worker.

9. Between 1980 and 1989, the industry grew by approximately 240% (Akyeampong, 1989). After its rate of growth peaked in 1989, growth in revenue slowed slightly but the industry has remained strong throughout the 1990s (Hamdani, 1996).

Beginning in the late 1980s, the industry also started to diversify. It now caters to a wide variety of customers from the transportation and manufacturing sectors to the retail trade. Its "products" range from general labourers to clerical workers to highly specialized professional workers (Statistics Canada, 1996: Cat. No. 63-016-XPB). While general labour, clerical work and construction work are the mainstay of the industry, the number of temporary help agencies specialized in providing workers for the transportation, construction and health-care sectors is growing.

10. For a detailed description of the history of the *Family Benefits Act* (1967) and the *General Welfare Assistance Act* (1958), see: Scott, 1996.

11. Although the legislation facilitating the privatization of administration and delivery of programs falling under the *Ontario Works Act* is still open to a range

of legal interpretations, sections 45, 46, 48 and 49 of the *Act* allow the public administrator to "delegate" its "powers and duties" to third-party delivery agents (s.46).

12. Ernie Lightman's (1995) general definition of workfare conforms with the definition of "pure workfare' offered here. Following Martin Rein, Lightman (1995: 154) argues that workfare is "a coercive or restrictive [work incentive] strategy, which uses sanctions and requirements to induce labour market participation." By his definition, workfare must satisfy two conditions, although the first is more critical than the second: first, it must be mandatory; and second, work or other approved activities (e.g., training, job-search, apprenticeship, career counselling, etc.) must be done in exchange for, rather than in addition or as a supplement to, the welfare payment.

13. Still, as Patricia Evans (1995) notes, it is important to recall that social assistance has never been an "entitlement" (i.e., an unconditional benefit) in Canada. Rather "need" and "available resources" have been used to determine eligibility throughout the history of the Canadian welfare state; this is not surprising given that most provincial social assistance programs pre-date the emergence of the so-called Keynesian Welfare State. In most provinces, social assistance recipients have also had to fulfill two work-related requirements to receive assistance: a work availability requirement and an employment preparation requirement (Evans, 1995: 6).

What differentiates "new-style" workfare programs from the types of obligations formerly existing at the provincial level in Ontario (i.e., before the introduction of *Ontario Works*) is that, to borrow from the insights of Lightman (1995) once again, they reflect a "coercive or restrictive strategy" that uses punitive sanctions and requirements to induce labour market participation. In this way, although they do not neatly conform with the second condition that Lightman (1995) attaches to his formal definition of workfare, these programs flow from the same type of work incentive strategy that he associates with workfare.

14. In this way, the employment placement programs falling under *Ontario Works* are not "pure workfare" programs, although they do reflect a restrictive work incentive strategy given the penalties for non-participation to be described below.

15. Notably, while the stated objective of the employment placement stream is to place social assistance recipients in employment, labour standards legislation may not cover workfare participants since it is debatable whether they are the genuine employees of the firms in which they are placed (McCrossin, 1997: 144). In the case of *Workfirst*, the employment status of participants is further complicated by the existence of the triangular employment relationship associated with the temporary employment relationship.

16. From this point onward, this article shall refer to the social assistance recipients selected for *Workfirst* as "participants". I intentionally place the word "participants" in quotation marks because the Ontario government's usage of this term suggests that social assistance recipients have a degree of choice where participating in *Workfirst* is concerned when this is, in fact, not the case. Rather, selected social assistance recipients are now obligated to take part in *Ontario Works* to continue to receive social assistance.

17. Upon reviewing the project, officials in the social assistance department recommended that the role of the broker be extended to placing "employable social service recipients in temporary employment opportunities" and reporting to the social assistance department on their success (Human Services Committee, April 1998: 2). They proposed this change, in consultation with the broker, since it was determined that a direct relationship with the placement agency would "result in the highest chance of being able to closely monitor client [i.e., "participant"] compliance and the success of the project" (Human Services Committee, April 1997: 2). In May 1998, the Regional Municipality of Peel formally approved this change, altering the placement portion of the program by eliminating the continuous participation of other temporary help agencies. Thus, the responsibilities of the broker now include placing participants directly in employment, where possible.

18. Obviously, it is not possible to measure how much the social assistance department actually "saves" by placing a given "participant" into a job because it is impossible to know whether the "participant" in question would have found work on their own. Still, documenting the savings reported by the department provides important insights into how the municipality is measuring the effectiveness of the program.

19. The social assistance department stopped collecting data of this type after the first eight months of *Workfirst*. It now only collects data on the number of participants that are deemed unemployable, refuse job offers or are placed on assignment through temporary help agencies (*Ontario Works* Activity Update, May 6, 1998). Unfortunately, no longitudinal data is available on "participants" placed in employment.

20. Although *Workfirst* effectively redefines the conditions of eligibility for welfare by making registration with temporary help agencies mandatory for "employable" social assistance recipients, the municipality's acceptance of the temporary employment relationship as an alternative to social assistance is not complete. In the Regional Municipality of Peel, policy-makers are still somewhat wary about both the reliability and the availability of temporary help work. Therefore, under *Workfirst*, social assistance recipients who gain access to temporary employment are not officially removed from the welfare rolls until they indicate to the social assistance department that their employment is "ongoing" (General Welfare Assistance Policy Directive, August 1, 1996: 4).

21. It is important to emphasize here, once again, that municipal government officials do not actually deliver many of the mandated components of *Workfirst*. Although the content of all segments of the program is approved by the social assistance department, most of the core elements are contracted-out to a third-party delivery agent (i.e., the broker). This practice undoubtedly affects the content and tone of certain dimensions of *Workfirst* since the broker has a different set of interests than the government. The point, however, is that their interests converge with respect to the larger objective of perpetuating growth and expansion at bottom of the labour market.

22. As mentioned in note 19, the roles and responsibilities of the broker and the temporary help agencies have been combined since the research was conducted. As a result, the temporary help agency that formerly acted as the sole-service broker now administers the entire program. In other words, where possible,

it places social assistance recipients directly into temporary help work without involving other temporary help agencies. At present, the broker only requires workers to register with other temporary help agencies when it is unable to place them directly. Involving the broker in placement is a notable change for a range of reasons but, most centrally, because it gives the broker a potential monopoly on placement. As well, the broker no longer conducts regular half-day orientation sessions with social assistance recipients. Rather, case workers and employment agency personnel orient social assistance recipients to *Workfirst* either individually or in small groups. However, the materials used in the orientation session and the approach initially adopted by the instructors are incorporated into the modified delivery of the program. Thus, it is still instructive to describe this session and the conditioning process inherent within it.

23. Social assistance recipients were initially selected to participate in *Workfirst* by computer. Only those individuals excluded from *Workfirst* (i.e., people with disabilities, seniors and sole support parents with young children) and a control group of 15 per cent of "employable" social assistance recipients were not selected for the program; the control group was established by the social assistance department in order to measure the success of the program after a pre-determined period. There is no longer a control group.

24. At present, the broker continues to place "participants" in either industrial or clerical work. Notably, in the most recent brochure that participants are given about the program, they are instructed that they will be "performing office or warehouse duties for various companies in the local business community" (*Workfirst* Brochure, April, 1998: 1).

25. Several legislative measures that the government is currently entertaining threaten to erode the rights and entitlements of *Ontario Works* "participants" even further.

The government of Ontario recently drafted a bill entitled "An Act to Prevent Unionization with Respect to Community Participation under the *Ontario Works Act*, 1997" (Bill 22). If adopted, Bill 22 will deny *Ontario Works* "participants" assigned to the community placement stream the right to join a union and to be covered by a collective agreement under Ontario's *Labour Relations Act*. Although it does not currently apply to participants in the employment placement stream, Bill 22 underscores the coercive nature of the *Ontario Works* scheme (Ontario Federation of Labour, 1998).

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