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## **Between Keeping Your Head Down and Trying to Get Noticed: Agency Workers in French Car Assembly Plants\*\***

Numerical flexibility is commonly promoted as a driver of employment growth. However, contingent work is frequently associated with “bad jobs”, particularly for those in low skilled occupations. Agency work is a common and growing form of contingent work and is often promoted as a tool for facilitating the labour market integration of young workers. In France, young agency workers make up a significant part of the labour force within car assembly plants. Studies have shown that these workers have harsher working conditions than permanent co-workers and are subject to a “despotic” factory regime. However, the triangular relationship, which frames the agency contract, may give rise to a more complex outcome in which the aspiration for stable employment mediates the coercion of labour market vulnerability.

Key words: **agency work, factory regimes, auto sector, agency autoworkers, hegemonic despotism, unions, labour process, Burawoy**  
(JEL: J47, J50, J63, J71, J81)

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\* Christina Purcell, Manchester Metropolitan University Business School, Aytoun Building, Aytoun Street, Manchester M1 3GH, UK. E-mail: c.purcell@mmu.ac.uk.

Paul Brook, School of Management, University of Leicester, Ken Edwards Building, University Road, Leicester LE1 7RH, UK. E-mail: viebrook@goolemail.com.

Rosemary Lucas, Manchester Metropolitan University Business School, Aytoun Building, Aytoun Street, Manchester M1 3GH, UK. E-mail: r.lucas@mmu.ac.uk.

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## Introduction

Labour market flexibility has long been a key component of the European Commission's employment strategy.<sup>1</sup> The Commission has promoted numerical flexibility and labour market deregulation as key drivers of employment growth, yet numerical flexibility is commonly associated with labour market insecurity, negative long-term career effects, and poor working conditions, particularly for those in low-skilled occupations (Smith et al., 2008; Bouffartigue, 2008; Barbieri, 2009). These are labour market outcomes that sit uneasily alongside the Commission's promotion of "decent work" (European Commission, 2006) and which present a significant challenge for European societies as policy-makers continue to pursue employment flexibility. Recent cross-national research has confirmed this association between "bad jobs" and numerical flexibility for many European workers in low-skilled, low-wage employment (Gautié and Schmitt, 2010).

Within the literature on the effects of labour market flexibility on job quality, there has been an increasing interest in agency work. Whilst agency work still represents a small proportion of employment across Europe, it has been the fastest growing form of numerical flexibility across EU15 countries and is beginning to expand in the new member states (Arrowsmith, 2009). Some studies have challenged the assumption that this is a "precarious" form of work, contending that the presence of highly skilled occupations amongst agency workers reflects an aspiration for "portfolio careers" amongst professionals able to sell their skills in favourable labour market conditions (CIETT, 2000; Knell, 2000; Guest, 2004).

Other research reasserts the negative aspect of agency work (Campbell & Burgess, 2001; Silla et al., 2005). The presence of high-skilled agency workers who appear to have a preference for agency working over permanent contracts (Kirkpatrick & Hoque, 2006; Torka & Shyns, 2007) should not obscure the continuing prevalence of low-skilled, low-wage occupations within agency work (Arrowsmith, 2006; Bergstrom & Storrie, 2003). Subsequently there has been a renewed interest in low-skilled agency workers, in part due to the emerging issue of migrant agency workers (May et al., 2006; Mackay & Markova, 2010).

The focus of research on agency work varies depending upon country context. In France, where agency work is overwhelmingly low skilled, research situates agency work within the wider context of the degradation of work in general and debates around "workplace suffering" following a number of workplace suicides (Sciences Humaines, 2005; Lefresne, 2006; Thébaud-Mony, 2007). Agency work is rarely perceived by French researchers as a positive career choice (Barbier, 2005), though the 'temporary help' industry has endeavoured to present agency work as an attractive and acceptable form of work.

A noticeable development in France is the significant proportion of agency workers that make up the workforce of the automobile industry. Both anecdotal and statistical evidence suggest that car manufacturers are turning to agency work as a consis-

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<sup>1</sup> See Jacques Delors' (1993). White Paper on "Growth, Competitiveness, Employment: The Challenges and Ways Forward into the 21st Century".

tent human resource strategy rather than a means of addressing cyclical peaks in activity (Larbi & Lecroux 2008). The car sector in France has provided the context for a rich body of literature on working conditions and labour relations. It has been an important source of data for researchers investigating the nature and experience of work in advanced capitalist societies, due to its position as a benchmark for post-war labour standards, and the leading role played by the car industry in the technological and organisational innovations across the wider economy. Whilst the growth of agency work in the sector has been recognised and the voices of agency workers have been included in qualitative research on car plants, they have not been a principal focus of study. Nor has there been a consistent engagement with the theoretical challenges posed by the presence of large proportions of agency workers in the sector.

This paper begins the work of addressing this gap, first by presenting a conceptual framework, based upon Burawoy's (1985) approach to the labour process, which tries to capture the specificity of agency work; secondly, by applying this framework to an initial analysis of data collected as part of an exploratory study of agency workers in the French car sector. In doing so, the paper presents a strong case for further research on the working lives of agency workers in order to generate both empirical and theoretical advances in the sociology of work.

The first part of the paper gives an overview of the main features of agency work in France before briefly discussing its growing importance in the automobile sector in the context of other changes that the sector has undergone. There then follows a discussion of Burawoy's (1979, 1985) approach to the labour process which has informed much of the literature on work in car plants. Burawoy's understanding of the role of factors external to the workplace is presented as a framework to examine the position of agency work within the contemporary workplace. The final part of the paper presents a 'pilot' assessment of the adequacy of Burawoy's conceptual framework via an initial study of agency workers and union representatives in three car assembly plants and one large supplier company in France.

### **Agency work in France**

France has one of the highest rates of agency work in the European Union and a well-developed temporary agency work sector dominated by a small number of large multinational temporary placement agencies. Between 2002 and 2006, 25% of jobs created involved agency contracts (INSEE, 2010). Due to the concentration of agency work in manufacturing industry, agency workers were disproportionately affected by the economic turmoil that engulfed Western economies in 2008. In France 130,000 temporary agency jobs were lost between 2008/2009 (INSEE, 2010). Latest figures put the number of agency workers within the French workforce at 550,000 (Clément et al., 2010). Whilst this is lower than the pre-2008 figure of 637,000 (INSEE, 2010), there has been a steady increase in numbers since the low point of the first quarter of 2009 (438,600<sup>2</sup>). Official figures show that during the second quarter of 2010, whilst the overall number of jobs fell, a rise in agency work partially offset the decline in overall employment (DARES, 2010). This recovery so soon after such dramatic falls in

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<sup>2</sup> INSEE série longue intérim diffusion 30/06/2010.

agency labour suggests that companies are using agency work to provide them with the flexibility to rapidly adjust their workforce in response to immediate economic shocks and future uncertainty. Within manufacturing, which accounts for over 40% of the volume of agency work (DARES, 2009), it is the automobile industry which is the most prolific user in terms of the proportion of agency work in relation to total workforce. In 2007, agency workers represented 282,000 full-time equivalent posts in the French automobile sector, making up just fewer than 10% of the total workforce, in contrast to 3.6% for all economic sectors. This figure fell to 263,000 in 2008. Since then, central government subventions to support the car industry, coupled with incentives to encourage consumers to buy French cars, have helped to produce an increase in agency work in the sector (DARES, 2009).

The concentration of agency work in French manufacturing means there is an over-representation of low-skilled males amongst agency workers. In 2007, 71% of agency workers were men, decreasing to 64% in 2008 due to the loss of agency work contracts in male-dominated industries (DARES, 2009). Three-quarters of agency workers are employed in routine and lower technical occupations (*ouvriers qualifiés or non-qualifiés*) in contrast to permanent jobs where these occupations represent a third of contracts (Caussain & Krief, 2007). Again the car sector comprises for a large part of these statistics with a number of French regions relying upon the automobile sector as a major source of employment for young men. Increasingly, access to employment in car assembly and equipment plants is through temporary work agencies.

Legislation governing agency worker in France is based upon the principle of parity. Agency workers receive the same hourly pay as permanent workers carrying out equivalent jobs. In addition, agency workers receive an end of placement bonus to compensate for their lack of job security. However, agency workers tend to be paid according to the lowest hourly wage on the pay scale since they do not accumulate years of seniority. This, coupled with the sporadic nature of placements, explains the high proportion of agency workers earning on average less than the minimum wage.<sup>3</sup>

There exists no comprehensive data on the quality of work of agency workers. However, studies have shown that agency workers are more likely to be exposed to lower quality of work than workers with permanent contracts (Erhel et al., 2009). The lack of access to training means that low-skilled agency workers have a high probability of remaining in precarious work.<sup>4</sup> Despite formal rights to training specific to agency workers since 1983 and the introduction of the “*droit individuel à la formation*” (employee access to training) in 2004, take-up rates are inferior to those of other workers, due to a number of factors, including lack of information about rights (Perez & Thomas, 2005).

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<sup>3</sup> 16.5% of agency workers earned less than 500 Euros per month and 14.8% earned between 500 and 1000 Euros (*Dares premières informations/synthèses, Septembre 2008*).

<sup>4</sup> A study by the Ministère du Travail in 2005 found that 70% of agency workers who had been in agency work the year before were still in temporary employment, while another study found that 39% of agency workers were still agency workers after a year and 23% had joined the ranks of the unemployed (Erhel et al., 2009, p. 29).

The promotion of a “permanent pool of agency workers” in the car sector (Gorgeu & Matthieu, 2009; Erhel et al., 2009) and the steady decline of permanent contracts makes difficult the transition to stable employment in regions dependent on the industry, particularly for low-skilled workers. Local labour markets, which are dependent on automobile clusters, are highly sensitive to trends in employment and human resource strategies of the major car manufacturers. In 2004, Renault and Peugeot-Citroën PSA accounted for 64% of the 98,000 jobs<sup>5</sup> directly linked to the automobile sector in the Ile-de-France (IAURIF, 2004). In the north east, where car plants dominate the economic landscape, between 2008 and 2009 employment declined by 5% compared with 3.6% nationally (INSEE, 2010).

The frequent and on-going use of agency work in jobs (posts) that are associated with the regular business activity of large, locally-embedded manufacturing plants (Viprey, 2002) can extend young workers’ period of transition from education to stable labour market integration. In a region like Franche-Comte, where 20% of agency workers in the region work in the automobile sector (INSEE, 2009) and where 68,000 jobs are linked to the Peugeot plant in Sochaux (Lemarre, 2009), economic shocks are a reminder of how the growth of precarious work leaves significant sections of the local labour force exposed to the market. Indeed, those regions where the automobile industry is a major employer suffered disproportionately from the recent economic crisis.

### **Car assembly plants, change and legislation**

Temporary agency work is highly regulated in France. Contracts are limited to 18 months and must not be associated with the regular and on-going activity of the user firm. However, a number of high profile court rulings in favour of agency workers indicate that the automobile industry engages in human resource practices that exceed the boundaries of legislation (Viprey, 2002). There is evidence that it repeatedly tinkers with job descriptions to circumvent the 18-month limit on agency contracts; and recruits production line workers almost exclusively on agency contracts suggesting this practice comprises a “standard human resource strategy” (Viprey, 2002), to resolve labour force issues that go beyond those provided for in the legislation.

Beaud and Pialoux (1999), in an ethnographic study of the Peugeot factory at Sochaux in the northeast of France, document the dramatic rise of agency work in the plant in the 1980s, where at its peak, agency workers constituted a third of unskilled workers. In the group’s Aulnay plant, north of Paris, agency workers have frequently accounted for over a third of the workforce, whilst there has been a steady decline in the numbers of permanent workers (Viprey, 2002). Similar figures can be found amongst suppliers. Sintax, a sub-contractor to Toyota in Valenciennes, was recently sanctioned due to its abusive use of agency work. A court ruled in favour of a group of young agency workers who had been working at the plant for periods ranging from two to five years. These young men had become accustomed to accepting their precarious employment status since they felt confident that their contract would continue

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<sup>5</sup> The automobile sector accounts for 11% of total employment in the Ile-de-France (IAURIF, 2004).

to be renewed, given the constantly high proportion of agency workers at the plant. At one point there were 200 agency workers working alongside 49 employees.<sup>6</sup>

These examples belie the iconic image that the automobile sector has traditionally occupied in European employment relations. Autoworkers have been a stronghold of European unions, with levels of union density relatively high in comparison with national averages. In addition, the sector is a historically important source of innovation in the organisation of work and industrial relations systems associated with Fordist production regimes. Collective bargaining, framed within the paradigm of the male manufacturing worker and guaranteeing stable employment with clear grading structures for job progression is strongly embedded in the labour relations of car plants (Pedersini, 2003).

In France, the sector has been a model for the social compromise of the *Trente Glorieuse* (post-war boom), a key element of which is the contract of indefinite duration (*Contrat à Durée Indéterminée* or CDI). From the guarantee of stable employment flowed other guarantees enhanced by sector-level collective agreements; minimum wage levels, alleviation of social risk such as ill-health, workplace accidents and unemployment, and a special retirement regime to account for the nature of “*travail pénible*” (arduous work).

However, the automobile industry has also been at the forefront of changes that have challenged this industrial relations model. The externalization through outsourcing of significant parts of the production process and the promotion of numerical flexibility driven by the demands of just-in-time and lean production, have undermined trade union collectivism amongst the workforce. Internally, new management techniques, framed by a discourse of participative management and empowerment, have undermined the collective representation of labour upon which the post-war model is based (Beaud & Pialoux, 1999).

The car sector has been the site of important ethnographic research both in the ‘golden’ period of Taylorist working practices and more recent restructuring of work organisation (Beaud & Pialoux, 1999; Danford, 1998, 2000; Durand & Hatzfeld, 2002; Bouquin, 2006). Many of these studies have worked with labour process theory (see Braverman, 1974), in particular the work of Burawoy (1979), as a theoretical framework that captures the different and dynamic configurations of management control and workers’ consent/resistance within the diverse range of contemporary workplaces. However, peripheral workers have been largely marginal to this research, often referred to in order to illustrate despotic workplace relations and/or management attempts to undermine union organisation (Danford, 1998; Hatzfeld, 2004).

Beaud and Pialoux’s (1999) study provides a glimpse into the world of the agency workers at the Sochaux plant. However, this work is also based upon the assumption that agency workers are subject to despotic labour relations due to their precarious employment status. Bouquin (2006), on the other hand, presents a more multifaceted analysis of agency work by identifying sources of consent to work which flow from

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<sup>6</sup> See: [http://www.lavoixdunord.fr/Locales/Valenciennes/actualite/Valenciennes/2008/11/15/article\\_neuf-anciens-interimaires-attaquent-un-s.shtml](http://www.lavoixdunord.fr/Locales/Valenciennes/actualite/Valenciennes/2008/11/15/article_neuf-anciens-interimaires-attaquent-un-s.shtml) [Accessed 18th February 2010].

this specific form of employment status. It is here that Burawoy's theory of production politics, which situates workplace interaction within societal relations expressing the degree of compromise and/or struggle between capital and labour, provides an opportunity to explore further how the specific conditions underpinning the labour process can give rise to different configurations of consent and coercion.

### Workers and evolving workplace regimes

Burawoy's (1979) seminal work, *Manufacturing Consent*, was part of a wider trend within workplace sociology focusing upon localised and varied management control strategies and workers' responses.<sup>7</sup> The conceptualisation of 'participation' and 'consent to work' through the metaphors of "games" and "making out" respectively serve as a convincing account of the shift from the "despotic regime" of production, described by Marx and re-conceptualised by Braverman (1974), to a "hegemonic regime". In contrast with the despotic regimes associated with primitive capitalist accumulation, a hegemonic regime is dependent on generating consent to work rather than relying on the fear produced by the raw necessity of economical survival.

Burawoy's *The Politics of Production* (1985) went further in theorising how state, market and social conditions generate the factory regimes in which workplace dynamics are embedded. By connecting the micro-dynamics of workplace relations to macro-level structures, the workplace is seen as the outcome of the "political apparatus of production", the most crucial elements of which are state support for the reproduction of labour power and state protection against the arbitrary action of employers<sup>8</sup>. Whilst the latter play a direct role in regulating the employment relation, the former attenuates the social relationship upon which capital's ability to harness labour is based (i.e. the inability of the worker to reproduce his or her labour power outside of the wage relationship). This dependency of the worker on the capitalist for survival is one of the conditions described by Marx for capital's despotic control over labour in early industrial capitalism since the worker is compelled to sell his/her labour power in order to secure the means of survival. Thus, the replacement of despotism by more subtle forms of control over the labour process in advanced capitalist economies is principally the product of negotiated compromises arising from the structured antagonism between capital and labour within and outside the labour process, rather than a more "enlightened" approach to human resource management by employers.

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<sup>7</sup> Burawoy's contribution to labour process theory is important because he goes beyond Braverman's (1974) emphasis on labour degradation and the structural dynamics of the capitalist labour process. Instead, he focuses on the complex processes that produce the variety of forms of labour surplus extraction and the factors determining their emergence. In particular, he is concerned to place centre stage the individual and collective agency of the worker.

<sup>8</sup> Burawoy identified two other elements of the political apparatus of production – competition and technology – which he considered to be subordinate to the role of the state in reproducing labour power and regulating the employment relationship (Burawoy, 1985, p. 148).



Institutional mechanisms, such as collective agreements, minimum wages, employment rights and protection undermine the ability of the employer to exercise unrestrained control over the labour process. The “despotic regime” gives way to the “hegemonic regime”, in which employers engage in strategies to elicit consent from the workforce. Different forms and degrees of state intervention generate different types of hegemonic regime, characterised by different parameters of control, consent and resistance. Thus, a new form of regime – ‘hegemonic despotism’ – emerged with organisational restructuring, deregulation, welfare state retrenchment and the return of mass unemployment in the 1980s. Hegemonic despotism is characterised by the way that fear of ‘capital flight’ combines with new management techniques, such as performance related pay, to mobilise the consent of the workforce to the intensification of work.

Burawoy provides a successful account of the dynamic evolution of workplace regimes over time and simultaneously identifies the emergence of a new form of regime within the context of what we now recognise as neo-liberal globalisation. He does this by first untying the “compartmentalisation of production and politics”, thereby enabling him to argue that there is an interdependent relationship between the organisation of work and the state. Second, he insists on the importance of the “political apparatuses which reproduce those relations of the labour process through the regulation of struggles” (1985, p. 122).

### **Autoworkers under ‘hegemonic despotism’**

The car industry is seen as “an ideal typical example of hegemonic despotism” (Sallaz, 2004, p. 691). In an increasingly international competitive environment, auto-manufacturers have insisted on the need to emulate forms of work organisation identified as the most efficient in order to guarantee the survival of the firm. The risk of losing competitive advantage provides a compelling rationale for the implementation of lean production, resulting in a consensus around the “one best way” to organise production. Workers are said to gain from potential and relative job security in the external context of increased risk, and from less monotonous and alienating work practices. Team-based work organisation, quality circles that provide a space for active problem solving and HRM practices, which promote high-commitment and “shared destiny” (Oliver & Wilkinson, 1992), are all part of the package presented to the workforce in the “post-Fordist” automobile plant. According to this narrative, relations between employer and employees are transformed, as workers buy into company goals and values of efficiency and quality. In return, workers benefit from skills gained from being flexible and polyvalent modern workers. The external environment of intense global competition, including encroachments on labour rights at the state and political level, provides the conditions for a shift towards market despotism, tempered internally by ‘employee participation’ management practices and a discourse of partnership with trade unions.

Research on the evolution of work in the car industry illustrates the varied outcomes of this transformation of work. Whilst there is a strong bias towards negative outcomes for workers, the variety of workplace behaviours and responses points to the influence of different layers of context. In particular, national institutional settings

establish the broad parameters within a wider global context of capital mobility; sectoral competitive demands set the scene for the organisation of production; and local labour markets and labour movements mediate the negotiations on the shop floor. For example, total quality management and quality circles commonly produce contradictory outcomes for workers, as a significant proportion actively engage in these management controlled forms of employee participation to enhance their work experience and therefore prospects (see Danford, 1998).

These new configurations of control and consent, however, may not be relevant to agency workers. Bouquin (2006) suggests that agency workers are influenced by a different type of management control, situated partly in market despotism but also in aspirations for a permanent contract. This theme is taken further by another body of literature, which focuses on the individual and collective consequences of the agency workers' unique contractual status.

### **Triangular relationships and dual control**

Gottfried (1992) takes as a starting point the triangular relationship between worker, agency and user-firm to develop an appropriate theory of control and consent. She concludes that the agency worker is subject to a dualistic system of control – a concept that captures the two distinct structures of management – and the different roles of each in regulating and managing agency work. First, there is the self-disciplinary pressure arising from the continuous need to gain access to paid employment via the temporary employment agency. Once access is (temporarily) gained, control takes place at the point of production. The agency worker must then acquiesce simultaneously to the direct supervision of their labour, and the requirements of employment agency in order to secure future opportunities. This suggests an intensification of aspects of despotic control – coupled with labour market vulnerability associated with the lack of a permanent contract – compels agency workers to accept working conditions that they are unable to influence and likely to be inferior to those of permanent co-workers.

Gottfried (1992) argues, however, that even in this disadvantageous context, consent can be relevant. Both employment agencies and user-firms tap into the future aspirations of agency workers to encourage workplace behaviours of consent and compliance, engaging in discourses which correspond to aspirations, a theme that is taken up by Degiuli and Kollmeyer (2007), and which Bouquin (2006) alluded to. Similar themes arise in other research on agency work. The path to secure employment depends upon the ability of the agency worker to present her/himself as “reliably contingent” (Peck & Theodore, 2001, p. 486), resulting in a high discipline regime which generates the need for “deep self-discipline” (Smith, 1998).

“Duality of control” gives a central position to the contractual status of agency workers in shaping the specific micro-dynamic interactions of workplace and agency settings. Given that the employment relationship, as an institution, plays a leading role in regulating and shaping struggles in the workplace (Burawoy, 1985, p. 123), it follows that it is a core aspect of the organisation of work to which production regimes are sensitive (Nichols et al., 2004; Steinberg, 2003).

### **Modified hegemonic despotism?**

Though hegemonic despotism emerged in the context of generalised employment insecurity, the permanent employment contract continues to be a key factor tying workers to the company's survival (Burawoy, 1985, Stewart et al., 2004, Sallaz, 2004). On the other hand, job insecurity is omnipresent for agency workers, regardless of the viability of the plant. Firm survival strategies frequently involve the shedding of the peripheral workforce, as recent developments in the auto sector have graphically illustrated. Therefore, management tend to perceive agency workers as a "buffer" to protect core workers, with the effect that they are principally treated as a part of management's hegemonic armoury rather than subject to it.

Similarly, organisational practices identified in the literature designed to align workers to company goals may not elicit the same response from a section of the workforce that has a time-delimited association with the firm. Agency work, transient by nature, may also undermine the development of autonomous teams (Pardi, 2007, Lepadat, 2007), whilst the core principles of lean production, centred as they are around the need for a skilled, well trained and motivated workforce (Stewart, 1998, p.219), may not be relevant to those on agency contracts.

If these sources of 'consent' do not apply to agency work, is Gottfried's (1992) approach appropriate? Or does it make more sense to fall back on explanations that focus on the increased exposure to the market? Degiuli and Kollmeyer's (2007) research combines both. Drawing upon Gottfried's analysis, they identify three practices that combine external sources associated with economic vulnerability. The first two are features that have some correspondence to the ideological components of hegemonic despotism: temporary work agencies engage in practices aimed at normalising labour flexibility; agency work is re-branded so that work placements are perceived as a trial period for permanent employment. All parties have a shared interest; a loyal relationship with the agency can lead to ongoing placements and an increased chance of permanent work. The third source of control is rooted in market despotism and combines with the former sources of control to generate acceptance coupled with aspiration, which motivate agency workers to "play the game" (Burawoy, 1979).

Within the automobile industry, acceptance of agency work may also be a function of the demographic characteristics of agency workers, with younger workers being more accepting of agency contracts as a path into secure employment (Beaud & Pialoux, 1999). However, where permanent contracts become increasingly illusory, and as placements are punctuated with frequent periods of unemployment, the perceived benefits of "playing the game" may be undermined.

### **Data and evidence**

In order to establish the adequacy of the theoretical framework outlined above, exploratory fieldwork was carried out in 2010. Interviews were undertaken with plant-based union representatives and temporary agency workers (TAW) in three car assembly plants and one large supplier company in France. Three of the union representatives also had experience of agency work in the sector. In total, there were eleven interviewees, six of whom were currently or had previously been agency workers. Two

unions are represented in the sample, the *Confédération Generale du Travail* (CGT) and the *Fédération des Syndicats Solidaires, Unitaires et Démocratiques* (SUD). One interviewee is a full-time, national SUD officer. A potentially significant limitation is the absence of the other generally less militant union federations when compared with the more radical political traditions of the CGT and SUD (Connolly, 2010).

Interviews were largely semi-structured with the aim of eliciting information and perceptions on the position of agency workers and their experience of work in the sector. The interview guide covered a range of issues pertinent to the working lives of agency workers: nature of jobs carried out by agency workers; control over pace of work; relations with co-workers; support and constraints at work; role of temporary help agencies; attitudes to unions and management; and other themes as they arose naturally from the interviews. The agency workers interviewed were young, reflecting the demography of agency workers in the sector. In one case, an interview took place outside of a large factory complex on the outskirts of Paris during a change of shift, thus rendering the interview more fluid and unstructured.

Interviews were conducted in French and translated into English. For the purposes of this exploratory study, the quality of the translations has not been subject to validation instruments (Brislin, 1980). This was not considered necessary since the aim of the data analysis is to identify common emerging themes through an initial analysis of the content.

### **One factory, two workforces**

The majority of posts are very hard, but there are posts that are even harder. It's true that the posts which are the most difficult, the hardest physically, are occupied by agency workers. Their salary is calculated at the lowest level, calculated on the basis of the lowest salary. One of the benefits for the workers is the profit sharing bonus. Every three months we have between 500 and 600 Euros which allows us to breathe a little financially. They don't have this, although they do harder work (Eddie, ex-TAW, union representative, car plant 1).

All car plant interviewees spoke of the physically hard nature of the work for all production workers. However, there was a general recognition that agency workers were assigned to the most demanding posts. This led to problems with supervisors for some workers as they struggled to keep up with the pace of the work, and fears that they would not be kept on.

They will end the contract, they won't renew the contract. We signed a contract for two months, and after he [the supervisor] said to me "you haven't done all the operations, we are not going to renew the contract". So for two months we worked, as we say, like dogs (Amina, TAW, car plant 2).

The expectations of performance were higher for agency workers. For example, Leila (car plant 2) discovered after suffering a workplace accident that the task was normally carried out by two permanent workers.

That agency workers are assigned to the most difficult posts is not a revelation (Beaud & Pialoux, 1999; Bouquin, 2006). How this effects social relations within the workplace is less known. For example, Bouquin's (2006) study looked more at the generational divide between permanent workers and younger agency workers. Ac-

cording to union representatives, there was no tension in the workforce arising from an unequal division of labour, although two agency workers did feel highly aggrieved by their inferior work experience in comparison with permanent co-workers. For another, resentment was directed more towards the firm. Thus, in a context where the numbers of permanent workers in the automobile sector have been steadily declining, the practice of “buffering” (Sallaz, 2004) permanent workers appears to be taking on a different form, whereby they are protected against the harshest jobs but not job loss. It was also suggested that the more intensive pace of work carried out by agency staff could be used by managers as a tougher benchmark for the rest of the workforce.

Confining agency workers to the most physically strenuous and repetitive work benefited the company in other ways. According to union representatives, the extensive use of agency work meant that there was a continuous supply of young and physically fit workers. In assembly workshops, physical deterioration due to the frequency and rapidity of actions left workers with significant occupational health injuries in a short period. Thus, a large disposable workforce reduces the liability for the firm.

Whilst in their discourse they guarantee a job for life, in reality they have a rapid turnover in order to manage the personnel. They overwork the young workers of twenty-five, they make them work to the limit and then you see workers that are wrecked, who have to have an operation on their wrists, who have their joints and back damaged (Eddie, ex-TAW, union representative, car plant 1).

Having large proportions of agency workers in the most difficult workshops allows manufacturers to renew a workforce subject to rapid physical deterioration. Rather than being marginal, agency work appears to be a key element of human resource strategy.<sup>9</sup> There is little incentive to take into account the long-term effects of physically demanding work if a significant proportion of the workforce can be easily discarded and replaced. This is illustrated by frequent attempts to conceal workplace accidents, which may have long-term consequences for those involved.

Agency workers will disappear from the figures. And what’s more, they are more likely to have accidents because they have less experience. It’s difficult, there is a real fight around this, because when there is a workplace accident, normally the boss must register it, but he doesn’t want to. He doesn’t want to fill out the forms, so he says to the worker “don’t worry about it, go home for a couple of days, when you come back we’ll sort it out, if we have to withdraw you from that post, we’ll put you on a chair for a few days and you won’t have to do anything” (Pierre, ex-TAW, union representative, car plant 2).

Another interviewee reiterated this point:

An agency worker who has a work accident... the agency will put pressure on him not to declare the accident so that they can make it look as if they’re aren’t accidents, What you should know is there are, on average, 4 accidents a day. Some are registered, others not. They conceal them (Rachid, union representative, car plant 2).

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<sup>9</sup> Christian Courouge, a Peugeot worker who collaborated with Pialoux in the study of Peugeot’s Sochaux plant, spoke in a radio broadcast on Patrick Jan’s documentary, “Ouvrier, c’est pas la classe”, of the fundamental role of agency workers in keeping the plant going. He claimed that the plant would not be able to function without agency workers given the high rates of workplace related injuries due to the nature of the work [[http://www.la-bas.org/article.php?id\\_article=330](http://www.la-bas.org/article.php?id_article=330)].

When agency workers experience accidents in the workplace, the accident is also registered with the agency, which is the legal employer, so whilst all workers are subject to pressure to keep quiet, agency workers are doubly pressurised. One worker, who was due to leave the plant, spoke of the danger of being blacklisted by both the user firm and the agency because she had insisted on formally reporting her workplace accident, despite knowing the possible severe, adverse consequences:

Once you are “classified”, you’re finished. You can’t work there any more, if you have had a problem, for example an accident that has been registered. Even if you changed [the agency] you wouldn’t be able to return...

... I’ve been “classified”. Because I had a work accident, and was on sick leave (Leila, TAW, car plant 2).

The “duality of control” (Gottfried, 1992), therefore gives rise to different layers of coercion, increasing the anxieties of agency workers with regard to both immediate and longer term consequences of accidents, and other “lapses” in performance. These examples point to the reinforcement of the despotic element of the factory regime flowing from the agency contract.

### “Dependable” and on “trial”

The big car manufacturers and temporary work agencies supplying the industry have a long-standing and close relationship, which involves large contracts that allow for lower rates for user-firms. The tight relationship between these two economically powerful actors inevitably gives rise to an unequal relationship with the agency worker (Ward, 2003). The fear of being blacklisted by both agency and user firm can have a considerable influence on the behaviour of workers, from the recruitment stage with the agency, to the time spent working for the user firm, through to the next assignment, resulting in an “*extended trial period*” (Gilles, national SUD official).

Management can be very open in what it expects from agency staff, whilst the role of the temporary work agency is to supply user-firms with “*dependable*” and “*good workers who don’t question things*” (Thierry, car plant 3). Being a “good worker” also means having the “right” attitude towards unions.

When we were agency workers, we kept quiet. We didn’t show our union sympathies. We made out as if we didn’t think about those things. And when the boss asked us to do overtime, we said yes. Because if we said no, we could be sacked. Even in the recruitment interviews, they put questions to agency workers: “what do you think of unions, strikes?” At that point you couldn’t say what you thought (*Thierry, ex-TAW, union representative, car plant 3*).

A young agency worker in the north of France was not sure that he would join a union if he had a permanent contract. However, he was unambiguous in his opinion that even associating with unions as an agency worker was out of the question:

If I was permanent I might have thought about joining a union that could have been useful perhaps to defend my interests. As an agency worker, I didn’t give it a moment’s thought. I discussed with X, who is the union representative, and sometimes we shared the same opinion, but I wasn’t going to tell everyone in the factory that I agreed with X. That you didn’t do. I kept it to myself (Daniel, TAW, car plant 1).

So agency workers are from the very start engaging in strategies to gain access to work and to guarantee continued access, yet this does not necessarily mean that they are en-

gaging in the types of games that Burawoy (1979) described. The consent that Burawoy described in the playing out of games and “making out” takes place in a context in which workers have some margin of power. The context in which agency workers project an image of the “reliably contingent” worker (Peck & Theodore, 2001) is one in which there is no space for negotiation. The construction of this image takes place under constrained circumstances where there is an imperative to “*keep your head down*” and “*not complain*”. At the same time, there is also a desire to be noticed by those who might influence recruitment decisions.

We have to give more than the others, as agency workers. A CDI, he finishes his work, he goes home, it's fine. An agency worker will try to get himself noticed, to chat to everyone, just in order to make himself stand out. Why? Because he hopes that if he stands out, he'll get a permanent contract (Daniel, TAW, car plant 1).

This corresponds to those studies that have found that contingent workers are likely to be accommodating to management's demands (Gottfried, 1992; Smith, 1998). Hodson (1995, cited in Padavic, 2005) referred to this form of behaviour as “enthusiastic participation”; whilst Smith (1998) revealed how temporary workers will regularly go beyond what is expected of them in search of a future reward.

### **From aspiration to disillusion**

Policy-makers, researchers and manufacturers commonly promote agency work as a mechanism for facilitating the labour market integration of young workers or other groups with weak labour market attachment (Booth et al., 2002). However, there was a perception amongst interviewees that large car manufacturers were exploiting unfavourable labour market conditions in areas around the plants to access flexible and cheap labour. One particular source of indignation was that these nationally important, profitable companies were not treating all their workers in a “*fair way*” and were able to get away with conditions and terms of work which were likened to “*modern day slavery*” (Jean-Luc, union representative, car plant 2). Young workers at one of the plants, employed by the company on state-subsidised training contracts, shared a similar sentiment. These temporary contracts were to lead to a *Certificat de Qualification Paritaires de la Métallurgie* (CPQM), a vocational qualification recognised by employers. By taking on young workers on these contracts, the company receives state funds and the removal of social security charges. At the time of the interviews, there were over one hundred of these young “apprentices”, a small group of whom were seeking advice from the union, since they had not received any of the training specified in their contract. They expressed strong disillusionment due to the perception that the company recruited them specifically to minimise labour costs. Consequently, they perceived their status as similar to agency workers rather than traditional apprentices.

Despite bad reputations, large national car manufacturers were considered important companies to work for. Though agency workers were not led to believe that agency contracts would lead to permanent work, there was at the beginning of assignments the aspiration of a permanent contract; there was always the chance that you could stand out and be taken on. However, these aspirations can be quickly quashed. The frequent non-renewal of contracts for large groups of agency workers brought home the precarious nature of their position, whilst the reality of the work

frequently dampened aspirations for a permanent contract. For Leila (TAW, car plant 2), everyone knew that the company “*has a bad reputation, but you hope you fall on one of the easier jobs*”. When her post proved too hard, she stuck it out until her contract was not renewed (due to a workplace accident), then she left with the knowledge that she did not want to work in such a “*horrible*” workplace.

It appears, therefore, that the ability to elicit consent via aspirations for future work (Bouquin, 2006) is time-limited. Experience can dampen any self-projection of motivation or loyalty to the firm. Aspirations and a sense of being empowered to influence career paths, which may exist at the beginning of the relationship between agency worker, employment agency and user-firm, can be rapidly replaced by the experience of market coercion within labour markets unfavourable to low-skilled workers.

### **Conclusion: How different is the agency autoworker experience?**

Whilst the sample is small, it does have the merit of highlighting new issues that can inform a framework for future research. As graphically shown in earlier studies, agency workers form part of a disadvantaged section of the workforce in comparison to permanent co-workers. This is hardly revelatory, as it reinforces the claim that the specificity of the agency contract alters the nature of the production regime and makes problematic the central assumption of contemporary labour process theory and analysis that management need to manufacture ‘consent’ amongst employees. There is little evidence, in the accounts presented above, of the ideological elements of a ‘consent’ based management control strategy associated with hegemonic despotism. Similarly there is little correspondence between the experience of agency workers and the forms of individual “resistance” to management control or survival strategies identified in much labour process literature (Ackroyd & Thompson, 1999).

On the other hand, the “duality of control” identified by Gottfried (1992), arising from the dual pressures of agency and user-firm, may be tempered at the beginning of placements by a willingness to conform to the ideal of a “good worker”, even if that means a negation of the self, as beliefs, particularly with regards to unions, are concealed. In such circumstances, any form of “consent” to perform “well” depends on the individual’s aspirations for stable (and “good” quality) employment (Gottfried, 1992; Degiuli & Kollmeyer, 2007; Bouquin, 2006). Keeping one’s “head down” whilst trying to make an impact on supervisors is a strategy which suggests a modified version of “making out” and “playing the game”, in a context where the prize is not incremental concessions, but a stable job. However, when reality does not correspond to aspirations, the experience of the labour process is transformed for the agency worker. The market coercion dimension of the labour process becomes more prominent as disillusion and hostility to the company sets in, the outcome of which will depend upon individual options for other employment. Where agency workers continue to conform to management demands, this will be in the context of an altered relationship to the labour process, where coercion plays a larger role. Others may choose to turn their back upon the demands of companies and agencies, such as the agency worker who declared her workplace accident, in the knowledge that this would cost her job and the possibility of future placements. As one of the union representatives



explained, “*leaving becomes a form of resistance*” when there are few resources available to oppose management’s control.

To what extent, therefore, is there a qualitative difference in the managerial regime experienced by agency workers and that experienced by permanent workers? From the data presented above, there appears to be no incentive for management in car plants to elicit consent from their agency workforce. Are agency workers, therefore, subjected to a regime of market despotism as suggested by earlier studies (Beaud & Pialoux, 1999) or do the conceptual insights provided by Gottfried (1992) and Degiuli and Kollmeyer (2007) suggest a new type of regime specific to this growing form of employment relationship?

Further research is required to reveal the extent to which the phenomenon of agency work represents a qualitatively different experience of the labour process. The data presented here is limited and provides only an indication of the working lives of agency workers. To further reveal how consent and coercion evolve over time, it will be necessary to gain access to a much larger sample of agency workers, including those who may just be beginning on their journey as a precarious worker in French car plants. It will be also necessary to gain a wider sample of union voices. For example, the *Confédération Française Démocratique du Travail* (CFDT) has a much more accommodating attitude to flexibility and adheres to the concept of “flexicurity” as a way of promoting employment growth and job quality. Nevertheless, Western Europe’s post-1945 institutions of industrial relations were built upon the assumptions and practices of the workplace hegemonic regime identified by Burawoy. Thus, the – dismantling and reforming of – European industrial relations in the closing decades of the last century paralleled the transition to hegemonic despotism, as unions strove to adapt to the changing circumstances of intensifying global competition, periodic economic crises and increasing political fragmentation and instability. The growth in agency work has presented a similar challenge to unions across Europe as their strategies have evolved from hostility to recognition that union renewal cannot bypass agency workers, particularly in their traditional strongholds, such as the auto industry. Further research needs to address both the evolution of production regimes through a more detailed analysis of how agency workers consent to inferior working conditions and the implications of this for plant-based labour relations and union organisation. The importance of comprehending the nature of the production regime for agency workers, therefore, goes beyond theoretical considerations into strategic labour movement debates on union organising, mobilization and renewal.

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