Despite Labor Shortages, Workers See Few Gains in Economic Security

The pandemic has supposedly given service workers leverage. But many still have unstable hours and incomes because employers like the flexibility.

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Over the past two months, Brenda Garcia, who works at a Chipotle in Queens, has struggled to land more than 20 hours per week, making it difficult to keep up with her expenses. When she confronts her manager, he vows to try to find her more work, but the problem invariably persists. In one recent week, the store scheduled her for a single 6.25-hour shift.

“It’s not enough for me — they’re not giving me a stable job,” said Ms. Garcia, whose work involves chopping vegetables and other tasks before burritos are assembled. “They’re not giving me the hours and the days I’m supposed to be getting.”

Ms. Garcia’s limited hours are not unusual at Chipotle, which has a largely part-time work force. A weekly schedule at her store from early January showed at least a dozen workers with fewer than 20 hours and several with fewer than 15.

With workers nationwide quitting at high rates and companies complaining that they can’t fill jobs, employers might be expected to rethink their dependence on part-time scheduling. While some employees prefer the flexibility, many say it leaves them with too few hours, too little income or erratic shifts.

But that rethinking does not appear to have happened. Government data show that in retail businesses, the portion of workers on part-time schedules last year stood about where it was just before the pandemic, and that it increased somewhat in hospitality industries like restaurants and hotels.

In a twice-yearly survey by Daniel Schneider, a Harvard sociologist, and Kristen Harknett, a sociologist at the University of California, San Francisco, one-quarter of workers at large retailers and restaurant chains said they were scheduled 35 hours a week or less and wanted more hours. That was down from about one-third in 2019, but the change was driven by a decline in the number of workers wanting more hours, most likely because of pandemic health risks and work-life conflicts, not because employers were providing more hours.

Even as employers complain of having to scramble to fill vacancies, there is little evidence that service workers are winning any meaningful, long-term gains. While businesses have raised wages, those increases can be easily eroded by inflation, if they haven’t been already. The overall national rate of membership in unions — which can obtain wage increases for workers even absent labor shortages — matched its lowest level on record last year.

Limited work hours are not unusual at Chipotle, which has a largely part-time work force. Brandon Bell/Getty Images

And the unpredictable schedules that arise when employers constantly adjust staffing in response to customer demand, something that is common among part-timers, are roughly as prevalent as before the pandemic. The survey by Dr. Schneider and Dr. Harknett found that about two-thirds of workers continue to receive less than two weeks' notice of their schedules.

"Companies are doing all they can not to bake in any gains that are difficult to claw back," Dr. Schneider said. "Workers' labor market power is so far not yielding durable dividends."

The changes that make work lower paying, less stable and generally more precarious date back to the 1960s and '70s, when the labor market evolved in two key ways. First, companies began pushing more work outside the firm — relying increasingly on contractors, temps and franchisees, a practice known as "fissuring."

Second, many businesses that continued to employ workers directly began hiring them to part-time positions, rather than full-time roles, particularly in the retail and hospitality industries.

According to the scholars Chris Tilly of the University of California, Los Angeles, and Françoise Carré of the University of Massachusetts Boston, the initial impetus for the shift to part-time work was the mass entry of women into the work force, including many who preferred part-time positions so they could be home when children returned from school.

Before long, however, employers saw an advantage in hiring part-timers and deliberately added more. "A light bulb went on one day," Dr. Tilly said. "'If we're expanding part-time schedules, we don't have to offer benefits, we can offer a lower wage rate.'"

By the late 1980s, employers had begun using scheduling software to forecast customer demand and staffed accordingly. Having a large portion of part-time workers, who could be given more hours when stores got busy and fewer hours when business slowed, helped enable this practice, known as just-in-time scheduling.

But the arrangement subjected workers to fluctuating schedules and unreliable hours, disrupting their personal lives, their sleep, even their children's brain development.

Nonetheless, the model continued to spread, and the shift to a heavily part-time work force was largely complete across retail by the mid-1990s.

A recent study commissioned by Kroger found that about 70 percent of the supermarket company's nearly 85,000 store employees in California, Colorado, Oregon and Washington State were part time. A survey of more than 10,000 Kroger workers on behalf of four union locals by the Economic Roundtable, a nonprofit research group, found widespread evidence of just-in-time scheduling, with more than half of workers reporting that their schedules changed at least weekly.

Kroger, one of the nation's largest employers, said in a statement that many of its employees sought part-time jobs for their flexibility and for health care benefits that competitors didn't offer, as well as for opportunities for upward mobility. "We provide hundreds of thousands of people with first jobs (think baggers, cashiers, stockers, etc.), second chances, retirement employment, college gigs," the statement said.

The company added that locals of the United Food and Commercial Workers union had negotiated and agreed to the relevant provisions of its labor contracts for decades.

A spokeswoman for Chipotle, where Service Employees International Union Local 32BJ is helping workers organize, likewise said that managers and employees mutually agreed on hours and that the company enabled employees to pick up additional shifts at other New York City stores when they were available.

But the practices remain contentious. In mid-January, more than 8,000 Denver-area workers at King Soopers, a supermarket chain owned by Kroger, went on strike, citing the lack of full-time employment as a key issue.

Workers picketing during a strike at King Soopers in Denver. A key issue was the lack of full-time employment. Michael Ciaglo/Getty Images

Renae Vigil, who works in the meat department at a King Soopers in Denver and serves as a union steward, said many of her colleagues would like to work full time so that “they wouldn’t be worried about how to pay bills, how to get this or that paid, but at King’s, it’s like winning a lotto.”

The frustrations suggest a relatively straightforward way for employers to reduce labor shortages: Offer more full-time positions.

But Kim Cordova, president of U.F.C.W. Local 7, which represents the King Soopers workers, said employers like Kroger were rarely moved by this logic. “They’ve told us they think the market is going to correct itself, this is temporary and they don’t want to lock themselves into changing permanently,” she said. The food workers union estimated that King Soopers had 2,400 unfilled Denver-area jobs early this year.

While the strike ended last month, after the company committed to raise pay, contribute more to health benefits and add at least 500 full-time positions, a majority of King Soopers workers are likely to remain on part-time schedules. Most retail and restaurant workers, who lack a union to organize a strike and provide strike pay, may have a harder time winning such changes.

Susan Lambert, a social work scholar at the University of Chicago who studies employers’ scheduling practices, said she and a colleague had recently interviewed store managers in Seattle and Chicago and found that some had, in fact, sought to provide more consistent schedules during the pandemic.

The change was driven by a combination of data, showing that more humane scheduling practices need not undermine profitability, and a desire by some employers to retain workers amid labor shortages, Dr. Lambert said. But she conceded that the changes were mostly at the margins.

“There are not major investments in changing major systems,” she said.

Data collected by the Labor Department indicates that the amount of part-time work in the retail and hospitality industries remains far above where it stood in the early 1970s.

The same appears to be true of companies’ reliance on contractors and temps, which scholars say has helped weaken wage growth over the past several decades.

Employers who outsource work to contractors or temps do not appear to have rethought those arrangements as a result of the pandemic, said Susan Houseman, a labor economist at the W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research. She pointed to the temporary help industry’s return to close to its prepandemic share of employment and an increase in self-employment during the past two years.

Gig companies whose apps allow people to find work as independent contractors say they have had an increase in workers over the last year or two. According to Uber, the number of drivers and couriers working through its service in a given month grew roughly 70 percent from January to October last year, or nearly 640,000.

DoorDash said the number of people working through its delivery app as of the fall quarter had more than doubled during the pandemic, to over three million, and Instacart said the number of full-service shoppers on its service — those who shop for and deliver groceries — had increased by more than two and a half times, to over 500,000.

The companies say that workers who use their apps value the flexibility of gig work, and that it helps sustain people during fallow periods or in places where work can be hard to find, such as rural communities. But gig jobs typically lack a variety of benefits and protections, like a minimum wage, and can reinforce economic insecurity.

To Dr. Schneider, the Harvard sociologist, the insecurity that service workers continue to face during the pandemic, supposedly a period of unusual leverage, shows how resistant their industries are to changing.

“I think it exposes something about how attached employers are to this just-in-time model,” he said. “This is something that goes to the heart of their business models.”