



## Work on Demand: Contracting for Work in a Changing Economy

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### **Before the Gig Economy: UK employment policy and the casual labour problem**

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In recent decades, jobs on offer in Britain have been transformed as permanent full-time employment has declined and precarious, irregular task-based work increased, trends actively supported by governments of all political stripes. Work is promoted as the sole route out of poverty. Such attitudes present as a volte face to policies promoted in the early twentieth century, when social investigation exposed irregular employment as a cause of poverty, not its cure, and as the main source of rising social dependency. The UK's earliest labour market policies sought to eradicate casual work and to encourage permanent employment – policies promoted assiduously for most of the twentieth century. Using historical evidence to explore proposals under discussion before the first world war, this paper makes three salient points. First, job insecurity and irregular employment exacerbate social inequalities, thereby raising the cost of social support (in spite of official efforts to contain it). Second, such developments undermine public trust – employers evade legal obligations for task-based workers while social security regulations require job-seekers to take such work. Finally, multiple job-holding and unstable employment destroy labour market categories on which policy analysis and the law rely. Thanks to the opposition of both sides of industry, the liberal British state has never been able to exert as much control over employment as governments in continental Europe. However, reverting to late nineteenth century labour markets will revive old problems and not offer any solution to new ones.