

Quality Employment and Good Jobs

*The first step to a new
economic model*

What is the New Economic Model?

Both parts of the Island of Ireland are unrecognisable from 40 years ago with huge progress in many areas not least employment and, in the South, strong economic growth. Even so, there are underlying weaknesses in both our economies, including low productivity in some industries, too many bad and low-paid jobs, underinvestment in public services, poor environmental performance, weak growth performance in the North and a housing crisis and inequality in the South.

In addition, we are now facing into the four profound challenges or 'megatrends' of an ageing population; decarbonisation; Artificial Intelligence (AI); and disruption to the global economy.

These ongoing and new challenges require us to think again about the type of economic model we need in the 21st century. It is in response to these profound challenges that the Irish Congress of Trade Unions with the help of the Nevin Economic Research Institute (NERI) have developed their New Economic Model (NEM).

In essence, this model is designed to produce ongoing, inclusive, and environmentally sustainable economic progress on the island of Ireland. The NEM aims to shift our focus away from 'low road' economic strategies focused on cost reduction and often precarious, gruelling or low paid work. Instead, it shifts the focus towards a 'high road' approach based on skills, knowledge and investment that is designed to generate high productivity, sustainable growth good jobs, social security, equity and resilience.

The NEM is consistent with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and at its heart is structured around four mutually reinforcing pillars:

- A **productive economy** based on skills, economy-wide innovative capacities and large-scale investment in public infrastructure and housing. This is accompanied by the promotion of workplace democracy and the idea of a 'good company' that behaves in a manner consistent with good labour and environmental practices, and high levels of investment and innovation.
- **More and better jobs** – with a focus not just on the number of jobs but also on the *quality* of those jobs and whether they have good workplace practices like collective bargaining. Key policies include public early years care and education and flexible hybrid work to promote labour market inclusiveness, as well as greater resources for life-long education to ensure no one gets left behind and that we are able to successfully adapt to changing needs, technologies, and other shocks.
- **Economic security** throughout people's lives. This would mean that people in our economy would feel secure and stable throughout their lives. This can be achieved through decent jobs and decent wages and a strong social insurance system that is there to protect and not to punish. It is also about decent public services that are available to all to ensure access to education, healthcare, public transport and other essential services.
- We want an economy that creates jobs and wealth, but we also want one that is stable and sustainable. **Economic resilience** means that we have an economy that can experience shocks without being toppled over by them. This means being disciplined about managing the economy, avoiding boom and bust, while also being prudent with taxes and public spending. It means not relying on short term boosts in taxation but ensuring that we have reliable funding for the public services that we need. It also means not allowing housing and energy costs to destroy our competitiveness and our living standards.

Summary

This report is the first in a new series of papers on the New Economic Model. In the New Economic Model Policy Series we delve deeper into specific policy areas and elaborate what it is that we think needs to be done. This report focuses on Quality Employment and Good Jobs.

In **Section 1** we define what we mean by quality employment and good jobs.

On this basis, a good job is defined as having the following characteristics:

- pays well;
- has demands that are manageable rather than excessive;
- provides secure and stable employment;
- offers opportunities for promotion and skill development;
- has choice and control over how work is done;
- provides social support from managers, co-workers and unions;
- involves the worker and unions in decision-making in the workplace;
- is safe; *and*
- has a reasonable balance between work and life.

In **Section 2** we set out a range of different job types to show how workers are impacted by the job characteristics/ type.

There are five job types that broadly describe the jobs market in Ireland:

- Precarious low paid, jobs.
- Demanding, highly controlled, precarious jobs.
- Secure, high-quality jobs.
- Secure, moderately good, unionised jobs.
- Relatively good jobs with strong employee-management relations.

In **Section 3** we consider what type of policy reforms could improve the quality of jobs

Policy should be focused around three areas:

1. Growing the number of high-value-added jobs.
2. Raising minimum employment standards.
3. Making existing jobs better.

These policies will create a jobs market defined by:

- A right to be heard;
- A balanced working life;
- Feeling secure in your work;
- Feeling involved and valued;
- Feeling safe and respected.

In **Section 4** we conclude by explaining why quality employment and the good jobs agenda is valuable for the economy and how society will benefit in the long-run, including:

- A more secure and stable tax base.
- Greater economic equality.
- Improved productivity and innovation.
- Greater economic stability and resilience.

Section 1 – What do we mean by quality employment and good jobs?

When people think about good jobs or job quality, they often focus on pay or whether someone says they are satisfied or happy in their job or, more generally, *an* individual's own opinion of what a good job or a bad job is.

How much you're paid or whether you're satisfied with your job do matter, but on their own they do not give policymakers a reliable picture of the job's quality. Job satisfaction can be influenced by what people expect, what they are used to, or how limited their alternatives are. You may be satisfied with your job because you don't imagine there's anything better out there. But people's view or feelings about what other jobs are like can often be wide of the mark. That is why when we talk about job quality, we have to try and look at how a job compares on the whole.

Job quality actually has many elements to it and many that we can measure independently. It includes what we call *extrinsic* job attributes – your pay, how secure your contract of employment is, how predictable your hours are, and whether you have access to benefits such as paid sick leave and pensions. It also includes *intrinsic* attributes that shape everyday work experience. Intrinsic means how your work is organised, the intensity of your work, how much autonomy you have over your work, what access you have to training and skill development, whether you have a voice in work matters and have collective representation, the degree of managerial support available, and the social environment of the workplace. All of these aspects together determine whether a job supports or undermines workers' health, wellbeing, how long they will work and how productive they will be.

This concept of job quality is based on the job demands–control–support model, which emphasises that jobs contain

both demands and resources. Jobs can make many demands of us in order to do our work, but they can also provide resources for us to do our jobs. High workloads, time pressure and long or unpredictable hours become harmful when workers have little or no autonomy or choice in their work. The same can be said for training opportunities or supportive relationships. Without these “buffers”, jobs become “high-strain” roles associated with stress, ill health, and burnout.

On this basis, **a good job** is one that:

- pays well;
- has demands that are manageable rather than excessive;
- provides secure and stable employment;
- offers opportunities for promotion and skill development;
- has choice and control over how work is done;
- provides social support from managers, co-workers and unions;
- involves the worker and unions in decision-making in the workplace;
- is safe, and
- has a reasonable balance between work and life.

A **poor job**, by contrast, is one where many of these attributes are absent and instead where:

- pay is low;
- demands are excessive;
- hours are long or unpredictable;
- security is limited;
- training and promotions are minimal;
- workers have very little say in the workplace;
- support is lacking and
- opportunities for rest, recovery and balance are scarce.

Most jobs sit somewhere between these extremes. The central task for policy is to recognise these different combinations of job characteristics and design interventions that can improve job quality in the round, instead of looking only at pay. You can read more about how job quality is measured [here](#).

Section 2 – What does your job look like?

As mentioned in the previous section, our jobs market is not simply divided between good and bad jobs, the reality is much more mixed. While every job is different, we can identify broad groups or job types that share similar characteristics and make up a significant part of the jobs market. Based on previous research, we can see five types of jobs.

1. Precarious, low paid jobs

These job types are characterised by precarious work and low wages. Many workers in these jobs face insecurity in terms of both their employment and their wages. These workers also receive relatively poor levels of additional remuneration benefits such as sick pay or health benefits. Most workers have low wages and are not trade union members and they are not covered by a collective agreement. These jobs provide few job resources, little job discretion, little training, limited management supports and few work benefits. On the 'plus' side, they experience little work to private life spillage and effort levels are more modest.

Meet **Derek**. He works as barman in a pub in his local town. Derek has worked there for almost 10 years but has had no opportunities for progression or promotion in his work. His hours of work have become increasingly unpredictable and his pay, which is only just above the minimum wage, has struggled to keep up with rising prices. His rent has increased significantly in recent years, and even though he and his partner work full-time, his contract doesn't give him enough security to apply for a mortgage. He has a long-standing respiratory issue and has had to miss work a few times lately. As he is only entitled to statutory sick pay, this means he had been out of pocket on these occasions.

He enjoys his work and he would like to continue working in the hospitality industry but he does feel that he will not be able to improve his circumstances within his current job. He would like a career path and training opportunities and to be able to make a decent living in a job that he likes.

2. Demanding, highly controlled, precarious jobs

Workers in this group face significant job insecurity, with many experiencing instability in their employment. They earn low to average wages but also feel anxious about their future work and employment. They are different to those in 'precarious, low paid jobs, because they experience highly intensive effort levels and lack autonomy over their work tasks. They also experience long working hours and have poor work-life balance.

*Meet **Agnieszka**, a dedicated social care worker in a residential care home. Agnieszka's work is deeply rewarding; she helps vulnerable residents with daily activities, provides emotional support, and ensures they feel cared for. She's passionate about her role and has a strong bond with the people she supports. However, Agnieszka faces significant challenges in her job that are common across the social care sector.*

Her pay is low, and despite the critical nature of her work, it often feels undervalued. The job is physically and emotionally demanding, and she has little control over her schedule or the pace at which she works. Agnieszka is frequently required to work long shifts, sometimes covering for colleagues who are absent, which can leave her exhausted and overwhelmed. The job's intensity and lack of breaks mean that she often doesn't have time to recharge, leaving her with limited personal time.

One of the biggest challenges Agnieszka faces is the lack of support and training for ongoing professional development. Although she's committed to improving her skills, she has few opportunities for formal training, which limits her ability to move into more senior roles or specialize in areas like dementia care or mental health. Agnieszka feels stuck, knowing that her role is essential, but there's little room for career progression or financial reward.

Additionally, the sector's high turnover rate means that many of her colleagues face similar burnout and frustration.

3. Secure, high-quality jobs.

These are secure, relatively well-paid jobs with good benefits. Many of these workers have paid sick leave, paid holidays, an occupational pension, and medical coverage. They enjoy high levels of job discretion, have good work-private life flexibility and relatively good training provision. However, working hours tend to be long. Most enjoy good social supports from their organisation and few express anxieties about their future, but only a few have employee representation via a union or are covered by a collective agreement.

*Now, let's meet **Emma**. Emma works as a senior associate in a financial services firm. Emma is dedicated and highly skilled, balancing her responsibilities to clients with the demands of raising two young children. She has invested years of education and hard work into her career, and her role in the firm is complex, requiring sharp analytical skills, long hours, and high levels of focus.*

Emma's workday often extends well beyond office hours and she finds it difficult to switch off. Although her job is secure and offers a good salary, the demanding schedule and intense pressures create a difficult trade-off between career development and family life. She does have autonomy and flexibility in her working day but she worries about the impact of her work-life balance on her children. She also worries about the impact for her career, because she doesn't do the type of hours she and others around her had grown accustomed to before she had children. She feels torn, both wanting to excel in her career and needing to be present for her family. Emma is constantly trying to juggle these two worlds, but without policies or support systems in place, this balancing act is unsustainable. At the heart of this is a culture within the world she works in of long hours and the expectation of a 'whatever it takes' to get the job done, to ensure her career continues.

4. Secure, moderately good, unionised jobs

This job type offers relatively secure employment, with few experiencing wage or employment insecurity. Most jobs are full-time and permanent but pay levels are low to average. However many have remuneration benefits such as paid holidays, paid sick leave, an occupational pension or medical coverage. These jobs are, for the main part, unionised jobs. Workers in these jobs are most likely to receive substantial levels of training. While working hours tend to be long, they offer high levels of work-life flexibility, good job autonomy, and work demands tend not to generate work-life conflict.

*Meet **Jenny**, she works as a supervisor in her local supermarket. Jenny started work on the shop floor and has been able to move up through various promotions. During this time she received training and other support to balance work with other commitments. She enjoys her work but sometimes she does have to work long hours, especially when the shop experiences staff shortages or during peak times of the year like Christmas. There is a recognised union in the supermarket and Jenny is a member. The union negotiates pay and terms and conditions for all employees including supervisors and this has meant that her pay has kept pace with the cost of living in recent years.*

Jenny would like to one day apply for an assistant manager's position and she feels that she will be supported to do that within her workplace. She does worry about automation particularly as more self-checkout tills are installed in the shop, but the union has an agreement with the company to manage this change in a way that protects existing workers and their terms and conditions.

5. Relatively good jobs with strong employee-management relations

These jobs offer relatively secure employment, with few experiencing wage or employment insecurity and they tend to be full-time and permanent. However, they are considerably less likely to have union representation and/or be covered by a collective agreement. While almost all have access to additional remuneration benefits, these are not as extensive as in the secure, moderately good, unionised jobs. While, workers in these jobs enjoy good social support from their managers, they also possess relatively poorer work-life balance when compared to workers in other job types.

*Let's talk about **Neil**, a welder in a heavy manufacturing plant. Neil is skilled at what he does—he's worked hard to hone his craft, becoming faster, more precise, and safer over the years. His work is essential, building the strong, durable structures that keep our infrastructure running smoothly. His wages are fair, but Neil's job offers limited opportunities for advancement.*

Neil has reached a point in his career where he's become highly proficient, yet there's no clear pathway for him to grow further in his role. Although he would like to keep advancing his skills, the training he receives is mostly minimal and compliance-focused, and the firm doesn't offer access to higher-level certifications or registered training. He finds himself in a cycle of routine, knowing he's capable of more but without the support or resources to advance. Meanwhile, Neil worries about his long-term future in the industry, especially as the physical demands of welding are likely to become harder to manage as he ages.

Neil's job, like many in manufacturing, is increasingly at risk of being automated. As the company invests in robotics and automated systems to increase efficiency, Neil worries about the long-term sustainability of his role. Despite becoming more skilled, the advancement opportunities within his company are scarce, and the fear of automation looms large over his job security.

Section 3 – What can be done to help?

Good work is about more than just meeting basic employment laws. It's not enough to create more jobs, focus on certain industries, or increase productivity and assume this will automatically lead to good jobs. Instead, we need to think more carefully about how workplaces actually operate and what type of jobs we actually want. Good jobs benefit not only workers, but also employers, the wider economy, and society as a whole. Making this happen won't occur by accident — it requires the involvement of the social partners, clear leadership, cooperation, and coordination from government. This section sets out policy recommendations to help ensure more people have access to good jobs.

1. Growing the number of high-value-added jobs

It is clear that government must be focussed on incentivising employment in industries and occupations that produce higher value-added activity. Research shows that there is a strong link between high productivity and good-quality jobs. Jobs in sectors that create high value are more likely to offer better pay, benefits, and working conditions. This might seem like an obvious policy priority, but there are many examples where government policies actively support the creation of jobs in low value-added industries. In the Republic of Ireland, the decision to reduce the VAT rate in the hospitality sector in Budget 2026 is a prime example. In Northern Ireland, there has been some recognition of the fact that government policy has not been successful in promoting employment in high value-added sectors. After the Lyons Report, which reviewed the performance of Invest NI, that organisation shifted its focus from simply creating jobs to improving productivity across the economy. This reflects a wider understanding that economic development should not

just be about creating more jobs, but about creating higher-value, more productive ones. Focusing only on job numbers, without looking at the quality or value of those jobs, limits our ability to achieve real economic change.

2. Raising minimum employment standards

Even if we were to prioritise growing high value-added sectors of the economy, this on its own will not be enough. Every economy is made up of many different sectors with different levels of productivity, and it is unrealistic to think that all jobs can ever be high-value or high-productivity. This means setting minimum standards that give all workers basic rights and protections, no matter what job they do or which industry they work in. These standards would create a basic level of job quality that everyone can rely on. They would show a commitment to fair treatment, inclusive growth, and sustainable employment, and ensure that all workers have access to decent working conditions. By putting these rights into law, we can set a clear baseline for employment standards across the whole workforce.

3. Making existing jobs better

Setting minimum standards to protect all workers is important, and creating higher value-added jobs is also a key goal—but we can't stop there. A good jobs agenda should not only set minimum standards but also aim to improve the quality of existing jobs. Most people will stay in their current roles for the foreseeable future, so raising job quality where they already work will have the biggest impact on their well-being. While growing high-value jobs in certain sectors is important for productivity and good jobs, we can't rely on this alone. We also need to improve job quality more broadly across the whole workforce. The key is to empower people to gain improvements and progress within their own jobs. Expecting people to do this alone is neither fair nor realistic. Policy must be focused on giving people the resources and entitlements to boost their own job quality. All workers should have access to trade unions and trade unions must have access to them

These issues go beyond pay. Work intensity and autonomy are key aspects of good quality jobs. Job design is crucial to ensuring a worker feels they have a sense of control and ownership of their job. The Good Jobs and Employment Bill in Northern Ireland sets out a number of important reforms that will give workers the ability to come together and collectively bargain for better terms and conditions in their work with their employer. The Irish Government's Action Plan to promote Collective Bargaining in the Republic of Ireland represents some potentially important first steps toward progress on this issue.

Creating good jobs is key to the development of a New Economic Model and there are already government initiatives, North and South, which hold promise. In the Republic, the European Commission is proposing new EU wide legislation – a Quality Jobs Act, to empower workers and ‘ensure that modern employment keeps pace with the modern economy’. Congress, as part of the European Trade Union Confederation, is focusing on the need to address the main gaps in EU legislation – telework and the right to disconnect, algorithmic management and AI at work, just transitions, occupational health and safety, subcontracting and labour intermediation, and strengthening the enforcement of EU labour laws and the role of the social partners. You can read the ETUC's proposals at <https://www.etuc.org/en/pressrelease/quality-jobs-offer-real-solution-europes-economic-challenges>

In Northern Ireland, the Department for the Economy has introduced a Good Jobs and Employment Bill which seeks to update, and in many cases, enhance workers' rights. Congress have campaigned for an Employment Bill for many years and have produced detailed proposals covering trade union rights of access, strengthening enforcement of labour protections, Health and Safety, work-life balance and tackling precarious work. You can read Congress's detailed proposals [here](#).

What do policies for good jobs look like?

A Right to be Heard. It is not fair to expect workers to be able to monitor and improve their own job without any help. Having a right to be represented in your job by a trade union is key to unlocking job quality. But it isn't enough to have the right to trade union representation if your employer stands between you and a trade union representative.

- Trade unions must have the right to come to a workplace and provide advice and assistance to any worker who wants it.
- If a worker wish to be represented by the union, then employers should engage and collectively agree pay, terms and conditions with their employee's trade union in good faith.

A Balanced Working Life. The world of work should reflect the realities and the challenges of the world we actually live in. The right to flexible working hours and flexible working practices should not be seen as a cost or a burden on business but as an enabler of a vibrant and valued workforce. All jobs are different and the best solutions are those that work for both employers and employees.

- Policymakers must focus on guaranteeing the right to flexible working and flexible hours for all workers from the first day in a job.
- All workers must have right to disconnect that ensures people do not feel 'on call' outside of their contracted hours of work.
- Taking parental leave should be a real possibility for all parents and guardians. We need to provide proper support for those taking family leave including proactively tackling pregnancy and maternity discrimination.

Feeling Secure in your work. Firms perform best when the people who work within them have stability and feel protected. You can't expect people to commit to their work if their work isn't committed to them.

- A living wage must be the basic threshold for all jobs within our economy. Statutory minimum wages must recognise the cost of living and reflect that in annual changes.
- Government contracts must only be granted to companies that guarantee secure wages and hours and engage with trade unions.
- Policy must be focused on removing exploitative work practices like zero hours contract, fire and rehire and other forms of precarious work.
- Workers should be entitled to basic notice periods about changes in their work, including shift patterns.
- All workers should be entitled to the same rights. Contract or agency work must never be used to bypass employment rights. Bogus self-employment and two-tier workforce practices must be eliminated.
- Sickness should never result in poverty and statutory sick pay that is adequate and decent must be a right for all workers.

Feeling Involved and Valued. Developments in technology like automation and artificial intelligence (AI) mean that more and more people have less control over their work. Technology doesn't have to be a threat to employment. If managed properly it can enhance both firms and the working life of employees.

- Workers must have clear job descriptions that detail tasks and responsibilities. This not only to maintain work-life balance but also so that workers have an opportunity to shape their work and feel ownership of it.
- Policymakers must incentivise firms to engage with workers on the introduction of new technologies so that employees feel the benefit of new investments.
- Skills policy needs to be reformed so that it is brought more into the workplace and meets the needs of both firms and workers.

Feeling Safe and Respected. No person at work should ever feel vulnerable or in danger carrying out their job. Every worker is entitled to dignity and respect at work, whatever work they do.

- Certain workers are more at risk given the nature of their job. However, during the pandemic we saw how this can change very quickly. Health and Safety at work needs to be a constant dialogue between workers and employers and the state must have firm enforcement mechanisms to stand behind them.

Let's look now at how policies to improve job quality would help the workers we mentioned earlier.

Derek – Proper sick leave entitlements, boosting the minimum wage and making sure that workers are given proper notice of shifts and compensation for cancelled work will give Derek some stability and security in his pay.

Agnieszka – Boosting Collective Bargaining rights would give trade unions the ability to negotiate better standards for work across the Care sector, meaning that Agnieszka would be entitled to an industry wide rate of pay with guaranteed hours and flexible leave entitlements.

Emma – A right to disconnect and the ability to seek more flexible hours would give Emma the ability to manage her job without missing out on promotions and new opportunities.

Jenny – Strengthening access rights for trade unions will help ensure Jenny and her colleagues will be able to safeguard the terms and conditions they have and ensure younger workers coming into the supermarket will enjoy them in the future too.

Neil – A government initiative to involve workers in decisions about automation and linking this to skills programmes in workplaces will help give Neil the confidence that he has a career in front of him.

Section 4 – The wider benefits of the Good Jobs Agenda

Policymakers and employers that invest in and prioritise good jobs and other supports such as training will experience less employee turnover, less recruitment costs and greater productivity and innovation due to having a more experienced, qualified, engaged and motivated workforce. A more productive and better paid workforce also generates greater tax revenue which boosts resources for governments and therefore more money for spending on education, health and infrastructure. This creates a virtuous circle of productivity and growth, enhancing dynamism within the economy. We can think of this as a high road model of development.

In contrast, policies that enable bad employers to gain a competitive advantage through low pay or the exploitation of workers (e.g. through long hours or under-resourcing) will push the economy in a lower productivity direction. This creates a race to the bottom effect with potentially good employers weakening the terms and conditions that they offer in order to stay competitive. In the worst-case scenario, an economy can get caught in a low productivity rut with a glut of bad jobs.

Collective bargaining plays a specific and crucial role in the labour market in so far as it offsets the inherent power imbalance between individual employees and employers. This power imbalance creates a market failure with wages and conditions worse than they would be if no such imbalance existed. Collective agreements correct this market failure and therefore generate a more efficient labour market outcome. An important result of this is a higher labour share of income across the economy. This will reduce levels of economic inequality as labour income is much more evenly distributed than capital income as capital income is concentrated within the wealthiest households.

Good jobs and collective bargaining are also important for long-term economic stability. When wages are set only by how strong the economy is at the moment, *i.e. by the market*, pay tends to fall or stagnate during downturns. This makes the economy more unstable and worsens 'boom-and-bust' cycles.

A better approach is for employers, and government to work together with trade unions. By taking a more planned and cooperative approach to wage setting, it's possible to support steady *and sustainable* improvements in workers' living standards.



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