[article review] 'Occupational health and safety of temporary and agency workers'

Cremers, J.M.B.

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The author investigated the workplace experiences of different types of precarious workers related to occupational health and safety (OHS), in particular of those who are directly-employed temporary workers and those who are engaged through an agency. The majority of studies into the occupational health and safety of precarious workers have found that these workers have poorer OHS outcomes. By using an ethnographically informed qualitative approach, Hopkins investigates the workplace experiences of workers (in the food manufacturing industry) undertaking the same tasks but working on different contractual statuses. He finds cultural practices that lead to worsened OHS experiences for those who are engaged through an agency. These experiences include inadequate safety training, poor quality personal protective equipment and a lack of clarity of supervisory roles.

Hopkins found little difference in the experiences of permanent and temporary workers who were directly employed by the case study companies. Where significant differences do occur is when agency workers are present. He notes that organisational responsibilities at even a very basic level, particularly around safety, may become unclear in situations where the recruitment of labour is externalised and a clearly defined employer–employee relationship
becomes difficult to uphold. Thus, ‘the lines of responsibility for these workers are growing increasingly blurred’ (p. 16). Adding to this problem is the heterogeneity of this workforce, particularly when considering migrant workers. Moreover, lower levels of English language skills may have an effect on workplace OHS if migrants cannot understand instructions and training related to their safety. He signals a risk-denying culture, not just one of risk-blindness. The user undertaking gives these workers a shorter induction, or they were completely excluded from instructions. The culture of on-time running and delivery was the key priority.

According to Hopkins it is of crucial importance for policy makers to make an end to the confusion in responsibility at a workplace level. The responsibility for a decent OHS-policy must be clarified and agency workers should receive the induction, equipment, training and supervision they require to ensure their safety in the workplace. Time to act, not to withdraw!