

Survey offers glimpse into employment of new youth groups

SOCIOLOGY

By QIN GUANGQIANG
and LIN YUNYUAN

The report to the 20th CPC National Congress called for intensified efforts to implement the employment-first strategy and improve related mechanisms to promote high-quality and full employment. It underscored the importance of supporting and regulating the development of new forms of employment, and protecting the rights and interests of those in flexible employment and new forms of employment. The 2023 government work report also emphasized placing a higher priority on promoting the employment of young people.

Emergence of new youth groups

In recent years, with the thriving of new industries, platforms, and business models brought about by information technology and the knowledge economy, new youth groups have been emerging in large numbers, and engaging vigorously in such fields as the internet, scientific and technological innovation, cultural creativity, and life services, showing a momentum of rapid development.

These groups of young people differ from traditional youth groups with respect to the content of their work, forms of employment, and social life values. They are playing an increasingly prominent role in powering socioeconomic development, and spearheading entrepreneurship and innovation.

Flexible employment and new areas are becoming “job reservoirs” for young people. At the same time, however, these new forms and fields are marked by undesired employment conditions and quality. In particular, problems loom large in stability of employment and income, protection of labor rights and interests, institutional recognition, individual development and promotion, and intellectual property rights protection, raising higher requirements for employment services and social security.

Moreover, the employment situation of new youth groups is consistent overall, but internal differences are obvious. This highlights the necessity to reexamine the distribution of resources and opportunities in the emerging labor market, from the perspective of social stratification.

In this light, we base our study on a survey of new youth groups in Beijing, which was conducted by the Beijing Youth League and the Institute of Sociology at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, with the aim to understand the current employment quality of new youth groups from both objective and subjective dimensions. In addition, the peculiarity and internal heterogeneity of these groups’ employment will be analyzed to offer suggestions for



A young entrepreneur sells gourd handicrafts via live stream in Linyi, Shandong Province. Photo: CFP

promoting the high-quality and full employment of new youth groups.

Employment status

According to the survey, the employment quality, internal division, and special problems and appeals of new youth groups can be summarized as follows:

First, objectively speaking, the employment status of new youth groups was unsatisfactory, but they reported high satisfaction with their jobs and displayed notable interest-driven career choices. Data reveals that the surveyed young people worked for 8.9 hours on average every day, longer than the statutory workday of 8 hours in China. Nearly one fifth, or 18.4%, of the respondents didn’t sign any labor contracts or had only signed “economic contracts” with their employers. Those who changed jobs in the last three years accounted for 44.5% of the surveyed young people; 29.4% expressed worries that they might lose their jobs within six months; and as high as 65.4% said they were under high work pressure in the last six months. Overall, the employment quality was discouraging.

Yet subjectively, they were upbeat about their employment status. 71.8% of the respondents expressed satisfaction with their jobs. Nearly 70% said they chose their jobs out of personal interest, and only 10% chose the option “only to make a living.” A significant shift has taken place in the occupational values of contemporary young people, who are inclined to make career choices based on their interest. Despite the grim objective employment situation, they tend to please themselves at work and make efforts for what they love.

Second, the job market is distinctly bifurcated among new youths, with evident disparities in the quality of employment between “primary” and “secondary” markets. The primary job market targets young people devoted to the internet culture, independent literary and artistic youths, entrepreneurs, and those working in new business models like providing life services. The secondary market consists of youths working in the platform economy, including ride-hailing

drivers, couriers, food deliverymen, and errand runners.

The former represents high-quality employment resources in emerging industries. Whether in terms of objective factors like employment stability, remuneration, and job security, or subjective factors such as job satisfaction, occupational reputation, and career prospects, those in the primary job market are apparently better off than youths working in the platform economy.

For example, surveyed young laborers engaging in internet platforms worked for 9.9 hours on average every day, higher than the overall average of 8.9 hours among new youth groups. Only 55.9% of the respondents signed labor contracts with their employers, far lower than the overall figure of 73.6%, and only 40.9% were provided with typical social insurances and a housing fund, far lower than the overall 63.1%.

Subjectively, 59.7% of the surveyed platform economy workers were satisfied with their jobs, also much lower than the overall rate of 71.8%. More attention should be paid to these relatively disadvantaged youth groups in the secondary job market alongside the protection of their labor rights and interests.

Third, the differences in employment status are often related to individual backgrounds, skill sets, and interests of new youth groups. Those with outstanding human capital, such as privileged family backgrounds, high education levels, and younger ages, mostly worked in areas like the cultural sector of the internet, independent literature and arts, and life service provision. These fields feature a higher employment quality and allow workers to choose careers based on their interest. In contrast, laborers from disadvantaged families, with limited human capital, and at older ages, are largely concentrated in the platform economy, and work for realistic factors such as maintaining a livelihood. Therefore, opportunities in emerging industry markets are not even, but stratified.

Fourth, compared with workers in the regular labor market, new youth groups have distinct requirements, including the need for in-

stitutional recognition, individual growth, career advancement, protection of labor rights and interests, as well as safeguarding intellectual property rights. Although the top ten new professions in China, such as “online marketers,” have been formally incorporated into the nation’s occupational classification system and institutionally certified, many new jobs are still left out of the official system, leading to many restrictions in professional skill evaluation, promotion channels, and benefit claim.

Meanwhile, intensive labor due to algorithmic rules, internet platforms’ torts and circumvention of employment risks, and frequent work accidents are commonplace. The protection of these victimized groups’ rights and interests is of great social concern. Additionally, intellectual property infringements in new fields and business models like the internet, big data, and artificial intelligence have proliferated, which also pose challenges to safeguarding intellectual rights and interests of young laborers in emerging digital fields.

Going forward

Based on new youth groups’ employment situation and problems described above, we propose the following suggestions for promoting the high-quality and full employment of these groups.

First, while “making the pie bigger” for employment in emerging industries, it is essential to tailor policies and guidance to different groups, thereby improving the employment quality of new youth groups continuously. Efforts are needed to constantly stimulate market vitality in emerging fields, actively foster new growth poles for employment, and give better play to the “job reservoir” function of emerging industries.

Meanwhile, attention should be paid to the appeals of new youth groups in different fields, to come up with targeted and practical solutions to crucial and longstanding problems facing these groups, such as improvement of labor conditions and protection of rights and interests, social acceptance and institutional recognition, skill as-

essment and promotion channels, and intellectual property rights protection. Especially, the relatively disadvantaged young workers in the platform economy should be given special attention to improve their labor conditions and safeguard their occupational rights and interests.

Second, “digitalization plus” should be utilized to empower the high-quality employment of new youth groups and the protection of their labor rights and interests. The rapid development of digital technologies and the digital economy have presented opportunities for the high-quality employment of new youth groups. It is necessary to leverage digital technologies and online resources to facilitate job information acquisition, human and social capital expansion, optimization of work’s spatio-temporal conditions, and innovation of labor service models for these groups.

Also, digital technologies should be regulated and guided to work for public good, and platform algorithms should be more socially valuable, instead of blindly exploiting laborers in pursuit of market profits. Digital technology’s advantages in information transmission and intelligent governance can be harnessed to promote employment and recruitment, personnel file management, labor arbitration, and rights and interests protection in emerging fields. Some localities have been exploring close collaboration of internet platforms with labor-related functional departments and labor unions to better safeguard laborers’ rights and interests. Such experiences are worth promoting.

Third, institutional construction and the development of emerging industries should be advanced synergistically to unblock channels for new youth groups’ upward mobility. Official institutional identification and pertinent policy resources remain critical to the occupational development of new youth groups. Therefore, we should consider new economic and social development scenarios to institute leaner certifications and identifications of new professions, so that new youth groups will have fairer and more reasonable spaces for job evaluation, professional honor certification, and career development, thus enhancing their sense of occupational gains.

Furthermore, institutional construction of emerging job markets should be accelerated to remove barriers like employment discrimination, build a fairer, more just, and more transparent labor market environment, and ensure smooth channels for new youth groups’ stable career development and improvement of status, inspiring them to make progress and succeed in all walks of life.

Qin Guangqiang (professor) and Lin Yunyuan are from the School of Ethnology and Sociology at Minzu University of China.