

LABOUR

A little too flexible

Each day about 400 000 temporary employees find work on construction sites, farms, in call centres and at retailers across SA. Most are employed by labour brokers, who contract them out to companies that require extra workers for specific projects or during peak periods.

But with mounting pressure on government from unions and bargaining councils to clamp down and restrict companies' use of temporary labour, the future of temporary employment hangs in the balance.

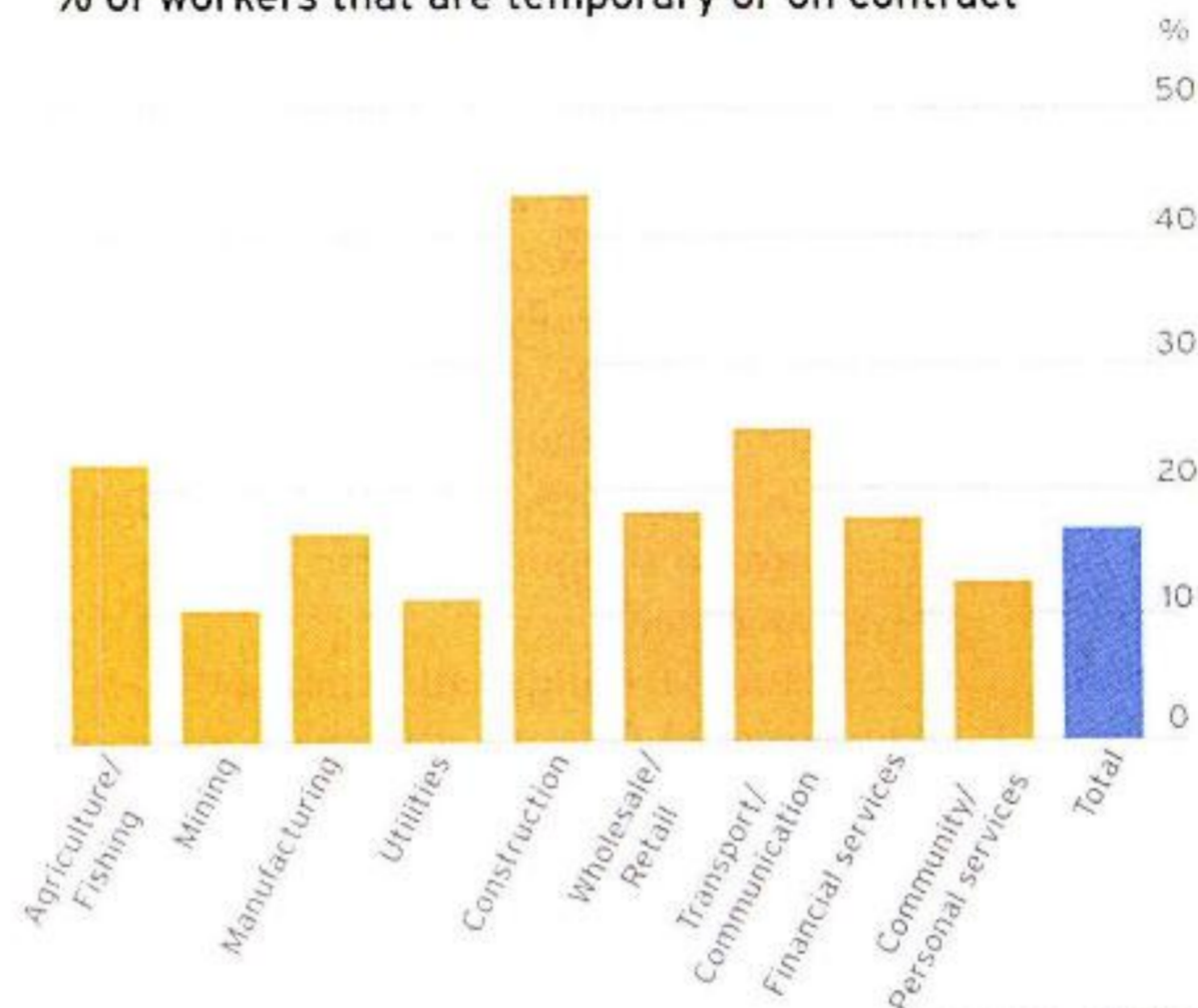
Talks at the National Economic Development & Labour Council (Nedlac) on the issue are at a sensitive stage. Sources say limits on the length of temporary contracts, as well as the percentage of the total workforce that a company can employ on a temporary or contract basis, are being mooted.

"We've taken a position for this year's negotiations that we don't want labour brokers or contract workers in any of our sectors," says National Union of Metalworkers' (Numsa) information officer Mziwakhe Hlangani. "Those brokers that are there already should be phased out completely and workers employed permanently." Hlangani also says that Numsa is proposing a limit of three months on employee contracts.

"This means that once a worker has

INFORMAL LABOUR

% of workers that are temporary or on contract



SOURCE: STATS SA

labour is an international trend," says Capes CEO John Botha. "If we remove the ability of companies to respond to their economic environment, it would render our labour force rigid and un-

competitive in an increasingly competitive global market."

There are about 3 000 labour brokers in SA, according to UCT researcher Jan Theron, employing about 400 000 people or 9,7% of the total workforce. This compares with developed countries, such as Spain (31%), Japan (16%) and France (14%). But Theron adds that the number of temporary workers is probably far higher as informal operators, often referred to as the "bakkie brigade", outnumber formal operators by three to one.

completed their three-month probation contract, the company must employ them on a permanent basis," he says.

Other unions have suggested that a nine-month maximum contract period would be more realistic.

But the Confederation of Associations in the Private Employment Sector (Capes) says severely restricting flexible labour will affect economic growth and job creation. "The growing use of flexible

The Congress of SA Trade Unions (Cosatu) labour market policy co-ordinator, Rudi Dicks, says that using temporary labour allows companies to evade responsibility for complying with labour legislation.

"Most brokers don't comply with the Basic Conditions of Employment Act, don't provide benefits for workers or meet health and safety standards," he says. Theron says he would welcome limitations on the length and number of times contracts can be rolled over. "In some industries, such as call centres, for example, there's nothing temporary about the work these employees do," he says. "It would be possible to stipulate a maximum period for contracts and still retain some flexibility for the employer."

But temporary staffing company Landelahni CEO Sandra Burmeister says that instead of cutting out labour brokers completely, the temporary employment industry is calling for better regulation through a single body where business, labour and government would be represented.

She says about 40% of all temporary staff become permanent within a year, creating a much-needed bridge for entrants into the labour market. In a country with over 40% joblessness, that should be a key consideration. **Jacqui Pile**

Construction workers
On contract, for now

