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Rise of the mid-life shirkers: Can Labour get the over-50s to love work again?

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Still at the golf course? Worklessness among the over-50s hasn't budged since Jeremy Hunt told them to put down their putters and get back to the office.

The latest figures show that 3,622,000 people aged 50 to 64 were economically inactive – neither working nor looking for work. That is up by more than 300,000 since the start of the pandemic.

This is despite the former Chancellor's efforts to encourage more 50-somethings to return to work, saying life 'doesn't have to be about going to the golf course'.



Time to chill: The latest figures show that 3,622,000 people aged 50 to 64 were economically inactive

At the time he made those comments in January last year, the number of those aged 50 to 64 who were economically inactive stood at 3,641,000 or 27.6 per cent of those in that age range.

Hunt went on to set out plans in his 2023 Budget to address the issue, including expanding access to 'mid-life MOTs' – designed to help people review their skills and break down barriers to employment.

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He also launched 'returnerships' – a type of apprenticeship targeted at over-50s.

After that, the inactivity figure among 50- to 64-year-olds dipped a little but then climbed again, to 27.4 per cent – meaning that more than a quarter of the age group is neither working nor looking for work. It is up from 25.6 per cent just before the pandemic.

The latest figures covering the three months to June this year illustrate the challenge that Labour faces addressing an issue that Tory efforts failed to solve.

New Chancellor Rachel Reeves has said that she wants to tackle the problem, declaring 'if you can work, you should work'.

Economic inactivity across the UK among those aged 16 to 64 stands at 9.4million, close to its highest level for nearly 12 years.



Get back to work: Rachel Reeves declared 'if you can work, you should work'

A near-record 2.8million of those are off with long-term sickness, while others are students (2.6million), or looking after family and homes (1.7million).

There are also just over a million people who have already retired and another million inactive for 'other' reasons, including that they 'do not need or want employment'.

Reeves may, like Hunt, turn her attention to the latter category when she delivers her first Budget on October 30.

However, Ros Altmann, a former pensions minister, stressed that some who are economically inactive had little choice.

'Many of these people are genuinely too ill to work or are caring for loved ones,' she said, adding that long NHS waiting lists meant that many who could work are unable to do so because of long delays for operations or treatment.

Some 228,000 people are described as being temporarily off sick. Campaigners say that as well as lack of health support, older workers are being let down by ageism, and limited opportunities for training and development.

'Tackling age discrimination, sorting out social care and more emphasis on equipping older people with modern skills are all vital,' said Altmann.

'Dealing with the NHS backlog will also help to ensure that those over-50s waiting for treatment have a better chance of working again.'