

## POLICY IDEAS

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# Work-Time Reduction: Possibilities and Problems

Herbert J. Gans

*Once, it was possible to think of reducing the workweek. Is it still? The author discusses the possibilities and many obstacles, economic and political. Yes, it might create jobs, but can it really be done without offering an equivalent wage for fewer hours? But if we do not think about the gains from work reduction (such as the modern invention of the weekend), it surely will not happen.*

SINCE TIME IMMEMORIAL, utopian thinkers have been predicting that someday, workers would be freed from long and arduous hours of daily toil to devote more of their waking hours to leisure, culture, community, and other pursuits. Liberating workers from laborious work and long hours would also be beneficial to their physical, mental, and familial wellness. However, in our time, work-time reduction has been proposed more often as a method of job creation: sharing the total societal workload to increase the number of jobs.

So far, the rates of unemployment and underemployment are not

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high enough to make it politically realistic to propose work-time reduction (WTR). Still, given the possibly dismal future of the labor market, it may become economically and politically relevant one of these days. If WTR can also contribute to individual and familial health and welfare, now is the right time to start discussing the policy's possibilities and problems.

## **Work-Time Reduction as Liberation**

Thomas More (1516/1965) may have been the first known utopian writer to propose the eventual reduction of human toil, but John Maynard Keynes might one day be best remembered for predicting that by 2030, people would be working only fifteen hours a week.

Keynes made the prediction in his 1930 essay "Economic Possibilities for Our Grandchildren," in which he promised not only liberation from long work hours a century hence but also a four- to eightfold increase in the standard of living (Keynes 1968).

Interest in Keynes's essay has been revived in recent years, thanks in part to Robert Skidelsky, his most recent biographer (Skidelsky and Skidelsky 2012, but see also Pecci and Piga 2008 and Sharpe 2013). Keynes was actually less worried about the workings of WTR than about how his fellow Britons would cope with the extra leisure time; the Skidelskys are concerned about people consuming too many goods that they do not really need.

More recently, the British think tank New Economics Foundation has conceived WTR as also an environmental policy and recommended a twenty-one-hour week, arguing that less work would produce a concurrent reduction in global warming (Coote, Simms, and Franklin 2010). Along with others, the foundation has also pointed out WTR's effects on worker health and familial wellness.

## **WTR as Job Creation**

The first labor unions in the United States began to advocate WTR in the late nineteenth century. Samuel Gompers is now best re-

membered for demanding the eight-hour day, both to create more jobs and to improve the quality of life of his workers and their families.

The most important early step toward WTR as job creation was taken in the Black-Connery Bill of 1933, in which Senator Hugo Black (D-AL) and Representative William Connery (D-MA) called for a thirty-hour workweek to reduce the high unemployment of the Great Depression. At first President Franklin Roosevelt supported the bill, but he changed his mind (or had it changed by business community pressure). Subsequently, he helped to prevent its coming to a vote in the House. However, Roosevelt later returned to his original support for the short workweek, using the Fair Labor Standards Act to require overtime pay after forty hours and thereby bringing the forty-hour week into being (Hunnicut 1988).

World War II, which provided the full employment of that period, and the postwar affluence ended interest in WTR, but when Europe encountered rising joblessness in the 1980s, several west European welfare states cut the workweek in the hope of creating more jobs (Gans 1990). However, although some extra employment seems to have been created by reducing the workweek by two to three hours, most countries had restored the forty-hour workweek by the end of the century (Bosch and Lehndorff 2001).

What has worked, both in Europe and in a significant number of American states, is a temporary policy called short-time work reduction, in which all workers agree to a reduction in work hours so that no one is laid off. However, the short-time policy has been successful only when the loss in wages is made up by unemployment insurance payments that replace all or most of the lost wages.

Currently, the continuation of the Great Recession, at least in the U.S. labor market, has produced involuntary workweek reductions accompanied by equivalent wage/salary reductions. The current average workweek outside manufacturing is about thirty-five hours.

Proposals for and discussions of adding jobs by shrinking work time are beginning to be made (e.g., Baker 2011, Hunnicutt 2013, Huntington 2012), and more may be expected if short workweeks and

increases in involuntary part-time and temp work continue. Someday it may be noteworthy that in 2012, President Barack Obama directed that a thirty-hour workweek be temporarily defined as full time to establish worker eligibility for health benefits.

## **Implementing Work-Time Reduction**

WTR and its assumption that the total number of jobs may be increased by reducing employee work time seems to make logical sense, but in an actual economy, it is accompanied by a variety of economic and political problems. Consequently, it is for now best seen as supplementary to direct job creation or as an emergency solution if and when new jobs cannot be created.

WTR's main problem is that it will be acceptable to workers only if those giving up work time do not lose pay; otherwise, it becomes just another way of turning full-time jobs into involuntary part-time work and at a lower wage. However, in the former case, it will be unacceptable to employers. Consequently, the needed make-up pay would have to come from government and may thus generate objections from taxpayers.

If regular taxes cannot supply the needed funds, special taxes must be levied on the economic sectors particularly responsible for the decline in jobs: capital-intensive industries, employers that computerize jobs, and those that send American jobs overseas.

A second problem: The policy can be viewed as assuming that economic growth has ended. Because this view is pessimistic, WTR's opponents have sometimes called it a "sharing of poverty."

WTR also flies in the face of an old and deeply believed faith, that economies can prosper only through economic growth and that such growth can never be allowed to stop. Businesses in competitive industries believe that they must compete in order to survive and that such competition requires growth. This is one reason that they have generally opposed national attempts at reducing work time.

Whether and how capitalist enterprises survive without economic growth and what form capitalism would then take are much debated

questions. However, WTR is causally independent of economic growth. A diversified economy is diversified also in its employment levels, and industries, occupations, and even individual workplaces with high unemployment and underemployment could, with government help, resort to WTR while the rest of the economy retains longer work hours.

Third, WTR flies in the face of contemporary capitalism, which has been steadily minimizing the role of labor in creating goods and services. Employers therefore have an additional reason for opposing WTR and trying to avoid participation in it.

Among their objections are the extra bureaucratic, training, and other costs that employers incur when they recruit and hire additional workers. If allowed, they prefer to pay overtime to their existing workers, to increase computerization, or simply to resort to old-fashioned speedup methods.

For this and other reasons, the supporters of WTR have not yet been able to provide persuasive evidence that it can create new jobs. Although the logic of the policy implies that a 10 percent decrease in work time would lead to a 10 percent increase in the number of jobs, Bosch and Lehndorff (2001) estimate that the actual number is somewhere between 3 and 6 percent and that it varies among workplaces and across an economy and its labor politics. It is probably easier to implement in large bureaucratized and routinized workplaces and perhaps impossible to make practicable in small workplaces with highly specialized and thus indispensable or irreplaceable workers.

In addition, WTR's advocates have not spoken up about its contribution to worker and familial wellness. Although there are studies about harmful work and its effects on health (e.g., Marmot et al. 1991), research on the relationship between work time and health are still rare.

Despite these problems, WTR is worth trying, in firms, public agencies, and nonprofit organizations. Even if the job gain is less than expected, working fewer hours may increase productivity. Worker health may increase as well, with appropriate savings in medical and related expenditures.

The likelihood that WTR could add jobs would be increased if competing industries overseas instituted the same policy at the same time. A firm with a thirty- or thirty-two-hour week might be unable to compete with one that can keep the same workers for forty or forty-eight hours, even if pay rates and other working conditions are the same.

If policies that shorten the workweek become feasible, WTR could also be designed for workplaces in which workers were eager—or could be incentivized to be eager—to take parental, child-rearing, and other types of leave. Even longer vacations open up opportunities for job creation, for example in areas where workers are interested in taking time off for hunting season.

In these cases, the replacements would most likely have to be temps—either people who want to work for a limited period or permanent temps but in a reorganized and government-regulated temp industry in which temps would obtain the same pay and benefits as other workers. Workplace routines would have to be adapted to the absence of the regular workers, and the latter would need guarantees that they would get their jobs back after their return.

Whether WTR could obtain the necessary political traction is hard to tell. Its fate during the Great Depression suggests another negative business reaction, which might be even greater now, considering the heightened shareholder and executive pressure for rising profits and stock prices. However, under other political conditions, and with more attention to externalities, WTR might be more feasible. After all, work time has been declining for centuries now, and economies seem to have become more productive nonetheless. Perhaps WTR should be introduced when an economy is healthy and unemployment is low.

Reducing work time for health and health-related reasons might become a topic of public discussion if family and women's organizations sought to obtain more parenting time and if such extra time could be quickly proven beneficial for children. Unfortunately, American workers have always wanted or needed more money rather than less work time, and the policy would require government income makeup or would have to wait for a period of rising worker pay.

Thus, it could be undertaken almost immediately in professional or technical workplaces that do not encounter internal or external competitive pressure to maximize their products or services and are staffed by highly paid employees. If workers voted for longer weekends, such workplaces could adopt thirty-two-hour workweeks; if they wanted more daily quality time at home, they could shift to six-hour workdays.

If global warming proceeds as predicted—and energy costs rise—workplaces in some regions may find it economical to close for several weeks during the height of summer.

In an ideal world, liberating WTR would begin in workplaces in which work is especially dangerous, dirty, exhausting, or otherwise inimical to longevity and good health. Unfortunately, such jobs are usually held by immigrant or other low-status workers who, lacking political and economic power, can be underpaid and overworked. They also need their wages so badly that they might oppose WTR.

## **Political Requirements**

Several contextual requirements and conditions are needed to make WTR politically viable. One is a U.S. economy in which a larger and growing proportion of the population is underemployed or jobless and both are generating pressure for government job creation. The second is public understanding of the destructive political, social, and emotional effects of high levels of unemployment and underemployment.

The third requirement is the realization by the business community that reducing unemployment and underemployment delivers funds mainly to households that spend most of their earnings. If the business community can accept the fact that these households help keep the consumer economy vibrant, the overall economy healthy, and business profits high, it could learn to give up its obsession with lower taxes and deregulation. However, the consumer economy might have to decline severely before the business community is ready to give it up.

The fourth requirement for making WTR feasible: that government be, and be accepted as, the incentivizer as well as the employer and income-support provider of last resort.

Equally important, government must be enabled to create a tax program that will pay for the wages and salaries lost by reduced work time and ensure every worker at least a living wage.

None of these requirements will become applicable until the political and social climate is right. For one thing, the current trend of rising involuntary part-time work and other forms of underemployment, as well as declining salaries, wages, and benefits even for full-time work, must grow larger and probably spread upward into the now better-off sectors of the population.

Until that happens, the activists, movements, and voters with an economic, ideological, and cultural interest in maintaining the economic status quo will seek to veto all change. Moreover, those who perceive themselves as the “makers” of economic wealth and the rest of the population as “takers” of various kinds of public benefits will be particularly hostile toward policies in which people are rewarded for working less. Thus, willingness to support WTR cannot take place until enough of the self-defined makers lose their jobs and some of their economic resources. And then they must first realize that they can no longer afford an ideology that mainly benefits the economic elites.

Change might also take place if the jobless, underemployed, and underpaid portion of the below-median-income population mobilizes its demographic strength and can turn it into political strength in behalf of this and other job creation policies.

Conversely, WTR might not become a politically feasible option until the economy is so healthy and incomes are rising so regularly that enough employees—and employers—are ready to seek liberation from excessive work time.

They could then decide if they want shorter workweeks, more leaves, vacations, or sabbaticals, or a shorter work life, with later entry into or earlier departure from the labor force. However, whether they can make such a choice will depend on whether employers are able and

willing to let them choose—and whether an economy with a variety of work times is able to function.

## **Social Requirements**

Keynes was neither the first nor the last member of the cultural elite to worry about what workers would do with and in their leisure time if their workweek were reduced. Some of these worriers predicted that the workers would not choose to improve themselves intellectually and culturally, thus holding back humanity's ennoblement. Others may have feared living with or being attacked by drunken, stoned, and media-sodden masses.

Undoubtedly, some people, including members of the cultural elite, will have trouble keeping themselves busy. However, if the workweek were reduced to thirty hours, many people would spend their new free hours in familial quality time. A modest family allowance might encourage finding and enriching such time.

Others would, if legally able, moonlight in second jobs, frequently in the informal economy. Eventually, some might turn to growing vegetables in their backyards, selling homemade foods and arts and crafts, and exchanging goods and services in a local barter economy. Some people might go back to school or volunteer, but unless WTR permits longer and subsidized vacations, most people will probably devote only a little more time to leisure activities.

Nonetheless, a wise government would, with the aid of nonprofit agencies, increase the opportunities for volunteering, for example, for workaholics and those needing help to fill up their new free time with useful activities. The opportunities must provide satisfaction and usefulness to avoid being labeled as “make-work,” and they must be carefully regulated to prevent an unpaid volunteer from replacing a paid worker.

However, such a government would also subsidize travel costs to make vacationing easier or lean on domestic and foreign tourist industries to do so.

Fears of overconsumption seem equally overdone. The Great Reces-

sion showed again that when people had to, most were able to forgo what they defined as luxuries and prioritize the necessities. Those for whom consumption is an addiction, whether of drugs or luxuries, and those who use conspicuousness for status seeking may have a harder time if austerity is required and if they cannot substitute window shopping for shopping.

Actually, WTR might require some austerity in a slowly growing or stable economy, especially if pay must shrink along with work time. Reductions in the standard of living will not be politically popular, although they might be compensated for in part by transforming health, education, and perhaps even commuting into public goods that are free for everyone.

Government and other institutions should also monitor possible WTR effects on education. Presumably the demand for good jobs will always outpace the supply, thereby maintaining the intense competition for places in “selective” and other academically high-quality schools at all levels.

However, a reduced workweek could also reduce the educational involvement of students with average levels of academic talent, and fewer might want to attend college. Then the quality of a U.S. high school education might finally have to equal that of Europe’s, and other ways of postponing young people’s entry into the labor force might have to be found.

Alternatively, education including higher education might shift some of its curricular and other programming toward developing student interest in avocations. Even now, many people find avocations that compensate for boring or otherwise unpleasant work, and avocational schooling might help others find avocations of their choice.

Perhaps WTR’s most serious effect would be some downgrading of work’s social functions. Work is a major source of social life, the best supplier of social usefulness, and thus a major creator of social and self-respect. Work also remains the most widely used way of determining and indicating social status.

These functions would survive a thirty- or even twenty-four-hour workweek, but they might be imperiled by a Keynesian fifteen-hour

workweek. Eventually, the country would develop substitutes for the social functions of work, but meanwhile, a sufficient number of volunteer work opportunities must remain available when enough paid jobs are not available.

## **Work-Time Reduction in the Very Long Run**

If technological and other innovations enable employers to continue to do away with jobs, future generations may yet have to adjust to Keynes's fifteen-hour workweek. However, if the country can concurrently bring about economic democracy, income and wealth may be sufficiently equalized to make the brief workweek economically feasible.

Conversely, and if the climate scientists are right, eventually global warming may overwhelm the coastlines and overheat the southern portion of the country so that its populations will have to move inland and northward. They would perhaps generate enough physical building and other infrastructural jobs to bring back fuller employment and a longer workweek.

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