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The fight to work less

Covid-19 changed our relationship to work. Trade unions and the climate movement should use this opportunity to fight for a shorter working week

The debate around working time has taken a dramatic shift across Europe this year. By and large, this can be attributed to the Covid-19 pandemic raising profound questions about our relationship to work: from targeted work time reduction schemes to prolonged periods of furlough and the normalisation of working from home, the possibility for workers to have more control over their lives has become tangibly real.

Progressive parties across Europe in particular have displayed an interest in working time reduction. In Spain, the coalition government recently announced a €50 million fund for trialling a shorter working week across public and private sectors. In addition, governments in Scotland, Finland, and Lithuania have all made commitments to either trial or work towards reducing the working week over the coming years.

Beyond mere commitments, shorter working week trials in Iceland's public sector since 2015 drew attention from the world's media regarding both its ambition and its positive results. Over 2,500 workers – more than one per cent of Iceland's working population – took part in the trial, which reduced hours down from 40 to 35 without a loss in pay.

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The trial was deemed an 'overwhelming success' with participating workers enjoying greater well-being, improved work-life balance, and a better cooperative spirit in the workplace. Following the trials' success, Icelandic trade unions have achieved permanent reductions in working hours for tens of thousands of its members. Roughly 86 per cent of Iceland's entire population has now either moved to shorter working hours or has gained the right to shorten their hours.

Working more, working less

However, it is not all one-way traffic in favour of shortening working hours across Europe. The other side of the emerging Covid-19 recovery narrative stresses that longer hours are needed from workers to 'pay back' the Covid-19 debt or 'modernise' the national economy. In launching a programme of labour reforms, President Macron argued that upping working hours would bring in more revenue for the French economy. In addition, the recent German election saw the Free Democratic Party (FDP) and the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) advocate for the 'flexibilisation' of the 'Hours of Work Act'. They argued that the 'global catch-up competition' requires the law to be modernised. This, in concrete terms, would entail the removal of the maximum daily working time limit of 10 hours.

Campaigners for shorter working hours need to take the emergence of these counter-narratives seriously. As our recent book on the subject demonstrates, work time reduction schemes that are implemented in times of crisis rarely result in long-term change.

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The historical example of the Great Depression should give us pause for thought here. The thirty-five-hour working time reduction scheme enacted by the Roosevelt administration only acted as a preventative measure to stave off unemployment. Industry leaders of the period were eager to reassert 'normal' working hours as soon as possible. They feared the increase in leisure time could undermine work's status as the 'centre of life'. The pressure from industry ultimately won out. Once the worst of the economic crisis receded, the thirty-five-hour week was swiftly abandoned. Within a two-year period, average working hours in the US increased again to forty-five.

UK history also reveals a similar story. In the mid-1840s, the European potato famine caused an economic recession, which led to factories in the UK implementing shorter working hours. The working time reductions of 1847, however, were rescinded as soon as conditions improved. It wasn't until nearly thirty years later that the legislation for a maximum ten-hour day was finally secured.

The important lesson to be learnt from history, then, is that opportunities afforded to the reduction of working hours in times of

crisis are only that, an opportunity. If a sustainable long-term reduction in working hours is to be achieved, pressure from below must be applied and maintained for greater freedoms in the workplace to consolidate.

A red-green alliance

What are the pressures from below that can be mobilised to maintain the momentum around shorter working hours across Europe? There appears to be an underexplored relationship between the plight of environmental activism and the trade union movement.

While green and red alliances have historically struggled to unify over a common cause, the time appears ripe for coalition building around the future of work and environmental sustainability. Lest we forget, neither environmental sustainability nor job creation in and of themselves are sufficient for communicating a vision of a post-carbon economy. The key is to couple these with individual well-being, collective equality, and their ongoing sustainability across generations. Following this approach, a reduction in working time can be a central demand around which both causes can unite.

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For trade unions, it provides an opportunity to reactivate their histories. One common theme that emerges in the history of reduced working hours is the invaluable role that trade unions have played. With many countries across Europe experiencing labour shortages, there appears to be a window of opportunity for unions to collectively bargain not only for better pay, but also reductions in the hours people spend on the job. IG Metall in Germany, Forsa in Ireland, PCS in Scotland, and BSRB in Iceland provide examples of trade unions moving in this direction.

With regards to climate activism, the disillusionment over the inaction of politicians at COP26 appears to be only reenforcing the need to keep pushing bold and radical policy demands to those in power. Whether activists and policy-makers approach transitioning to a post-carbon economy from the position of post-growth, degrowth or a Green New Deal, one policy that appears compatible across these strategies is reducing working hours. Not only does it offer a relatively simple and effective way of reducing carbon emissions, it also provides a clear purpose and vision to the new economy we so badly need: one built on environmental and social justice.

In sum, while progressive parties across Europe appear to be embracing the shorter working week in response to the pandemic, the fight for greater free time will be won by building power in the workplace and across society at large. By communicating and establishing a new narrative of the future based on sustainability and greater freedom in the workplace, trade unions and climate activists can build power from below and win a permanent shorter working week for working people across Europe.



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