FUTURE OF SOCIAL DEMOCRACY 31.07.2025 | Susan Javad

The myth of the lazy worker

Contrary to the European trend, Germany wants to extend daily working hours. Here's why the current debate is a step backwards

While working time reductions are very much on the agenda in many European countries, Germany seems to be lagging behind. The Spanish government, for instance, plans a 'right to disconnect' and a general reduction in weekly working time to 37.5 hours. This is already the norm in the public sector and large companies. In Sweden, the largest trade union peak organisation LO has set the target of a general reduction of regular working time from the current statutory 40-hour working week and has made this a central demand of the upcoming bargaining round. In France, employees have been working a 35-hour week since 2000 (with a certain amount of flexibility). And in Denmark, a working week is 37 hours long since the 1990s, spread over five days at 7.5 hours a day, in most cases including breaks which are counted as working time.

The situation in Germany, where a discussion on working time is once more gaining momentum, is quite different. There was a heated debate on a four-day work week or working time reductions about two years ago, but now the wind has changed. After years of complaints from employers' associations and the conservative CDU/CSU that people in Germany no longer work hard or flexibly enough, this sentiment is now reflected in the current coalition agreement.

Why working more is not the answer

The agreement espouses that Germany should shift from a daily to a weekly maximum working time. That would increase flexibility and, supposedly, improve work–life balance. What is certainly the right thing to do in some situations – and hitherto has been implemented on a voluntary basis – is now to be made the rule. This would not be mandatory, however. It may well be that all those whose jobs can be done primarily on a laptop can, say, send a few emails after their family duties have been completed, hold a digital meeting with project partners in Australia or catch up on the latest research literature. By contrast,

electricians cannot just pick up their work again after reading the kids their bedtime stories. Nor can sales assistants or delivery drivers. For them, the abolition of the eight-hour day, which is now being demanded, basically means working longer hours at a stretch, getting back home to their children even later, no more family dinners, and shifting unpaid care work onto one's partner – if one has one – or to already understaffed public facilities.

And for all employees, excessive working time, shorter breaks and rest periods, as well as little say in the hours they work, have deleterious effects on their health. But surely this should have been understood even by those calling for (even) more flexibility and for people to 'improve their attitude to work', as the Confederation of German Employers' Associations (BDA) Chief Executive Steffen Kampeter put it. Appeals of that kind simply fly in the face of many people's everyday reality.

The often-repeated reproach that many now regard work as an 'inconvenient interruption of their leisure time' (German Chancellor Friedrich Merz) and just don't work hard enough is therefore equally false. The fact is that there have never been as many people in work in Germany as there are today. Particular progress has been made when it comes to the labour market integration of women. Furthermore, the total number of hours worked is at a record level.

Workers are, first and foremost, human beings.

To be sure, not everyone works the traditional, standardised full-time hours, which in any case vary from company to company and from collective agreement to collective agreement. There are many things that people need to do or simply enjoy doing besides earning a living. And they have every right. Workers are, first and foremost, human beings. And in any case, not every job is also a vocation, which those in different circumstances so easily forget.

Greece tops the European league with regard to weekly working hours. And there's every reason to believe that Greek workers are really working hard. But precisely this example shows that it makes a lot more sense to focus our attention on labour productivity. A European champion in that respect is Denmark, with a 37-hour working week. Even the Netherlands, with the lowest working hours in Europe, leads the field when it comes to labour productivity. In other words, there is no causal and certainly no linear relationship between the number of hours worked and productivity, or, for that matter, national prosperity.

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It's clear that the basic thrust of the political debate on working time in Germany is misdirected. And when the proponents of reform argue that they're only asking for a weekly maximum working time rather than daily and thus for more flexibility – in other words, 'only' for a redistribution of working time, not an extension – it begs the question: if eight hours aren't sufficient, it's already possible to work up to 10, in phases, if they are compensated within six months or 24 weeks. And if even that isn't enough flexibility for some employers, collective agreements already offer further leeway. But in that case, of course, employers have to conclude such agreements in the first place, and as the ongoing decline in collective bargaining coverage in Germany indicates, fewer and fewer are willing to do so.

'Just do it!' was a constant refrain during the last coalition negotiations. We'd like to say the same thing to the employers. When it comes to the government, we'd also say 'just do it, but please do it right'. Make sure that collective bargaining is not eroded any further. The Federal Collective Bargaining Compliance Act embedded in the coalition agreement is a meaningful step in that direction. But it shouldn't be the only one. The German Trade Union Confederation (DGB) has a whole list of points that policymakers could take on board to slow the trend and perhaps even reverse it. One important move would be to make it easier for whole sectors to make collective agreements binding, including for companies previously without such agreements. Statutory clarification of the permissibility of so-called 'margin clauses' (*Spannenklauseln*) would also help. This would also ensure that trade union membership makes a positive difference for employees, for example, with regard to wages or additional holiday entitlements. Key to this would be to identify and bring allies on board, including among employers who see the value of fair social partnership in their own economic and societal interests.

To that extent, the current backwards-looking working time debate in Germany is also an opportunity. A broad public debate on the value of work, productivity and fairness, also in relation to gender equality, is needed. And that makes it a thoroughly social democratic debate. For decades, the successful 'made in Germany' model was based on stable social partnership and broad collective bargaining coverage. If we were able to come close to Scandinavian levels of 80 to 90 per cent coverage – in contrast to current German levels of just under 50 per cent – then the

current debate, as backwards-looking as it may seem, would have been worthwhile.



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