

Work Less, Play More

Time is life. It is one of the most basic requirements for citizens to pursue their own conceptions of the good. Time has also been the focus of political struggle. For the Italian Autonomist movement of the 60s and 70s, the right to a richer life outside the factory was just as important as the need for better working conditions. As automation brought gains in productivity - enabling factories to produce more goods in less time - workers had every right to demand greater freedom.

Such demands will always have their moral objectors. Responding to calls in the 1920s to move from a six- to a five-day working week, George Markland, chair of the Philadelphia Gear Works, remarked that the men of America were becoming "softies and mollycoddles." His objections sound archaic to modern ears, but graft still has its champions. A recent article in *The New York Times* covered the phenomenon of "toil glamour" - the prestige attached to busyness and the willingness to work through fatigue, especially in the tech industry.

It is in this context that a major new report, co-authored by the Autonomy think-tank and the 4 Day Week campaign, feels so refreshing. The report calls for a national move to **a shorter working week, enabled by investment in automated technologies, to be implemented without a loss of income.** The document has received praise from, among others, the Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell and the economic historian Rutger Bregman.

The report is a welcome revival of work-time debates and a rejoinder to the softer 'work-life balance' campaigns of the 90s and 00s, in which more leisure time was still generally seen as a lifestyle choice for the more privileged, or a perk for those fortunate to have flexible employers. The vision here is deeper and more inclusive - the reduction of work-time should be state-endorsed and state-facilitated, so that as many as possible can benefit from an increase in free-time.

What is also striking about the report is its sheer range of arguments. Recent statistics show that 1.4 million workers in the UK now suffer from work-related ill-health, with 50 per cent of the work days lost linked

to work-related stress, anxiety or depression. The report argues that reducing the working week could be one way of relieving some of this mental pressure.

Its authors also suggest that a shorter working week could have benefits for gender equality. In a context where women in the UK perform 76% of all childcare, and spend an average of 26 hours per week on unpaid domestic work, a shorter working week could help level the field, making paid work more accessible to women and, in heterosexual couples, provide the time necessary for men to take on a greater share of domestic responsibilities.

The report also adds an environmental case, suggesting that the shorter working week could reduce the number of polluting commuter journeys, as well as furnish people with the time to reduce their reliance on carbon-intensive convenience goods, such as ready-meals.

The clincher, here, is the argument that these benefits could be pursued with the support of employers. The report cites a number of studies and cases to suggest that the shorter working week could be implemented without a loss in productivity, not only due to the benefits of automation, but also due to the way long hours and work stress undermine efficiency in the long run. Indeed, many companies have already embraced the shorter working week, including the Wellcome Trust, who recently announced their plan to trial a three-day weekend for 800 of its employees.

If the report can be commended for its breadth of arguments, it should also be praised for recognising the limits of the shorter working week. The authors are careful to stress that the policy is not 'a silver bullet for all of society's problems'. It raises many new questions, and led me to consider whether all jobs are equally as amenable to automation and reductions in hours. Reducing hours in jobs with an 'on call' element, such as nursing, may require new systems of job-sharing as opposed to wholesale reductions in work-time.

New work-time regulations may also have less to offer workers whose exhaustion is not caused by the direct imposition of a work schedule, but by bigger contextual factors. There are many workers today who are, in a certain sense, forced to discipline themselves. We can think of the gig worker, whose graft and long hours are driven by a need to survive rather than the diktats of a boss and a timetable. We might also consider those academic or creative workers who, in this world of high competition and temporary contracts, work beyond their limits because they fear for their future 'employability'. Many workers in these categories are still hoping for a five-day week. Their problems are not reducible to work-time regulations and would require more complex solutions.

We should also spare a thought for people who genuinely enjoy their jobs - fortunate people, for whom the distinction between 'work' and 'life' has become irrelevant. A truly progressive path to a shorter working week will need to leave space for a plurality of attitudes, creating the policy conditions for people to make choices, rather than prescribing a work dosage.

Finally, as Autonomy and the 4 Day Week Campaign have shrewdly noted, many of the problems with work have a strong cultural dimension. After all, it is not only job demands that prevent men from undertaking domestic work, but also stubborn cultural conventions about the nature of a 'woman's role'. Likewise, it is not



merely a lack of time that leads people to buy carbon-intensive convenience goods, but also consumerist ideals of luxury and the good life.

In this context, the shorter working week is not presented by the new report as a cure-all, but as a practical foundation for change - the idea is to create policies that are 'maximally supportive' of longer-term cultural shifts. As its authors argue, the policy should be seen as one important element in a broader set of labour struggles. As well as the struggle for less work, we must continue to attend to the struggle for better work, for resources and dignity in unemployment, and for an end to the mistreatment of people who cannot approximate society's ideal of the 'good worker'.

Yet even if the shorter working week is not a panacea, this new report remains a path-breaking intervention. In this gloomy period of austerity, which drives us to fixate on survival and security above all, Autonomy and the 4 Day Week campaign deliver an urgent reminder to consider the importance of freedom.

As well as a cogent policy proposal, the demand for a shorter working week is a provocation. It is an invitation to discuss uncomfortable truths: to scrutinize a world of work that has operated with disregard for people's bodily limits and existential needs. What is life for? What do we really want?

Autonomy and the 4 Day Week campaign are showing us that such questions need not be the preserve of utopians and dreamers. They have produced a report written in the spirit of the late Erik Olin Wright, and his call for a new 'utopian realism'. The shorter working week might be a bold proposal, but it has its feet on the ground, and its eyes on the evidence.

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Find more info at:
autonomy.work

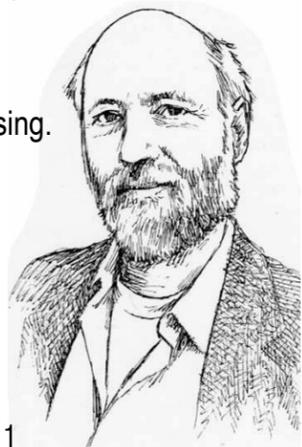


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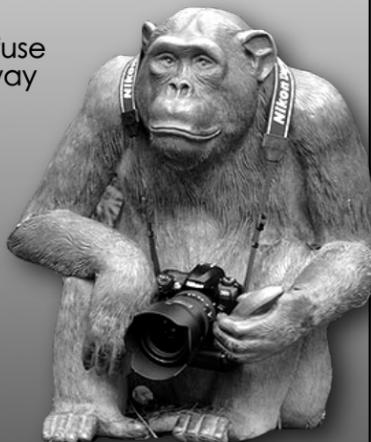


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