

Choice of Work Hours

What if the work week had kept getting shorter during the past fifty years?

Early in the nineteenth century, most Americans worked twelve hours a day, six days a week. The work week shrank gradually during the nineteenth century and more quickly during the twentieth. The traditional six-day week was shortened to five and a half days during the 1920s and to the five-day, forty-hour week during the 1930s.

But for over fifty years, the work week has stagnated at 40 hours. The long historical trend toward shorter work hours stopped completely during the 1950s and 1960s, during a period of rapid economic growth, rising wages, and widespread affluence. And since the 1970s, work hours have increased.

If work hours had kept decreasing at their trend of 1909-1929, the average work week would now be less than 25 hours. **Working these shorter hours, Americans would be far from poor.** We would earn as much as we did in the 1960s, when America called itself “the affluent society.” Americans today consume more than twice as much as in 1960 – personal consumption per capita (in 1992 dollars) was \$7926 in 1960 and \$17,403 in 1995 – so we could cut work hours in half and still have a 1960s standard of living.

When hourly wages began to go up during the nineteenth century, workers took some of the wage increases as increased earnings and some as increased free time. If people had continued doing this during the past fifty years:

- **We would not have had the mass suburbanization that began in the 1950s**, which has covered the American countryside with faceless subdivisions, strips, and shopping malls. The federal government built freeways and guaranteed mortgages for suburban housing in order to stimulate economic growth. With a slower growth rate, some people would have moved to suburbia, but many would have stayed in older towns, suburbs, and urban neighborhoods, where you can walk to go shopping.
- **We would not have had the mass movement of preschool children to day care centers that began in the 1970s**, as women entered the workforce. Work hours would be short enough that most families could take care of their own preschool children, even if both parents work.
- **We would not have a hyper-consumer economy** and the social effects that come from promoting needless consumption.

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Creating Needless Work

The graph shows that in manufacturing industries, where the best historical statistics are available, average work hours declined early in the twentieth century, hovered near 40 hours after 1950, and increased a bit during the 1980s and 1990s. The comprehensive statistics used in the graph begin in 1909, but earlier data indicates that hours had already dropped considerably before 1909: in the mid nineteenth century, the typical factory hand worked 12 hours a day 6 days a week, a total of 72 hours a week.

The work week has not stagnated at 40 hours by chance. **Work hours stopped declining because of deliberate government policy.**

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During the depression, there was a struggle within the Roosevelt Administration over whether to fight unemployment by reducing work hours or promoting growth. The Senate passed the Black-Connery bill, which reduced the work-week to 30 hours. Virtually everyone believed that this bill was just a first step, that work hours would inevitably become even shorter in the future, as technology became more efficient and there was less work to do. Labor supported this bill, led by AFL President William Green. But business leaders resisted the bill fiercely, saying we should fight unemployment by promoting what they called “the new gospel of consumption.” This opposition stopped the House of Representatives from passing the bill.

The Roosevelt administration initially backed Black-Connery. Because of business opposition, it backed the Fair Labor Standards Act as a compromise – the law that established the 40 hour week. Roosevelt also promised more funding for public works projects to stimulate the economy and provide everyone with 40-hour jobs.

In post-war America, this compromise became the conventional wisdom. Everyone believed that we should actively promote growth to provide everyone with 40-hour jobs. Corporations stepped up their advertising, and the federal government funded freeways and suburban mortgages to increase demand and used Keynesian planning to stimulate growth. **We have succeeded in stimulating growth and maintaining the average work week of 40 hours ever since.** But do we have to keep producing more and more products endlessly, whether or not we want them, just to create jobs?

Give Workers a Choice!

The 40 hour week may have made some sense in 1930, but it no longer makes sense today. Now that women work as well as men, people need more flexibility to balance work and family responsibility. Now that we have a more affluent economy, people should have the choice of working shorter hours and living more simply.

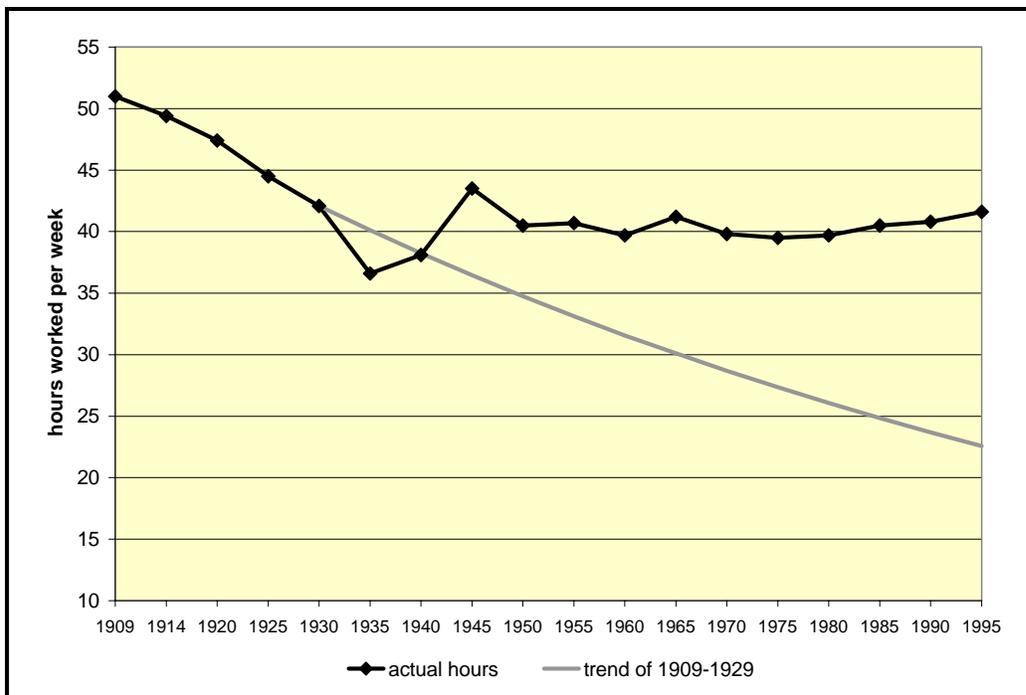
Yet most people today have no choice of work hours. Most good jobs are full-time, and most part-time jobs have low wages, no benefits, no seniority, and no opportunity for promotion. For example, many college teachers now work part-time as “Adjunct Professors,” and they are underpaid and have no chance of getting tenure.

In most fields, if you want job security, good pay, benefits, and a chance of promotion, you must take a 40-hour job. The economist Juliet Shor has estimated that, because of the lower pay and benefits for part-time workers, if the average male worker cuts his hours in half, he will cut his earnings by 80 percent.

Despite these obstacles, many people want to work part time. The great majority of part-time workers are part-time by choice. Only 17 percent work part time because full time work is not available. Obviously, many more people would work part time, if they were treated as well as full-time workers.

To let people choose the work hours they want, we need:

- **Laws ending discrimination against part-time workers:** Employees who do the same work should get the same hourly pay and pro-rated benefits, whether they are full-time or part-time. Part-time workers should also have the same seniority and same chance of promotion as full-time workers who have put in the same number of hours.
- **Tax incentives to create more part-time jobs:** Under France’s Robien Law employers receive subsidies if they reduce average work hours by at least 15 percent and hire new employees to make up for the reductions. France also has a separate program that subsidizes employers who offer part-time jobs to parents of young children. In the United States, we are more likely to use tax incentives than direct subsidies: we should reduce taxes for companies that provide high-quality part-time jobs.



“The long historical trend toward shorter work hours stopped during the 1950s, despite rapid economic growth, rising wages, and widespread affluence.”

Average Work Week in Manufacturing

source: Census Bureau, *Historical Statistics of the United States, Statistical Abstract of the United States*

The Netherlands has done the most to promote part-time work.. During the 1980s, Dutch businesses agreed to provide more part-time jobs in exchange for unions restraining their wage demands. And the Netherlands has a law banning discrimination against part-time workers. As a result, the average work week for all Dutch workers is now under 30 hours a week.. Rudd Lubbers, the Prime Minister when these policies were implemented, has written:

the Dutch are not aiming to maximize gross national product per capita. Rather, we are seeking to attain a high quality of life.... Thus, while the Dutch economy is very efficient per working hour, the number of working hours per citizen is rather limited. ... We like it that way. Needless to say, there is more room for all those important aspects of our lives that are not part of our jobs, for which we are not paid and for which there is never enough time.

Because of this policy, the Netherlands has one of the lowest unemployment rates in Europe, and it is attracting attention as a model for other European countries.

With this sort of policy, we could have enough good part-time jobs to let people choose their own work hours.

“Shorter work hours are essential to sustainability, but the environmental movement has ignored this issue. ”

Sustainability

For the first time, people would choose their standard of living. To decide how many hours to work, people would have to make a conscious decision about whether they want more money or more free time—and this would be an eye-opening experience for today’s Americans, who do not even have enough time to take care of their own children. Before buying a second car, you would consider that you could work a day less every week, if you did not have to support that car.

Most people would be happier with shorter hours. Having more time for your family, your community and your own projects is more important than owning a trophy house or a Sport Utility Vehicle.

Shorter work hours are also essential to sustainability, but the environmental movement has ignored this issue. We can never move toward a sustainable economy as long as we need endless growth to provide people with more jobs. If people can choose shorter work hours, we can move toward slower growth and ultimately to a no-growth economy, without increasing unemployment.

We still are trying to stimulate growth to fight unemployment, the policy we adopted during the depression: . But when we think about the future and about the looming limits to resource supplies and to environmental carrying capacity, we can see that our biggest problem is not unemployment. **Our real problem is working too much and consuming too much.**