

Work Time and Global Warming

If Americans could choose to work less and consume less, it could make a dramatic difference in greenhouse gas emissions.

Yet most Americans do not have the choice of working shorter hours. Choosing to work less is the biggest environmental issue that no one is talking about.

Work Time and the Environment

Americans work longer hours than the people in any other developed country. The average American works 1817 hours a year, and the average west European (in the EU-15 nations) works 1562 hours a year.

A recent study by Harvard economics professor Mark Weisbrot found that:

- ▶ If Americans worked as few hours as western Europeans, it would lower our energy consumption by 20%. With this change alone, the United States would have produced 3% less greenhouse gas emissions in 2002 than in 1990, almost bringing us to the Kyoto goal for cutting emissions.
- ▶ If Europeans worked as many hours as Americans, it would raise their energy consumption by 25%, making it impossible for them to reach their Kyoto goals.
- ▶ If the developing nations imitate the American model (all else being equal), world emissions of CO₂ in 2050 would be 14Gt, raising world temperatures by 4.5 degrees. But if the developing nations imitate the European model, world emissions of CO₂ in 2050 would be 10Gt, raising world temperatures by 2.5 degrees - a very substantial difference caused by work-time alone, apart from other policies to reduce emissions.¹

Choice of working shorter hours could have a significant effect on global warming in the short term, as this study shows.

Choice of work hours could have an immense effect on global warming in the long term by slowing the rate of economic growth.

Currently, the economy must grow in tandem with increased productivity, regardless of how much people actually want to consume. Because of improved technology, the average American worker can produce about 2.3% more each year, which adds up to an eight-fold increase in a century. As long as the work week remains the same, per capita

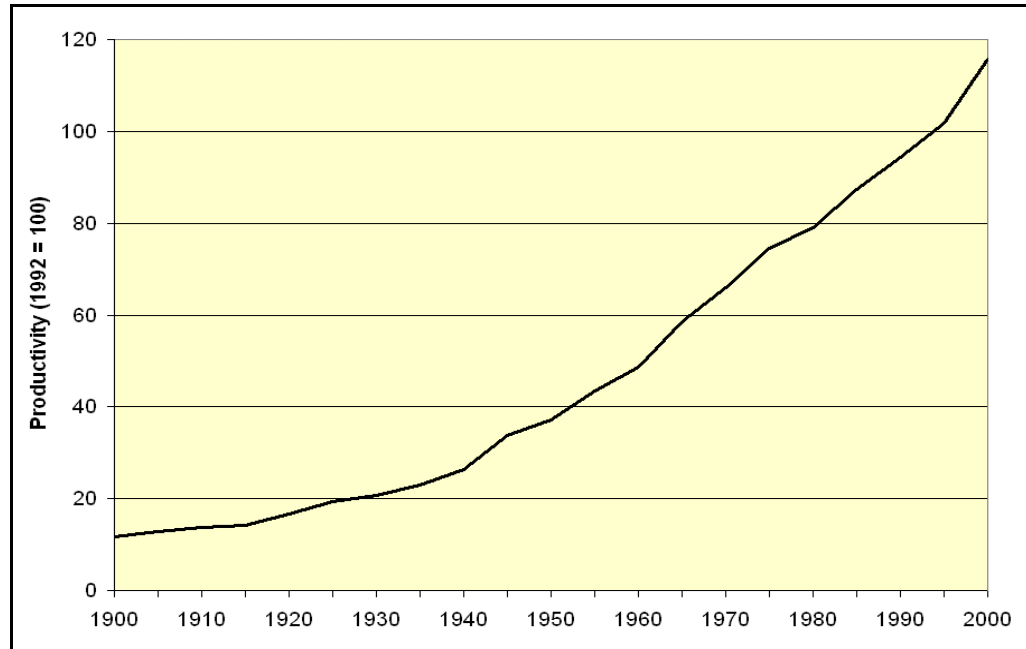
Shorter work hours could make a dramatic difference in greenhouse gas emissions. Yet most Americans do not have the choice of working shorter hours.

production and consumption must increase eight-fold in a century just to avoid unemployment.

Any reductions in greenhouse gas emissions through conservation and cleaner fuels is likely to be overwhelmed by this increased output. To stabilize world climate, we must reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 80% during this century, and there is little or no chance of doing this if per capita output grows eight-fold during this century.

Rather than increasing output at this rate, we must slow growth by giving people the option of using increased productivity to reduce their work hours - an alternative to using increased productivity to produce and consume more.

“During the twentieth century, productivity increased by just over 2.3 percent per year, increasing eight-fold in the course of a century.”



American Productivity (Output per Worker Hour)²

We Should Have A Choice

A survey by the Center for the New American Dream found that half of all Americans with full-time jobs would prefer to work a four-day week at 80% of their current pay.³

These people want to downshift economically, to consume less in order to have more time for their families and their own interests. If they could make this choice, they would be happier, and America's total impact on the environment would be reduced by about 10%.

Yet most Americans today have no choice of work hours. Almost all good jobs are full time, while most part-time jobs have low pay and no benefits.

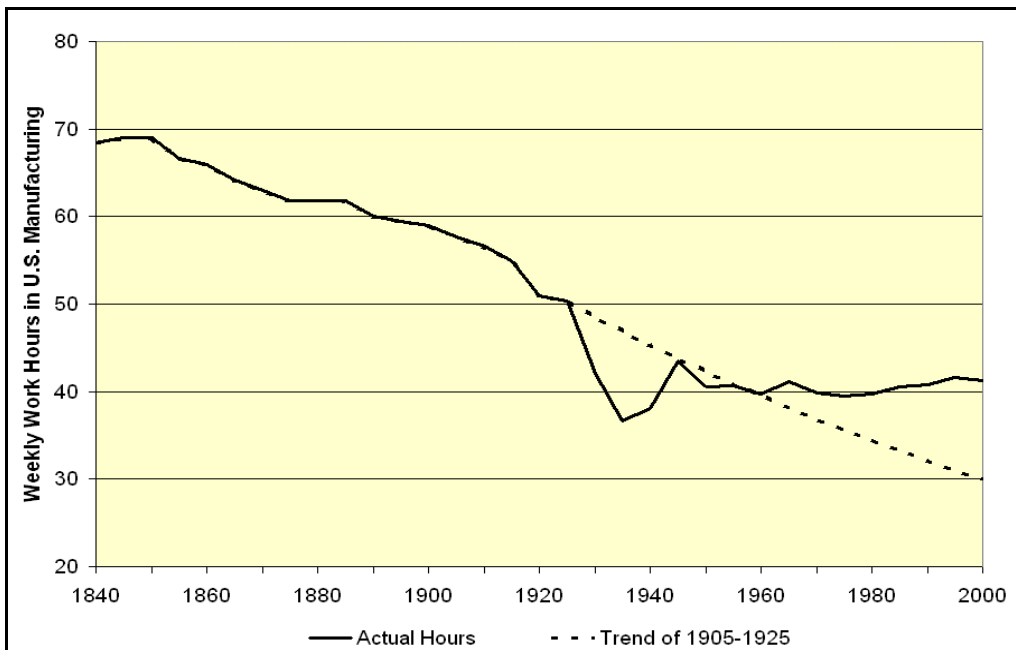
The economist Juliet Schor has found that, if the average American male worker reduced his hours by 50%, he would reduce his earnings by more than 80%, because part-time workers have lower wages and fewer benefits.⁴ (The average female worker would reduce her earnings by a bit less, because women are more likely to have worked part-time during part of their lives, and so they are already discriminated against.)

To give workers the opportunity to choose their hours, we need to:

- ▶ **End Discrimination Against Part-Time Workers:** By law, part-time workers should have the same hourly earnings as full-time workers and should have equivalent benefits, seniority, and chance of promotion. For example, many businesses give part-time workers no seniority to protect them from layoffs; by law, a half-time worker who has been at a company for ten years should have the same seniority as a full-time worker who has been at the company for five years. The European Union already has this sort of law protecting part-time workers against discrimination.
- ▶ **Create More High-Quality Part-Time Jobs:** The Netherlands and Germany have laws saying that, if a full-time employee asks to work shorter hours, the employer must accommodate the request unless it will be a hardship to the business; only 4% of these requests are rejected because of hardship. If this policy is too strong for us to adopt immediately, we can begin by giving private employers tax incentives or other incentives to offer their workers the option of working part-time.
- ▶ **Let Government Take the Lead:** Government should offer employees the option of working part-time, except in cases where it gets in the way of performing the job properly.

Will People Work Less?

The most common argument against choice of work hours is that people will always want to consume more and more and will never choose to work less. But there is no evidence for such a totally pessimistic view.



Average Work Week in American Manufacturing⁵

“Before the depression, hours became shorter because of labor union demands. Since World War II, hours have remained constant in the United States because of government policy.”

In the United States and Europe, work hours declined steadily from the beginning of the industrial revolution until World War II, because labor unions fought for shorter hours. After World War II, there were laws establishing a standard 40-hour work week, and governments promoted economic growth to provide everyone with a 40-hour job. Since the 1970s, most European governments have dealt with unemployment by shortening work hours, while the American government has dealt with unemployment by allowing wages to fall.

Before the depression, hours became shorter because of labor union demands. Since World War II, hours have declined in Europe and remained constant in the United States because of government policy. This policy does not give Americans what they want: we have seen that half of Americans with full-time jobs would prefer to work shorter hours.

New Environmental Policy

To deal with the threat of global warming, environmental groups must:

- ▶ Recognize that shorter work hours and simpler living would make it much easier to stabilize world climate and to cope with other global environmental problems.
- ▶ Support legislation to allow work-time choice, as outlined above.
- ▶ Advocate for simpler living, while emphasizing that we do not want to force anyone to work shorter hours and consume less. We just want to give people this option, which they do not now have.

At least, we could move closer toward European work hours, and this alone would be an important contribution to stopping global warming.

At best, there could be a strong movement toward simpler living, which could transform our society as the civil rights movement and the feminist movement did.

During the coming century, as global warming becomes worse, people are bound to see that we would be better off if we consumed less. But a simple living movement cannot spread widely as long as almost all the good jobs do not give you the option of working less and consuming less.

A simple living movement can not spread widely as long as almost all the good jobs do not give you the option of working less and consuming less.

¹ David Rosnick and Mark Weisbrot, "Are Shorter Work Hours Good for the Environment?" Center for Economic and Policy Research, 2006)

² Sources: 1900-1957: Susan B. Carter et al., editors, *Historical Statistics of the United States: Earliest Times to the Present* (New York, Cambridge University Press, 2006) p. 3-463; 1958-2000: George Thomas Kurian, ed, *Datapedia of the United States: American History in Numbers*, third edition (Lanham MD, Bernan Press, 2004) p. 134.

³ Center for the New American Dream, www.newdream.org/live/time/timepoll.php.

⁴ Juliet Schor, *The Overworked American* (New York, Basic Books, 1991) p. 133.

⁵ Sources: 1840-1890: *Historical Statistics*, p. 2-301; 1890-1925: *Historical Statistics*, p. 2-303; 1930-1995: *Historical Statistics*, p. 2-306 to 2-307; 2000: U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 2006* (Washington, DC, 2006) p. 414.