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A Four-Day Working Week: its Role in a Politics of Work

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Abstract
From a fringe idea with limited wider support, the goal of a four-day working week has moved into the spotlight in contemporary policy debates. Indeed, a growing number of businesses have agreed to pilot a four-day working week. This article examines what the turn to this goal means for a politics of work. It argues that its adoption by business interests can dilute its impacts, while its stress in some radical circles can distract from other pressing goals such as higher wages and improvement in work's quality. The article is sceptical that a four-day working week, as currently conceived, would necessarily transform work for the better. Building on a different politics, it proposes an alternative agenda that would allow for fewer work hours alongside higher quality work. The barriers to the realisation of this agenda reinforce the fact that radical change in society requires deeper institutional reform, including within workplaces.

Keywords: four-day working week, power relations at work, quality of work, work time reduction, post-work, workplace democracy

Introduction

THERE IS RISING interest in—and support for—reducing the length of the working week. This is evidenced, in particular, in debate on the possibilities and prospects for a four-day working week.[1] Once regarded as a radical demand of some labour activists, this specific goal has become an increasingly prominent part of modern policy debates. Indeed, a growing number of businesses have recently committed to piloting a four-day working week.[2]

This article is interested in what the recent turn to the idea and goal of a four-day working week means for a politics of work. Does this turn represent a vindication and triumph for critics of work who have long argued against 'normal' patterns of working time? Or does it constitute a false dawn and potentially a false move for such critics? In its journey from the fringes to the centre of policy debates, is the case for a four-day working week in danger of losing its critical edge? Further, given the need to address other pressing demands, not least the goal of ensuring that people can meet their needs through work, should critics focus their efforts on greater job security and better pay for workers, ahead of cutting work hours? In this sense, is the quest for a four-day working week just a distraction from the more urgent task 'of saving jobs and improving the quality of work'?[3]

The article argues that there are potential dangers with the modern debate on a four-day working week. These include the retreat to a 'business case' for shorter work hours that ignores the need for greater worker bargaining power and democratic change in workplaces. There is also the danger of ignoring the goal of meeting the needs of workers for higher incomes and higher quality work. These

[1]W. Stronge and A. Harper, eds., *The Shorter Working Week: A Radical and Pragmatic Proposal*, Autonomy, 2019; http://autonomy.work/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Shorterworking-week-docV6.pdf (accessed 1 April 2022); A. Coote, A. Harper, and A. Stirling, *The Case for a Four-Day Week*, Cambridge, Polity, 2020.
[2]J. Jolly, 'Thousands of UK workers to take part in four-day week trial', *The Guardian*, 4 April 2022; https://www.theguardian.com/business/2022/apr/04/thousands-of-uk-workers-to-take-part-in-four-day-week-trial (accessed 4 April 2022).
[3]P. Thompson, 'Capitalism, technology and work: interrogating the tipping point thesis', *Political Quarterly*, vol. 91, no. 2, 2020, pp. 299–309.

dangers highlight how a four-day working week, as currently conceived, might not necessarily be the best route to improve the quality of workers' lives.

Nonetheless, despite the problems and tensions in the above debate, it is argued that work time reduction should be an important aspect of a critical agenda for change in work. Here though, support for a shorter working week needs to be clearly linked to specific goals regarding the nature and future of work. Returning to older ideas from socialist thought, the article argues for less as well as better work. The move to a four-day working week must be about transforming work itself. This will only be achieved, however, by taking steps to reform work, including through the democratisation of workplaces. The barriers to such reform—from modern businesses to current state policy—illustrate the political struggle required to achieve a better world within work and beyond it.

Why work less?

Debates on the need and benefit of working less are not new. They have existed for many years. Key critical contributions include those of Marx and Keynes. These authors looked forward to a time when work would occupy fewer hours in the week. Marx sketched out a future (post-capitalist) utopia where the freedom from drudgery and freedom to live well beyond work would be extended. Keynes, from a different vantage point, predicted that the working week would fall to just fifteen hours by 2030. He anticipated that the proceeds of higher economic growth would be used to raise incomes and reduce work hours, allowing the move to an economy of abundance and greater leisure time. While differing on some fundamental points, Marx and Keynes agreed that progress in society equated with extending 'free time'.[4]

In modern debate, ideas about reducing the length of the working week have again assumed prominence. Notably, these ideas have been linked to myriad goals ranging from radical notions of human emancipation to the more prosaic pursuit of higher productivity. The interesting aspect is that both critical voices drawing on the original ideas of Marx and Keynes and more conservative interest groups seeking to improve business performance have found common cause in promoting the case for a four-day working week.

Prominent in critical circles are 'post-work' ideas.[5] These argue that work is harmful to wellbeing and extol the benefits of a work-free existence. Moving to a four-day working week is seen as a necessary first step in liberating people from the restrictions and deprivations of work. Beyond that, it is seen as important in extending the freedom of people to realise their talents in non-work activities. A positive view of leisure informs the argument for reducing working time.

The radical demand for a four-day working week is also associated with other goals. These include the reduction of carbon emissions. By reducing material production and consumption, a shorter working week would help to curtail pressure on the natural environment and meet climate change goals. It is also argued that a four-day working week would help to address gender inequality by evening out the distribution of paid and unpaid work time. These benefits add weight to the argument for creating a 'post-work' future.[6]

Alongside these critical arguments, however, there exists a more conventional set of ideas that supports a cut in weekly working hours. These ideas appeal directly to business interests and eschew goals that fit with any kind of radical politics. To the contrary, they suggest that a four-day working week can be good for business and a route to higher economic growth.[7]

The essential idea is that the existing five-day working week is 'inefficient'. If workers worked four days instead of five days per week, they would be less tired and stressed by work. They would also be more focussed and able to contribute ideas that can benefit the organisations in

[4]K. Marx, *Capital*, vol. 3., London, Penguin, 1992 [1867], p. 959; J. M. Keynes, 'Economic possibilities for our grandchildren', in J. M. Keynes, *Essays in Persuasion*, London, Norton, 1963 [1931], pp. 358–73.

[5]N. Srnicek and A. Williams, *Inventing the Future*, London, Verso, 2015.

[6]J. Schor, 'Sustainable consumption and worktime reduction', *Journal of Industrial Ecology*, vol. 9, no. 12, 2005, pp. 37–50; K. Weeks, *The Problem With Work*, Durham NC, Duke University Press, 2011.

[7]A. Barnes, *The 4 Day Week*, London, Piatkus, 2002; A. S. K. Pang, *Shorter: How Smart Companies Work Less, Embrace Flexibility and Boost Productivity*, London, Penguin, 2020.

The Political Quarterly, Vol. 93, No. 3

which they work. In addition, they would be less likely to quit their jobs and seek alternative employment. While apparently counterproductive for most businesses in terms of adding to recruitment costs, a four-day working week might actually reduce their overall costs by raising productivity, increasing worker morale and reducing turnover costs. Its achievement, indeed, may fit with a profit-maximising strategy and benefit shareholders.

These areas of overlap and agreement between seemingly polar opposite positions raise obvious questions. Hence, while critics may claim impact for their ideas by the fact that some modern businesses are willing to contemplate cuts in work hours, on closer inspection, it can be argued that their impact on debate is rather limited. Just because opinions converge on a particular goal—namely a four-day working week—does not mean that critical enquiry has achieved a 'win' in the so-called market for ideas. In fact, there remain continuing tensions in the debate on work time reduction. These tensions, as argued below, become more clearly evident once businesses actually look to implement a four-day working week. Their resolution, however, means thinking beyond the parameters of modern 'post-work' ideology. Indeed, it means developing new critical ideas about the role and future of work.

Conflict over working time

It is important to highlight the historical and political context in which the length of the working week has been determined. This context includes the unequal power relationship between capital and labour. Workers have achieved shorter work hours not through the kindness of employers, but by active struggle. Periods when weekly work hours have fallen have been ones in which the bargaining power of workers has been strong. Collective worker organisation via unions, coupled with low unemployment and strong economic growth, have helped workers to secure cuts in working hours.[8] The stalling of weekly work hours in recent decades—a feature of most capitalist economies—reflects partly on how the bargaining power of workers has declined. Keynes's dream of a fifteen hour working week by 2030 has been thwarted—not because capitalism has stagnated, but because the rewards of capital accumulation have gone disproportionately to capital owners. It can be argued, therefore, that workers will only be able to achieve a shorter working week if their bargaining power is enhanced.

The wider point is that work hours are contested and subject to conflict. While scenarios can be imagined where productivity is increased by cutting the duration of the working week, most businesses are likely to resist cuts in weekly work hours. Many businesses, indeed, will want to stick with a five-day working week and use overtime (whether paid or not) and/or work intensification to accommodate changes in demand. Arguments about promoting worker wellbeing, saving the planet or reducing gender inequality are unlikely to have much impact on the owners and managers of most businesses. This fact explains why businesses offering a four-day working week remain exceptional in modern economies. It also explains why present-day schemes designed to introduce a shorter working week are mostly temporary, why they are rarely associated with large organisations and why they often fail to deliver their promised benefits for workers.

Microsoft Japan, to take one example, trialled a four-day working week in 2019.[9] The effects on productivity and workers' morale were found to be positive. The apparent success of the trial, however, did not prompt a permanent move to a four-day working week—rather, it was followed by a reversion to a standard five-day working week. In other trials (again temporary in nature), a four-day working week has yielded reductions in work time which have been less than anticipated. Notably, a well-publicised experiment in Iceland reduced the average working week for some public sector workers from forty hours to thirty-five or thirty-six hours—it did not represent the

[8]R. Skidelsky, 'How to achieve shorter working hours', Progressive Economy Forum, 2019; https://progressiveeconomyforum.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/PEF_Skidelsky_How_to_achieve_shorter_working_hours.pdf (accessed 1 April 2022); C. Hermann, *Capitalism and the Political Economy of Work Time*, Oxford, Routledge, 2015.

[9]K. Paul, 'Microsoft Japan tested a four-day work week and productivity jumped by 40%', *The Guardian*, 4 November 2019; https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2019/nov/04/microsoft-japan-four-day-work-week-productivity (accessed 1 April 2022).

reduction of a full day's work.[10] This experiment was held-up as a successful trial of a four-day working week, when in reality, it showed the potential for more modest cuts in work hours.

Atom, an internet bank in the UK, also announced in 2021 that it would move to a four-day working week, but at the expense of an increase in the length of the 'normal' working day.[11] Under the scheme, the working week was cut from 37.5 hours to 34 hours—a reduction of just 3.5 hours. A three-day weekend, then, appeared for workers as an extended period of recovery from a more compressed working week. This confirms how reductions in working time—when accompanied by the same workload and higher work intensity—can impair workers' wellbeing.[12]

A case-study of a New Zealand financial services company that adopted a four-day working week is particularly noteworthy. Much reporting has focussed on the success of this company—Perpetual Guardian—which introduced a four-day working week in 2018.[13] This success inspired the company's owner, Andrew Barnes, to write a book in support of the case for a four-day working week. This book has since inspired a wider business-centred debate on the possible benefits of cutting the working week. Recent research, however, highlights concerns with the way that the company sought to introduce a four-day working week and casts doubt on its benefits as a basis for broader reform.[14] Managers took the lead in making the change—unions were absent and workers were not fully involved in the decision-making process. Crucially, the chief stated goal of a four-day working week was to increase productivity. This goal was internalised by workers and became a standard for evaluating the success of a four-day working week.

The problem was that higher productivity was put ahead of other things. The attainment of collective goals such as greater freedom from work (as expressed by radical writers) was not considered directly. Indeed, such goals were downgraded or compromised as productivity increases took centre-stage. Workers felt more pressure to perform at work to meet the stated productivity target. They also came under greater monitoring to comply with this target and felt under greater obligation to work hard in order to make the experiment a success. In effect, workers relinquished some freedom in work as a price for achieving a four-day working week.

The issue is that, where owners and managers in businesses adopt a four-day working week, they are likely to adapt it to suit their own interests, even if this prevents efforts to improve workers' lives at work. By itself, a four-day working week need not empower workers—indeed, its implementation may leave them exposed to more intensive work and under potentially stricter control at work. Where managerial prerogative and wider business interests prevail, there will be a limit to how far workers can gain from a four-day working week.

What about workers themselves? Will they necessarily demand a shorter working week? There is evidence that a minority of workers want to work fewer hours, even if this means forgoing higher pay. In the UK, for example, around a third of workers want to reduce their work hours—of these, a third would work fewer hours for less pay.[15] For these workers, a four-day working week cannot be achieved soon enough. They would be likely to be active volunteers in any scheme to reduce weekly work hours.

Yet, there is another group of workers (admittedly still in a minority) who want to

[10]BBC, 'Four-day week "an overwhelming success" in Iceland', BBC News, 6 July 2021; https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-57724779 (accessed 1 April 2022).

[11]D. Thomas, 'Atom Bank introduces four-day working week without cutting pay', BBC News, 23 November 2021; https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-59377940 (accessed 1 April 2022).

[12]C. Kelliher and D. Anderson, 'Doing more with less? Flexible working practices and the intensification of work', *Human Relations*, vol. 63, no. 1, 2010, pp. 83–106.

[13]R. Booth, 'Four-day week: trial finds lower stress and increased productivity', *The Guardian*, 19 February 2019; https://www.theguardian.com/money/2019/feb/19/four-day-week-trial-study-finds-lower-stress-but-no-cut-in-output (accessed 1 April 2022).

[14]H. Delaney and C. Casey, 'The promise of a four-day week? A critical appraisal of a management-led initiative', *Employee Relations*, vol. 44, no. 1, 2022, pp. 176–190.

[15]UK Office for National Statistics Dataset: Underemployment and overemployment, 2020; https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/datasets/underemploymentandoveremployment emp16 (accessed 1 April 2022).

extend their work hours, not necessarily out of a love for work (indeed, they may resist aspects of the work they do), but because of a basic need to earn more money. Underemployment (with work hours constrained below desired levels) has become an increasing problem in modern society.[16] It is reflected in involuntary part-time working as well as in multiple job holding. Evidence suggests that some low earners are forced to juggle several different jobs—working long hours in the process—just to make ends meet.[17] Long work hours for these workers represents a forced choice. This shows how, at an ideational and political level, a four-day working week may not resonate with all workers—indeed, for those on low incomes and who are struggling to get by, it may be seen as a direct threat and something to be avoided.

It is often claimed that a four-day working week can and must be achieved with no reduction in pay. This is partly justified on the basis that a four-day working week can yield higher productivity—a fact, as argued above, that is used to gain business support for reducing work hours. This claim is also used to win wider worker support for a four-day working week. Workers, however, need to be in a position to secure any gains in productivity from shorter work hours. In practice, these gains may be appropriated by employers with no increase in pay—the adoption of a four-day working week may then coincide with an increase in underemployment and a widening in inequality between workers. For those in low-paid occupations, where work is often paid by the hour, the realisation of a four-day working week would require rises in hourly pay rates if no reduction in overall pay is to occur. But employers will likely resist such increases, preferring to stick with lower hourly rates of pay. In low-paid sectors, employers will have the power to set wages and will resist any increase in hourly wages (especially where productivity gains are limited). The idea that the shift to a four-day working week will offer direct benefits to all workers, in short, can be disputed.

Proposing a four-day working week can divert attention away from other more urgent concerns that hinder workers' ability to live well. In relation to the above point, for many contemporary workers (including those in the so-called 'gig economy'), the key problem is a lack of enough income to live. This problem will only be intensified by limiting work hours—rather, its resolution will require new laws to enforce and uprate minimum wages. The argument here is that reformers should target the issue of low pay as well as employment gaps and low quality work, rather than get side-tracked on to debates about reducing work time.[18]

Yet, this argument risks overlooking the case for a shorter working week. It misses how, with suitable interventions, work and life might be improved by cutting work hours generally. As argued below, in developing a critical agenda—one that deals with urgent challenges of modern work, but also offers some visionary perspective about how the world of work might be transformed—it is important to retain the idea and goal of reducing the duration of the working week.

Reworking the future

For the moment, it is useful to refer back to the ideas of Marx and Keynes. Their vision of reducing working time encompassed people winning more time for themselves to be and do what they want. It resisted the idea that business would continue as normal and instead put forward a radical idea of creating a future society where the freedom for people to live well would be extended. At least in the case of Marx, this vision also fitted with an idea of recreating work—of making it into something that people would seek to embrace, not reject. The pursuit of the freedom to enjoy leisure, in Marx's writings, was bound together with the goal of extending the freedom to enjoy work itself. Other socialist writers, notably William Morris, made similar arguments in support of transcending the 'useless toil' created by capitalism and of realising

[16]D. Bell and D. Blanchflower, 'Underemployment in the United States and Europe', *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, vol. 74, no. 1, 2021, pp. 56–94.

[17]A. Smith and J. McBride, '"Working to live, not living to work": low-paid multiple employment and work–life articulation', *Work, Employment and Society*, vol. 35, no. 2, 2021, pp. 256–276.

[18]Thompson, 'Capitalism, technology and work', p. 307.

'useful work' under socialism. This entailed reducing work hours as well as elevating work's quality.[19]

The Marx-inspired vision—of creating less and better work—has got lost in 'post-work' politics by a focus on 'abolishing' or 'eliminating' work. It has also been negated in business-based arguments for shorter working hours, because sacrifices or compromises in the quality of work have been accepted or condoned in the reduction of work time. An objective of this article is to restate the case made by Marx for combining a shorter working week with higher quality work. In short, it is not a matter of choosing between less and better work, but seeking the conditions where they can be both achieved simultaneously.

The above discussion helps to highlight two important points. Firstly, it suggests that minimising work time is not just about securing freedom from work, but also about realising the freedom to work with meaning and purpose. Creating more free time is an important goal, but so too is achieving work that means something to those performing it. In seeking shorter work hours, then, efforts should be made to elevate the quality of work and to improve the lives of workers, whether at work or beyond it. Secondly, it is evident that reform must entail shifts in power from capital to labour. Despite the persuasiveness of economic arguments in favour of a four-day working week, all businesses will not volunteer to implement it. To the contrary, as argued above, most will actively resist it. Voluntary action by business owners cannot be relied upon to achieve decisive change in either the duration or quality of working time. Instead, these owners must be pushed to change by the pressure of unions and state action.

Collective interventions will themselves be resisted. The private sector might tolerate, for example, trials of a four-day working week in the public sector. But it will lobby hard against moves to legislate for cuts in weekly working hours. A generalised reduction in work time, in effect, will necessitate the state taking a position that most business owners are likely to oppose. Minimum wage laws have required the state to counter and overcome the interests of business—the same can be said for the implementation of measures to cut weekly working hours as well as to raise the quality of work.

This resistance only emphasises the need to push for change. Working time and the quality of work are currently set in the interests of a minority—they are determined in a fundamentally undemocratic way. If society is to become more democratic, then it needs to build institutions that allow workers more of a say over how long they work and how they work. Reform must extend to creating workplaces where workers are active participants and decision makers. This means promoting works councils and granting workers a seat on company boards. It also means exploring new forms of ownership, including ones where workers are joint owners. In the end, it is impossible to consider the scope for a world of less and better work without ceding more power to workers in the control and governance of workplaces. Economic democracy, therefore, can be pursued alongside measures to make work lighter in both a quantitative and qualitative sense.[20]

Moves to democratise work, of course, will face resistance from the owners of capital. Just as the majority of businesses will want to retain a five-day working week, so they will want to continue with existing (undemocratic) modes of ownership. Yet, once more, this simply highlights the need to pursue the necessary reforms and to win—for all workers—a shorter working week and work that is meaningful.

Conclusion

This article has shone a critical light on modern debates focussed on realising a four-day working week. These debates are ones in which opponents and supporters of the existing system of work have found common ground. Both critics arguing for a 'post-work' society and more conservative writers looking to make businesses more productive have come to support the case for a four-day working week. The article has argued that any notion of critical ideas gaining a foothold in mainstream policy debates is premature and likely

[19]W. Morris, 'Useful work versus useless toil' [1885], in C. Wilmer, ed., *News From Nowhere and Other Writings*, London, Penguin, 1993, pp. 285–306.

[20]D. A. Spencer, *Making Light Work: An End to Toil in the Twenty-First Century*, Cambridge, Polity, 2022.

false. Far from exerting any influence on mainstream opinion, these ideas are likely to be crowded out by agendas that favour business success over other social and collective goals. The emergence of businesses enacting a four-day working week only confirms this point. A four-day working week is only acceptable to businesses if it raises productivity and this bias towards economic gains limits the scope for wider reforms (including ones that have the potential to benefit workers). Indeed, the danger is that a four-day working week is implemented in ways that can backfire on workers and magnify problems of work. This danger indicates how the goal of reducing working time can alienate some workers (including those in low-paid work and who are union members).

Despite this criticism, the article has still argued in favour of cutting work hours. The current length of the working week is neither the most efficient, nor the most optimal for society. Reducing it would certainly bring benefits (economic as well as social and ecological). In this respect, current campaigns in support of a four-day working week are important in promoting the case for change. But these campaigns need to be broadened out. As argued above, the argument for work time reduction must be situated in a broader agenda: one that encourages a transformation in—and of—work.

There are pressing problems of low pay, together with high work intensity and low autonomy work in the present, that need to be addressed. New problems are emerging linked to the cost of living crisis and falling real wages that also require urgent attention. All these problems mean reforming work generally, not simply its duration. Nonetheless, it is important that we retain some vision of what the future of work (and working time) might look like. This is especially so given the challenges wrought by Covid-19 and the need to create a more inclusive and sustainable society in its wake. The idea of 'building back better', if it is to have any meaning, must include the reimagining of work.

The aim, however, should not be to craft a 'post-work' society (one where work is somehow ended), but to create a future where work is enhanced as an activity and where it allows for more time for other things in life. The broader goal should be to transform work and life such that all the time humans spend is fruitful and rewarding. This means, in more specific terms, creating a whole new system of work—one that is enriching for everyone to participate in, and where work and non-work time add equally to the wellbeing of all.

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