

# The future of work and working time: introduction to special issue

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This introduction to the special issue on the future of work and working time offers an overview of issues of relevance to present-day debates on working time. The aim is to bring together two divergent debates, the first on working time reduction for full-time workers and the second on the diversification and fragmentation of working time. It considers the history of working time including the forces that led to the establishment of the standard employment relationship and to reductions in standard working hours. It addresses contemporary trends and examines why there has been both a stalling of working time reduction and a diversification of working time norms. Some limitations of focussing only on clock time are considered as well as some of the benefits, from more meaningful work to better health and well-being, that stem from both regular and non-excessive working time. The final section turns to the case for reform: it argues that policies are required to address the fragmentation of working time, and that these policies should be combined with a focus on shortening standard working hours that could increase the sustainability of working time in a dual-earner society and even limit the supply of labour for jobs offering only fragmented working time.

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## 1. Introduction

Two apparently divergent issues dominate the current debate on the future of work and working time. The first relates to the destandardisation of working time (Supiot, 2001; Messenger, 2005; Campbell, 2017; ILO, 2023), a process that began with the growth of non-standard employment (Supiot, 2001) and the move to the 24/7 economy but which has been accelerated by the spread of platform work (De Stefano, 2016) and the emergence of an ‘always-on’ culture. The second relates to the puzzle as to why the long-term process of reducing standard working hours, predicted to follow technological

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advance and productivity growth, has stalled in the UK and elsewhere since at least the 1980s (Hermann, 2015). The spread of AI and digitalisation, while adding to the destandardisation of working time and the erosion of the standard employment relationship (SER), has also led to renewed discussion over whether it could finally be possible to mobilise the potential of new technology, both to provide greater opportunities for leisure and family life and to reduce any increased risk of involuntary unemployment.

Bringing these two debates together is challenging, in part, because the whole debate about reducing standard working hours presumes the continuation of the SER (as outlined by Supiot, 2001). Under this model, employers committed to provide regular work for extended durations, organised in continuous shifts with disruptions to work flows still paid for under contracts that guaranteed wages for time at work. Even under these conditions, legislating for or bargaining over reduced standard hours raised potentially contentious issues both over the implied changes to hourly pay if shorter hours were not to result in lower incomes and over any efficiency and work intensity consequences that would underpin higher hourly pay. In the current context, collective bargaining capacities have declined in many countries and particularly the UK. This trend to weakened collective organisation has coexisted with a range of drivers leading towards more diversity in working time norms and arrangements. This diversity is associated with the structural shift to services, widespread product and labour market deregulation, and the diversification of the workforce by gender, age and citizenship. All these drivers for change in working time norms have been enabled and facilitated by technology and changing power relations in the labour market. Fast forward to the present and we find concerns over fragmented working time and extended working days, increases in involuntary unpaid time within the working day, pressures to be always connected to work and increasing problems of determining responsibility for working time due to ambiguities in employment status, and triangular employment relationships between workers and clients, platforms, agencies and subcontractors. Under these conditions, even thinking about how to set about reducing weekly working hours and what that would mean in practice has clearly become more complicated.

A clear priority is to find ways to protect workers facing the problems of fragmentation but reducing standard full-time working hours still provides a potential key to many problems from poor health and well-being, persistent gender inequality and pressures to work to an older age before retirement. A key question is whether the increasing differentiation of working time arrangements by class, gender, sector and among individuals, is limiting collective action to pursue both the redistribution of productivity gains and the reorganisation of work arrangements to better suit current societal needs, including the shift towards dual earning households. And if that is the case, then it is important to consider what can be done to create a more common experience, both providing better protection within fragmented working time systems and enabling a reduction in standard working hours.

These apparently divergent but in practice connected debates are well represented in the seven papers in this special issue. The first two papers address the debate on the potential for reducing working hours: Spencer's paper views the issue from a history of thought perspective through a comparison of the contributions and perspectives of Marx and Keynes, while Mullens and Glorieux provides an analysis of a specific experiment with shorter working weeks in a company in Belgium and alerts us to some of the complexities of such experiments. The following two papers address differences in working time within and between occupational segments. Howcroft and Taylor,

explore differences in working time patterns and rhythms of a semi-professional group—IT workers in the UK—between those working in a bureaucratised workplace and those working in the competitive app development marketplace. [Devetter and Valentin](#) use a novel methodology to explore and measure working time change in France across two dimensions: the total length of the working day and the share of paid work hours versus unpaid hours between the day's start and finish times. Comparisons across key occupational categories reveals trends towards greater social inequalities in working time and pay. The final three papers bring platform work into the debate though [Piasna's paper](#) on the challenges posed by algorithmic management stresses that this is an issue for all employees, not just those engaged in gig work. Piasna identifies the need for a new approach to regulation to fill important gaps in legal frameworks, including what counts as working time and how working time and wages are connected. This overview is complemented by two empirical papers: [Pugliano \*et al.\*](#) on freelancers across Europe and [Fernández Massi and Longo](#) on delivery workers and designers in Argentina. Platforms are found to encourage excessive competition whether by allowing competition on rapid response times not skills ([Pugliano \*et al.\*](#)) or by allowing choice over log-in times for delivery work ([Fernández Massi and Longo](#)) or by activating global competition for design work, with workers from the Global South investing significant unpaid time in the hope of accessing work paid on Global North terms. The consequences are that platform workers have to accept a high level of unpaid time and a blurring of the work time/free time divide to secure and maintain work though the type of unpaid time and the reasons for compliance vary across the cases.

This introduction to the special issue on the future of work and working time is organised as follows. [Section 2](#) reviews the historical campaigns and subsequent laws that both helped establish the SER and drove reductions in standard working hours, focussing mainly on the UK but set in an international perspective. [Section 3](#) addresses contemporary trends. It considers why there has been both a stalling of working time reduction and diversification of working time norms and ends by reviewing the role of technology in these trends. [Section 4](#) outlines some of the limitations of focussing only on clock time and some of the benefits, such as prospects of meaningful work and better health and well-being that stem from both regular and non-excessive working time. [Section 5](#) turns to a possible multi-faceted policy agenda for addressing both fragmentation and reduced working time by combining policies to combat the erosion of standard working time protections and norms with policies to kick start moves towards shorter working hours. [Section 6](#) brings together these considerations of labour law and re-regulation, changing technologies, evolutions in capitalism and demands for working time reduction. While it is conceivable that we will see changes in the direction of better employment security and reduced but more predictable hours of work, we conclude that less positive outcomes, including a greater proportion of workers without a standard employment relationship, are also possible.

## 2. Historical foundations of working time arrangements

History shows that work time first rose and then fell with the development of capitalism. The imposition of long hours of work marked a break with the past—prior to capitalism, workers had shorter but more leisurely lives with their time not regulated by the clock but instead by the seasons and the weather ([Thompson, 1967](#)) and their pay determined by custom and/or product prices not by time worked ([Biernacki, 1995](#)). The transitions

in many sectors to collectivised work measured by clock time in factories and other workplaces was explained, according to a Marxist perspective (Marglin, 1974), by the search for higher labour productivity and the extraction of surplus value through the development of workplace norms around both time discipline and expected effort levels. New institutional economists (Williamson, 1985) attributed the same trend towards internalised labour within firms to the search to minimise transaction costs through the development of the SER that enabled constant amendment of the implicit labour contract.

Capitalism thus brought a stricter divide between work and leisure time and lengthened hours of work. Up until the end of the nineteenth century, six-day working weeks in excess of 70 hours were not uncommon in some sectors, such as the railways (Huberman and Minns, 2007). These long working hours were not the choice of workers but instead were the product of the choice of employers who saw longer work hours as the route to higher profits. The profit imperative drove employers to increase work hours often at the expense of the health and well-being of workers.

Reduction in working time (particularly weekly work hours) was hard fought for by workers. As the nineteenth century progressed, workers used the collective strength won through unions to press employers for cuts in the working week. They were helped in this endeavour by the actions of state to enforce limits on the working time of women and children. While such limits were resisted by many economists partly because of their perceived interference in employer autonomy and the distorting effects they were assumed to have on the labour market (Blaug, 1958), they won wider support due to the protections they afforded to workers from debilitatingly long hours of work. The earliest factory legislation in Britain set limits to the working day of children, initially pauper apprentices whose 'health and morals', according to an Act of 1802, were put at risk by long hours working in some of the earliest mills, then still powered by water. The first legislation to govern the working hours of adults, the Factories Act of 1844, was confined to female workers in textiles. In practice, these controls benefited men too as textile work was not rigidly segregated by gender, and it became infeasible for employers to employ men on longer hours once Parliament legislated to prevent staggered starting and finishing times for men, women and children (the 'relay system') in the 1850s. Although the Factory Acts of the 1840s only applied to textiles, the 10-hour day they established became the norm elsewhere as a result of collective bargaining. The Factory Acts were thus a major stimulus for working time reductions across the wider economy (Deakin and Wilkinson, 2005, pp. 227–8; Adams, 2022, p. 86). Patterns of 'normal' working, in general, were forged through conflict and struggle and represented compromises between capital and labour.

Working time norms took various forms and had several rationales. The main justification for legislating for a 10-hour working day was the need to protect the human body against the effects of mechanisation. Occupations which did not involve manual or physical work, or which were unaffected by automation, remained outside the scope of statutory controls at this point. The implications for gender were complex. The case for protecting women and children from long hours was made in terms of their greater vulnerability to physical harms, with the need to protect women's reproductive capacities receiving particular emphasis. In some cases, this led to the complete exclusion of women from certain industries, as occurred in the case of underground labour in mining from the 1840s. Yet occupations in which female labour was widespread, in particular the rapidly growing service sectors including retail, education, clerical work and domestic service, were wholly outside statutory protection by virtue of their unmechanised nature, while

also being mostly untouched by collective bargaining (Adams, 2022, pp. 84, 88). In these sectors, very long hours were often the norm up to the end of the nineteenth century.

The regulation of the working week, like that of daily working hours, was initially justified by a similar health and safety rationale. Under the 1878 Factories and Workshops Act, overtime beyond the statutory daily and weekly limits was not as such prohibited, but had to be justified by reference to a set of permitted reasons, and was under the control of the factory inspectorate. In practice, however, overtime was widespread and difficult to limit as workers relied on it to supplement earnings. At the end of the nineteenth century, the British trade unions shifted their approach from one of seeking to suppress overtime in the interests of boosting employment, to one of attempting to raise premia for extra hours worked. Collective bargaining set a 'normal' working week (initially 48 hours, later, by the middle decades of the twentieth century, 40) which was not intended as a ceiling on working time as such, but as the threshold at which higher, overtime rates of pay became available. This involved a more or less explicit recognition that the negative health effects of long working hours were being traded off for higher pay (Adams, 2022, p. 91).

Elsewhere, legislation governing the working day and week more clearly had the objective of restricting actual hours worked. Among the first countries to set a statutory 48-hour working week across all industrial occupations was Uruguay, in 1915. In France, the Popular Front government established a statutory 40-hour week in 1936. The French approach of legislating for working time limits has persisted, with the Aubry Law of 1998 the first in Europe to introduce a 35-hour working week, with effect from 2000. In Germany, the statutory limit has been set at 48 hour, implying an 8-hour day and six-day week, since the 1930s, but sector-level collective agreements have steadily improved on this. Collective bargaining established a 40-hour, five-day working week from the mid-1960s, and successive waves of strikes saw this reduced to 37 hours by the early 1990s.

Other issues which came within the remit of working time laws around the world during the twentieth century included public holidays, annual leave, weekend working, maximum duration of shifts and night working. The International Labour Organization played a crucial role in disseminating these norms. Its very first convention, adopted in 1919, set an 8-hour day and 48-hour week norm for industry, and this was extended to commercial and office work in 1930. A weekly rest convention was first adopted in 1921, and one for the 40-hour week in 1935.

Alongside efforts to reduce the working week, attempts were made through a combination of law and collective bargaining to make it more regular. In Britain, the hiring of workers by the day was still common in sectors, such as dock work, not just at the end of the nineteenth century but well into the twentieth. In engineering and coal mining, workers might be continuously hired, but be subject to extended periods without pay when no work was available. Casual and informal work was also associated with the practice of hiring through intermediaries, which was rare on the European continent at this time (Biernacki, 1995), but which persisted in parts of British industry into the 1940s (Deakin and Wilkinson, 2005). Trade unions pushed back where they could, by including provisions for a guaranteed daily wage and later a weekly one in collective agreements, and the state intervened directly to end casualisation in the docks. The legal principle that employers were liable for interruptions to work began to take hold through case law in the early decades of the twentieth century, and was later formalised through collective agreements and legislation for 'guarantee pay'.

Employers, in practice, came to see benefits in cutting and regularising work hours. The last hours of six-day working weeks were seen as subject to diminishing returns and this helped to win over employers to state-imposed and worker-demanded cuts in work hours (Nyland, 1986). This view at least made employers more accommodating when demands for shorter work hours were made by workers. It created the possibility for potential ‘win-win’ scenarios where workers could secure shorter work hours for the same pay while employers could gain higher productivity from reduced work hours. The lesson for the present is that employers are more likely to accept work time reduction if there is a demonstrable positive economic effect on profits. Economic interests, in this case, still influence the scope for and limits to reform in work hours.

In fact, working time has fallen in capitalist economies not on a consistent basis but rather in a piecemeal and sporadic fashion. Falls in the working week in the UK, in particular, have tended to be clustered in particular periods when trade unions have been strong, including just following the two world wars. These falls have reflected the strength of workers’ bargaining power coupled with the strong growth of the economy that have made it possible for employers to cut weekly work hours with no loss of profitability (Pencavel, 2018).

There have been noteworthy variations in the speed of decline in work time across countries. Germany and the Netherlands, for example, have witnessed faster falls in weekly work hours for full-time employees. These falls have persisted through to the present—these countries now have the shortest working weeks in Europe and indeed the world. They reflect the effect of collective bargaining and societal norms favouring leisure over work. The contrast can be made with the UK and USA where weekly working hours have stalled over recent decades—a fact that reflects the relative weakness of unions and the abiding strength of the work ethic, among other factors.

Work time patterns have also varied by gender. Historically, women have performed significant work in the home, caring for others as well as cleaning and cooking. This work has been unpaid and unaffected by laws regulating the amount of time spent in the workplace (Adams, 2022, p. 88). Female employment was widespread in Victorian Britain and often took the form of full-time work, but in Britain changing gender norms and shifts in public policy saw a reduction in female participation in the first decades of the twentieth century, and the entrenching through collective bargaining and social legislation of a male breadwinner wage (Deakin and Wilkinson, 2005, ch. 3). From the 1980s, in Britain as elsewhere, women have again increased their participation in labour markets, taking on more paid work. But this has been at the cost of their performing the same or similar amount of unpaid work time. The rise in female labour market participation has meant that, at the household level, work time per capita has risen in capitalist economies (Hermann, 2015). This trend has offset falls in weekly work hours and higher paid holiday entitlement, meaning that paid work performed by many households has increased. For women workers, there has been a persistent problem of a ‘double shift’ with hours of paid work adding to hours of unpaid work.

### 3. Recent trends in working time

#### 3.1 *The stalled reduction in the standard working week*

The reduction of the standard working week has stalled in capitalist economies. It has stayed at five days per week. In this respect, it has remained unchanged for several

decades. It can be recalled that J.M. Keynes famously predicted in the 1930 that the average working week in capitalist economies would fall to just 15 hours by 2030 (see [Spencer, 2024](#)). This outcome would follow from the progress of technology and the increase in productivity. Yet, there seems no chance of this prediction coming true. On the contrary, if current trends continue until 2030, working weeks in all capitalist economies look set to remain at around five days and with limited likelihood of any emerging new universal norm such as was established in the post war period around the 40-hour week. Even if a four-day week were to become more prevalent in the next decade, it is still a long way from Keynes' prediction of 15 hours.

In addition to the stalling of a general downward trend there are distinct and evolving class divides that are working in different directions from those that typified arrangements in the Victorian and Edwardian era. In the past, the more affluent in society were associated with the 'leisure class'. The rich bought immunity from work by dint of their wealth ([Veblen, 1899](#)). They worked less only at the cost of the working class working more—their high status was built on their pushing work on to the less affluent working class. Workers worked hard to satisfy the luxury consumption of the rich. But, in more recent times, those with more wealth have tended to work more not less—they have remained 'busy' ([Gershuny, 2009](#)). This reflects partly on a desire for status through association with busyness not leisure but it also reflects a need for more income so that the rich can keep up with prevailing (high) consumption norms. It also reflects the effects of management practices and reward schemes that demand and lock-in long work hours in high-paid jobs (see also below). Elements of the working class by contrast, facing limited access to full-time work, have more recently faced shorter work hours, though not out of choice (see [Bangham and Gustafsson, 2020](#)). The secular decline in work time among the working class has coincided with more underemployment and in-work poverty ([Bell and Blanchflower, 2021](#)). It has been associated with a fragmentation of the SER and the rise of phenomena like zero-hour contracts and on-demand employment.

There are at least four reasons for these recent trends. The first reason is workers' lack of power to effect reductions in the working week. The decline in the power of unions in some countries, influenced and orchestrated by the state, has meant that workers have lost the ability to bargain for and secure cuts in weekly work hours. The decline in collective bargaining coverage has been particularly marked in the UK and USA, meaning that weekly work hours have stayed higher for longer in these countries. The survival of collective bargaining and strong unions in particular sectors has meant that countries like Germany and the Netherlands have witnessed shorter working weeks, though still not a move to a standard working week that is fewer than five days.

The adverse bargaining environment for labour is also the result of the rise of the shareholder value model in corporate governance. Pressures to maintain consistently high levels of dividends and share buy backs, which again have been at their strongest in the USA and UK where there has been a higher incidence of takeover bids and hedge fund activism than in mainland Europe and Asia ([Buchanan et al., 2012](#)), have heightened the pressures on managers to deliver cost reductions and higher profits. Even when shorter work hours might be productivity-enhancing and hence cost-reducing in net terms, firms have been reluctant to experiment with shorter working weeks.

A second reason why weekly work hours have stayed long is the impact of consumerism. Capitalism as a system has always encouraged higher consumption over shorter work hours—this reflects on the need for employers to keep selling output

and maintaining profitability. Capitalism is also associated with forces of commodification where activities are turned into sites of money-making. Workers have found that they have had to pay for basic services and have faced the requirement to earn money to meet their needs. This requirement, which has been accelerated by privatisation and austerity programmes, has encouraged and embedded longer work hours.

But a consumer culture has also been fostered under capitalism by rising levels of advertising and product innovation. The market for goods and services has developed rapidly and new wants have expanded. These wants have underpinned a constant and rising work commitment—workers have had to work the same or more to keep up with the latest fashions, from new cars to the latest smartphones. The cultivation of higher consumer demand has reflected the strategies of those in marketing and advertising and has prevented the reduction of work hours. In this case, longer work hours have not been coerced directly but rather have been manufactured by consumerist sentiments and norms that have become more prevalent in modern capitalist society (Cowling, 2006).

A third reason why the working week has not fallen is the allure of work. For many workers, work represents more than a means to income—it also represents an end in itself. Workers' identities and lives are wrapped up in their work and they often receive intrinsic reward from working. Workers do not have to be workaholics to see benefit in work and to work beyond the time they need to meet their immediate needs. It can be argued that workers' identification with work explains, if partly, why they have not necessarily demanded shorter work hours and why work hours have stayed long. Of course, there remain many aspects of work that are harmful to workers and an unmet demand for shorter work hours persists. Work, after all, remains a necessity. But there are reasons why many workers go on for working that are not related to money and the meaning and pleasures of work can be given as a reason why work hours have not fallen in many jobs.

A fourth reason is the development of new management practices that vary across sectors and for different groups of workers. Within the expanding higher skilled and professional occupations, efforts by employers to reduce professional autonomy and to raise productivity have led to pressures to work wherever and whenever in order to achieve performance targets (Rubery *et al.*, 2005), often incentivised by performance-related pay. Opting to work less is only usually possible or seen as legitimate for those who have high caring responsibilities—mainly women—and this comes at major costs to life-time careers and income (Connolly and Gregory, 2007). This pressure to extend working time has been facilitated by digitalisation. Email and smart phones, more generally, have been associated with the creation of an always-on culture that denies downtime and extends work time. The rise in home-working since the COVID-19 pandemic has also blurred the divide between home and work life and between work time and leisure time. While the pandemic may have challenged the dominance of regular attendance in the office and normalised working from home, it has not led to any decisive move away from the five-day working week. To the contrary, it has made it easier for some employees with significant care responsibilities to continue to work on a full-time basis albeit in new 'hybrid' conditions. These experiences stand in contrast to what has been happening for many in lower skilled service sectors where digitally enabled practices are leading to fragmented working time and insufficient hours of paid work—as we discuss below.



These longer-term reasons may be compounded or alleviated by more contingent factors—ones relating to the present and that may or may not persist into the future. These include the cost of living crisis (linked to higher inflation and the squeeze on real living standards). The spike in inflation since 2022 has certainly made it more difficult for many workers to cut work hours—indeed, it has created pressure for them to work more. There is also a growing lack of access to affordable housing and rising mortgages and rents. These factors have again created pressure for workers to increase work hours or at least to maintain them. On the other hand, the experience of the pandemic lockdown appears to have sparked interest among some employers and workers in the possibilities of new working time arrangements such as a four-day week.

These trends and patterns suggest a general lesson, namely that progress in technology and with it, productivity, is insufficient to secure falls in full-time working hours. What matters is how the fruits of technological progress and productivity growth are shared out. Workers can only be expected to gain shorter full-time work hours if they have the power—through unions or support from the state—to secure them. Since the 1970s, retreat in the bargaining power of workers (linked to factors such as the decline of unions) coupled with a harsher legislative environment in some countries, notably the USA and UK, have meant that the gains from technological progress and productivity growth have gone disproportionately to capital owners, leading to higher inequality (Deakin, 2021). This has translated, in turn, into slow falling or stagnating work hours. Many workers have simply been too poor to work less. A key message is that workers need to gain the power to convert gains in productivity growth into shorter work hours.

A further factor must be the impact of the decline in the common experience of standard full-time working hours as the dominant norm in economy and society. It is the drivers of the diversification of working time norms that we now need to consider.

### 3.2 *The diversification of working time norms*

All the major historical campaigns for reduced working hours have focussed on reducing time spent in full-time work. In the factory model on which working time standards were mostly modelled, there was also the assumption that work would be organised in continuous shifts with minimum guaranteed wages for time spent at work (Supiot, 2001). These working time arrangements, though never universal, had come to dominate Western economies by the mid twentieth century (New Economics Foundation, 2019). Tellingly, deviations from this norm came to be referred to as non-standard or atypical forms of work. Moreover, working time and production or operating hours were expected to coincide (Delsen *et al.*, 2009)—except in some capital intensive sectors where shift working always prevailed or in services that had to be provided for longer hours such as in hospitals and transportation. However, from the 1970s onwards, this working time norm began to be called into question under the combined influences of major trends in the three key domains of production, labour supply, and regulatory conditions and power relations. These trends have had diverse impacts, leading to fragmentation in working time norms by group and sector. They have also had different effects across countries depending on prevailing regulatory regimes and social and gender arrangements. Nevertheless, in combination, they have constituted a growing and fairly widespread challenge to the standard working time norm and the associated institutionalised male breadwinner model of employment and labour market participation.

3.2.1 *Trends in the structure and organisation of production* The current employment of the vast majority of people in services in itself offers a challenge to the Fordist working time norm which by definition developed in manufacturing. It is a tribute to the power of this norm that the dominant form of work in services taken as a whole is still five days a week and roughly ‘normal’ full-time hours (OECD, 2021). However, working time in some service sectors, especially those associated with private consumption, leisure activities and outsourced business services such as cleaning and catering has moved to shorter and more variable shift patterns, particularly in countries with weak labour market regulation. The key drivers here are variations in demand—within the day, the week or between seasons—coupled with deregulation of product markets and the associated emergence of the 24/7 economy. In these services, employers had strong motives to reject the presumption that workers could expect to work a regular Monday to Friday week and be paid extra for any additional shifts to meet variations in demand outside of standard hours and at the weekend. Employer-driven changes in working time arrangements in services led to a major expansion of part-time work contracts in many countries. Due to these developments coinciding with women’s growing employment in the labour force, part-time work is often assumed to only or mainly be used to accommodate women’s continuing care responsibilities. Consequently its use to reduce overhead costs and increase work intensity in service employment is often overlooked.

A further key driver of change in working time is change in systems of production of goods and services within sectors including the now longstanding trend towards lean production; indeed, the term ‘just-in-time production’ points to a new temporal organisation to focus work in peak times and to reduce it in slack periods. Just-in-time supply chains may also be global in nature. Before the recent wave of concern over industry 4.0 and now 5.0, employment risks were expected to stem from globalisation (itself of course facilitated by technology), especially offshoring, rather than from technological displacement. Offshoring also requires coordination across time zones, thereby providing part of the push towards an always-on culture, alongside the extension of domestic opening hours especially in service sectors. More recent developments in the mode of production include the use of platforms and the application of algorithmic management at work. These issues are taken up by several of the papers in this special issue. Not only are these developments leading to work intensification for the hours that are scheduled and paid but also to unpaid hours that are neither paid work hours nor personal and free hours for domestic work or leisure due to split shifts, waiting for work, seeking work, developing work skills outside of paid hours or high commuting times relative to the length of a paid shift. These developments may also extend working days particularly for those in higher level jobs where working time is often no longer counted and instead staff are expected to work as long as it takes to complete their responsibilities and to be available for any problems, especially from clients, outside of standard working hours (Rubery *et al.*, 2005).

3.2.2 *Workforce trends* The waged workforce has been diversifying at the same time as the service economy has expanded in most developed countries. This has provided opportunities for employers to diversify working time through atypical employment contracts, freelance and solo self-employed work and more recently by turning to gig work. Although increasing female participation has been a universal phenomenon across OECD countries, this has not always relied on expansion of part-time work. In many

European countries, resistance to part-time employment has been due to differences in the patterns of women's employment integration (Pfau-Effinger, 1998; Rubery *et al.*, 1998) and attitudes of trade unions to non-standard work. However, strong pressure from the EU to facilitate the growth of part-time work has led to a more diffused expansion. This policy, although ostensibly aimed at fostering greater female participation, was pursued even where women's participation was high despite low levels of part-time work and was part of a strategy to flexibilise European labour markets (Stratigaki, 2004). This diversification of the workforce helped legitimise employers' moves away from the SER norm that were not always aimed at accommodating those unable to comply with a full breadwinner-type employment norm.

This diversification extended beyond gender to students who are also available for flexible working time, and older workers, especially after the raising of statutory retirement ages, for health and well-being reasons. More recently, employment of migrant workers has been used to challenge working time norms with many offered casual work (McCollum and Findlay, 2015) even though they are available for long hours of employment. There may be a paradox here with those most willing to work the longest hours offered the shortest guarantees of paid hours. There is also a global dimension to changing labour supply. Richard Freeman (2005) argued that global production systems opened up for Western businesses a huge labour reserve in the Global South. Whether through offshoring, platform work or through migration, the borders between richer Northern economies and those of the Global South have become ever more permeable.

*3.2.3 Regulatory change and working time norms* Regulatory change is the third factor shaping the diversification of working time norms and can be considered both a reflection of and a cause of changes in the power balance between labour and capital. Some erosion of protection is fairly universal even if the extent and form of change varies across countries. The expansion of employment in services has contributed to a weakening of regulation as many service-orientated sectors have never been effectively organised. In addition, there are major historical and current differences in how working time is regulated across countries (OECD, 2021), either directly or indirectly through constraints on the use of non-standard contracts. Yet even one of the most highly regulated countries—France—with its state-led regulation of full-time hours and its high minimum norm of 24 hours for part-time work (in other words, in French law an employer is normally required to offer paid work of up to 24 hours a week to a part-time worker) is still found to be experiencing diversification of working time norms amounting to what is called by Devetter and Valentin (2024) a dismantling of the continuous working day. Thus, while regulations do something to stem the tide of diversification of working time norms, they are far from fully effective in the absence particularly of strong workforce organisation.

Another feature of recent trends has been the growth of professional and other higher skilled jobs, many of which may not be strongly regulated by national norms but where, as Howcroft and Taylor (2024) point out in this issue, occupational communities may generate different logics of work and time organisation and different priorities in respect to observing 'clock' time constraints particularly if the community enjoys some degree of autonomy to manage the more unpredictable elements of process time—that is, the time needed to complete non-routine tasks. It is in higher level professional and managerial jobs where the always-on culture has become most

pervasive and where hours tend to be the longest due to unpaid overtime, arising from expectations that they need to work however long it takes to complete their work responsibilities. Moreover, with the decline in organisationally structured careers, these groups are under pressure to engage in training and personal development outside of paid hours, leading to a growth in what [Howcroft and Taylor](#) term ‘tertiary time’. These trends have given rise to what has been labelled time poor, income rich households ([Harford, 2018](#)), especially when partners are also engaged in professional or managerial work.

A further factor leading to diversification of working time norms has been a shift in the predominant mode of legal regulation in the direction of greater flexibility in the definition and application of norms. The European Union’s 1994 Working Time Directive encapsulated this approach through its use of extensive reference periods of up to one year to modulate the length of the working week. In this respect, it was following a model which had begun to develop in some European countries in the 1970s. As early as 1971, Belgian law was setting a normal working week of 40 hours with provision for additional overtime of up to 10 hours a week or 40 hours over a three-month reference period, extendable to a year via collective bargaining. This technique of ‘bargained flexibilization’, allowing collective agreements to modulate or depart from statutory standards, has since been widely followed, with the Directive a major driving force in its adoption both within the EU and beyond ([Adams \*et al.\*, 2023](#)). By this means, the Directive, while purporting to set a transnational floor of rights, has also served to introduce new flexibilities and complexities into working time law, downgrading the traditional goal of reducing total hours worked.

The EU has also been at the forefront of efforts to normalise so-called non-standard forms of work, departing from the SER of full-time, indeterminate and directly contracted labour. In this, it was following the lead of certain member states, who followed a dual strategy of recognising the legal validity of part-time, fixed-term and temporary agency work, while controlling their use by firms, and aligning the terms and conditions which applied to these forms with those applicable to the SER ([Adams and Deakin, 2014B](#)).

Germany has had laws requiring the use of fixed-term contracts to be justified since the early 1960s, and from the mid-1980s it placed limits on the duration of fixed-term contracts which did not need justification. France was among the first countries, from 1979, to set a limit on the number and duration of fixed-term contracts which could be agreed before they were deemed to give rise to permanent employment. Laws requiring part-time and fixed-term contract workers to be treated equivalently to those in full-time or permanent work were first adopted in France in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and this model spread to other countries before becoming embedded in EU directives of the late 1990s. The application of the equal treatment principle to agency work, which became the basis for EU directive in 2008, had been achieved in French law as early as 1982 ([Adams \*et al.\*, 2023](#))

As the EU directives on the different employment forms have bedded down at state level, they have contributed to a shift in the direction of policies on labour market flexibility. While the tendency in the 1980s and 1990s was for European countries to promote the use of fixed-term contracts beyond the scope of core labour protections, from around a decade ago there has been a move to integrate fixed-term and temporary agency work back into the mainstream employment model ([Adams and Deakin, 2014B](#)). In some circles, as with the Italian debate over the ‘single employment

contract', this has been coupled with the aim of loosening protections applicable to the SER. In laws passed in 2014 and 2015, the Italian legislature removed controls over the use of fixed-term and temporary agency contracts, and restricted the availability of reinstatement for unfair dismissal. However, by 2018 the 'Dignity Decree' had restored the need for justification for the use of non-standard employment contracts. In Spain, there has been a similar shift back to the regulation of fixed-term and agency work after a spell of deregulation (Adams *et al.*, 2023). Several countries both within and beyond the EU have laws requiring workers employed on a part-time or on-call basis to be offered a more regular job after a certain minimum period of service, or to be paid for waiting time (Adams and Deakin, 2014A). Over time, then, there has been a tendency for regulation to acknowledge a greater diversity of employment forms in addition to or alongside the SER, at the same time as working time laws were rendering the standard model itself somewhat more flexible in its mode of operation. These changes have not, however, led to an eclipse of the SER, at least as a regulatory model: it remains the norm against which the non-standard forms are benchmarked and, for certain purposes, aligned. It also continues to set a standard for working time norms. How far this means that the law is failing to keep up with the changing nature of actual work practices is one of the conundrums currently facing policy makers. While there is a widespread recognition that labour laws are capable of evolving to meet new technological and organisational conditions, there is a clear risk that current legal models will be bypassed or rendered irrelevant by the rise of forms of work for which they do not cater.

### 3.3 *The role of technology in current trends—and is it different this time?*

The above outlined trends towards diversification of working hours may be being accelerated by the current spread of the platform economy and algorithmic management but the erosion of the Fordist SER model of working time has been recognised now for several decades (see Supiot, 2001; Fleetwood, 2007). Messenger, the ILO's working time expert, has consistently highlighted the extent of diversification taking place, and even by 2005, had already identified new trends that had emerged over the past decade or two resulting in 'a growing diversification, decentralization and individualization of working hours, as well as an increasing tension between enterprises' business requirements and workers' needs and preferences regarding their hours' (Messenger, 2005, p. vii).

Despite these longstanding challenges to the standard working time norm, many of the papers in this special issue focus their attention on more recent technological conditions. So a key question becomes, is there something new happening under the current technological wave that makes this a critical juncture for working time? Are we experiencing mainly a reinforcement of prior trends and is this a step-change that could even lead to the end of the SER and its associated working time norms and its benchmarking role in employment law? This debate in many respects mirrors those on previous technological waves that have supposedly heralded the end of work and the demise of the SER. The challenges to working time norms prior to the current debate on AI and digitalisation have all been facilitated, even if not wholly determined, by new technologies; thus, just-in-time production was facilitated by programmable machines, flexible scheduling in services was kick started by the electronic point of sale technologies in retail (alongside the growth in a workforce that

was willing to take on part-time work) and global production chains reliant on the new control opportunities offered by the internet and mobile technologies, enabling remote management in real time of outsourced and offshored labour processes. All these developments were associated with their own wave of anxiety over technological unemployment and the erosion of hard won worker protections. That said, the papers in this special issue do raise concerns over developments in working time and associated worker protections and rights, not because they are fundamentally new but more because by adding to long-term pressures, they may potentially lead to tipping points away from the SER and its influence on the organisation of work and working time.

Three particular issues for the future of the SER and its working time norms and protections stand out. Firstly, [Piasna \(2024, p.116\)](#) argues that algorithmic management and its atomisation and punctuation of paid working hours is no longer confined to the still marginal gig economy because ‘AI-enabled oversight and control of the workforce is being increasingly adopted throughout the whole economy including in conventional employment settings’. Secondly, as [Pulignano \*et al.\* \(2024\)](#), [Fernández Massi and Longo \(2024\)](#) and [Piasna \(2024\)](#) all point out, platforms are facilitating extensive and continuous competition for work tasks by enabling the less qualified and experienced and the geographically remote to compete on price and flexibility with more experienced, qualified and local labour. By inducing competition between low wage and high wage economies, the unpaid hours associated with the platform work become more sustainable as the wages earned still exceed comparable home country earnings even taking into account unpaid hours. A third area of concern is the impact of changes in working time arrangements on inequalities within countries. As [Devetter and Valentin, \(2024\)](#) find, it is the lower skilled workers who are facing the decline in paid working hours at the same time as their working days are extending, while at the other end of the scale managers are consolidating their access to continuous and high-paid working hours. Trends towards increasing inequalities in both volume and remuneration of work open up new challenges for reducing working hours. Taking steps to ensure no loss of income under reduced hours would not be sufficient to address current income needs among the lower skilled who might not see shorter hours as their highest priority.

#### 4. Beyond clock time

##### 4.1 *Different understandings of the relationship between work and time*

Many quantitative studies consider working time as being a relatively straightforward variable. It can be quantified directly: for example by measures of the length of the working day, week or year. These measures, in turn, can be used to estimate the temporal divide between paid work and ‘free time’.

But paid work has always involved some unpaid time outside of employment that has been essential to performing that employment—for instance, commuting and laundry of overalls or business attire. Domestic labour, in general, has always entailed some unpaid time devoted to keeping workers fit for work. Conversely, many jobs have included paid time when the employee has not been working—for instance, waiting for a customer, for a machine to be mended or for an instruction from a line manager. The gaps in working time (or ‘porosity’ in the working day) can be experienced as negative and frustrating (due to boredom), or positive as an opportunity to rest, listen to music or read a magazine.

Several papers in this special issue demonstrate that there are multiple forms of unpaid time associated with modern non-standard contracts such as platform work. For instance, some of the time described in these papers could be classed as ‘idle time’ (Massi, 2024) where no work is being done. The experience of ‘not working’ while at work is not new, but not getting paid for those time periods when work is not being done, is a very significant deviation from the SER. This might be waiting for a ride-hail job to come up on the system, or killing time between split shifts on a ‘low density’ job. In any event, the issue is that work time is occurring, even while workers are not being paid for the tasks they are employed to do.

The papers in this special issue draw attention to the new ways in which time is experienced and show how the relationship between unpaid time and paid time can vary with non-standard employment. But they also illustrate how the range of possibilities will vary widely between individuals and types of work; for instance, platform workers doing remote tasks from home may be less inconvenienced by unpaid gaps in work than peripatetic workers or workers doing split shifts on their employer’s premises. In many instances, workers are expending effort during unpaid hours, for instance, to find work, or to demonstrate their skill and reputation to attract future work (referred to as ‘Digital Tournaments’ by Pulignano *et al.*, (2024). Howcroft and Taylor, (2024) make further distinctions between clock time and process time (both paid) and tertiary (unpaid) time in the case of IT workers. It is clear from these papers that the fuzzy zone between paid and unpaid work time makes a considerable difference to the quality of jobs and the actual rate of pay. It is also clear from the papers that the extent of paid and unpaid work depends on technology, power relationships and location of the work. The broad point is that we should be cautious about quantitative measures of working time, though not in a way that discounts their importance in understanding how working time might and should evolve in the coming years.

#### 4.2 Working time and meaningful work

Another aspect of some of the papers in the special issue is the focus on combining objectives—particularly the goals of less and better work. Work time is an aspect of the quality of work and reductions in its length can help to promote well-being by reducing the costs of overwork (e.g. fatigue and burnout). But work time reduction can also help to improve access to higher quality work if shortened work hours are concentrated in tasks that are more fulfilling. It can complement the goal of meeting workers’ needs for meaningful work alongside extended hours of leisure (see Spencer, 2022).

Marx, in his vision of a socialist future (see Spencer, 2024), argued that technology should be used to curtail drudgery and to extend time for non-alienating work. In this vision, Marx was not arguing for the full automation of work but instead the repurposing of technology to lighten work, both qualitatively and quantitatively. For this to happen, workers needed to be handed direct control and power over the use and application of technology. More democratic conditions at work coupled with the focus on production for need rather than for profit would help to establish the basis for shorter work hours together with higher quality work.

The lesson from Marx is that work time reduction is not an end in itself, but rather also a means to enhance the broader qualitative experience of work. This is based on the recognition that work can add to well-being and that workers’ finding meaning in work is an important goal to pursue alongside their finding meaning in leisure.

However, for this to happen, in line with Marx's argument, there is a requirement for reform in work and the move to more democratic workplaces that respect the interests of workers for creative activity within the work realm and beyond it.

Working less, too, can entail the sharing out of work. Workers who work no hours at all (due to unemployment) or few hours (due to underemployment) may be able to work more if work is redistributed from those currently working long hours. The greater freedom from work enjoyed by workers who work too much may be matched by greater meaning that the unemployed and underemployed get from working some hours. The equalisation of work hours at a lower average level may boost overall well-being by reducing excessive working for some and the lack of work faced by others. In this way, it may advance the cause for better work and expand the opportunities for living well.

#### 4.3 *The impact of unemployment, job quality and working time on well-being and health*

Aside from the goal of promoting meaningful work, there is the more basic task of ensuring that work is available to those who need it. Much evidence exists that unemployment is a source of human misery. The reduction of unemployment then should be a top priority in society. Most (not all) jobs provide a level of well-being significantly higher than the well-being of those who are unemployed, and individuals without paid work for other reasons (the 'economically inactive') also have lower well-being scores than employees (McKee-Ryan *et al.*, 2005; Paul and Moser, 2009; Kamerāde *et al.*, 2019). The evidence also suggests that the benefits of work are caused more by the psycho-social aspects of employment than the simple economic effect of the wage, so even a generous level of benefits or income guarantee would do little to offset the negative psychological impact of unemployment.

The relationship between job quality and well-being is also fundamental to understanding the possible future direction of labour market changes on mental health (see Wang *et al.*, 2022). Some aspects of job quality have improved over recent decades (Smith *et al.*, 2013), and there is no suggestion that this change will be reversed; for instance, the future ergonomic and ambient nature of jobs may continue to improve as new technologies are used to improve physical working conditions in some cases. Likewise, despite Graeber's provocative claims (2018), there is little evidence that the proportion of employees claiming that their jobs are meaningless has increased in the past 20 years (Soffia *et al.*, 2022).

However, one of the aspects of job quality that does seem to be threatened according to several of the papers in this special issue is job security. Whether it is the enhanced risk of involuntary quits from non-standard jobs, or not knowing how many hours will be available from a platform in the next week, the impact on well-being of such insecurity, particularly over the longer term, is demonstrable. As Wood (2020) shows, having a job where the hours can change from week to week, and where workers have little or no control over their hours of work, can also be a significant problem for individuals and their families.

The impact of hours of work on well-being is more complex. There is clear evidence of the multiple ways in which excessive hours of work (in excess of, say, 48 hours per week) over an extended period has negative consequences for mental and muscular-skeletal health, but the evidence for reduced hours of working is less clear-cut. Experiments in working time reduction (e.g. Mullens and Glorieux, 2024) repeatedly show that collective reductions in working time without loss of pay result in a whole



raft of benefits for employees such as better sleep and lower rates of burnout and anxiety. This is seemingly inconsistent with other evidence that, as Wang *et al.* (2022) found, once job quality is controlled for, there is little difference in well-being between individuals working one to two days per week and those working four to five days per week. One explanation is that working shorter hours than other employees (i.e. traditional part-time work) penalises those individuals in terms of pay and promotion opportunities (Smith *et al.*, 2013); this would not be the case for collective reductions of work hours.

Thus, the evidence suggests that, if we need to prioritise policies to shape a better future of work, the order of priority should be to: (i) minimise unemployment, (ii) to maximise the quality of jobs (particularly job security) and (iii) to reduce the hours for full-time workers. A wider ambition, as argued above, should be to combine the goal of more meaningful work with longer hours of time away from work. This would help to promote well-being through both work and non-work activities.

### 5. The future of working time—towards a more inclusive future

What the above discussion has revealed is that there are current and future challenges to how working time is organised and rewarded that pose major problems for the future well-being of workers. There are pressures both on the extent of time spent on waged work, not only due to the stalling of reductions in full-time standard hours but also because, as papers in this issue reveal, an increased—even incessant (Piasna, 2024)—connectivity to work, while the extent of work-related activities that are remunerated narrows. Despite the increased labour market presence of groups that have priorities other than waged work (care, education, ill health, etc.), many of these working time changes may even intensify problems of managing work and other aspects of life, as guarantees of work volumes or of predictable hours recede, particularly in some sectors and some countries. This applies even though the opportunities for freelance and non-standard work may be sold under the guise of choice over where and when to work, thereby offering apparent freedom from the constraints of the SER. Yet, as Fernández Massi and Longo's (2024) paper reveals, through a case study where platform workers can choose when to log on, this free choice results in ever longer waiting times for any paid work hours. All this suggests the need for new and more imaginative approaches to how to regulate and shape working time arrangements if the protections that the SER has provided are to be both maintained and extended to currently excluded groups.

As we have seen, the five-day week remains the basis for most full-time working time arrangements, at least in organised sectors. However, it is being challenged by a renewed push to shorten full-time hours and move towards a four-day week or its equivalent. Such action can be considered vital for at least three reasons. Two of these have already been elaborated on, namely to ensure workers can benefit from the productivity gains from technological change which may otherwise be appropriated by capital and to improve health and well-being together with supporting access to meaningful work. The third reason is to move towards more sustainable working time and employment norms compatible with a more gender equal dual-earner society. Such a development could also enable moves away from solutions to work–life issues through individualised flexible arrangements and towards a shorter common full-time standard that could protect collective working time norms while updating them to make them

more compatible with gender equality. The current half-way move in countries such as the UK towards gender equality in paid and unpaid work promotes opportunities for long hours of work for those operating as the main breadwinner and more fragmented work for those operating as a secondary earner. As Nancy Fraser (1994) has argued, the more sustainable solution compatible with gender equality is that everyone should be both a breadwinner and a carer but that requires a move away from the standard of a minimum 40-hour five-day week and towards a four-day/30-hour objective.

### 5.1 *Towards a more inclusive approach to working time policy and regulation*

To achieve a more inclusive system of working time regulation, there are two major connected issues that need to be addressed: the thorny issue of employment status, particularly in the gig economy, from which most protection stems; and the fightback against the fragmentation and insecurity of working time.

5.1.1 *The contentious issue of employment status* Employment status is a critical factor in determining coverage of legal protections on working time and pay and therefore the protections available to those participating in fragmented work. The rise of platform work has been a major challenge for labour law systems which coevolved with the SER. Working time laws generally contemplate a sharp divide between time spent in and at work, and other time. The premise of the gig economy was that consumers and workers alike would benefit from labour being available ‘on demand’. In practice, the main beneficiaries have been platform companies and their shareholders. Initially, platforms presented themselves as intermediaries, bringing customers and workers together, without the physical overheads associated with the SER, and few of its regulatory and fiscal constraints. It has taken a concerted effort to push back against this legal model through a combination of litigation and activism. New ‘independent’ unions were initially to the fore in this process, which over time has spread more widely across the unionised workforce in several countries. Faced with the challenge posed by strategic litigation, courts in a number of jurisdictions have ruled that platforms can be characterised, for certain legal purposes, as employers, with the result that couriers and drivers employed on a gig-work basis are at least in principle covered by minimum wage and working time legislation (Hiessl, 2022). Legislatures in several countries have been more open to lobbying by tech firms, leading to the creation of specialised regimes for platform labour, offering protections below the normal floor of rights, and the adoption of company and fiscal laws to encourage so-called ‘micro entrepreneurship’ for gig work (Deakin, 2023).

As a result of these complex and sometimes contradictory trends, it is proving difficult to apply the standard working time model to gig work, even in contexts where individuals qualify for legal protection as employees or workers. Time spent on-call or waiting for work does not necessarily qualify as working time for regulatory purposes and so does not count towards daily or weekly limits, although the legal situation varies across jurisdictions and may confer the protection of working time limits in some situations. Since the law is not clear cut, it may be difficult in practice for gig workers to assert statutory claims for waiting time to be compensated and counted towards legal maxima even if they are classified as protected workers or employees, and enforcement remains weak across the platform sector. While there are some instances of platforms entering into collective bargaining with trade unions following

judicial clarification of workers' employment status, as occurred in the UK following the Supreme Court's *Uber* ruling in 2021, there are just as many instances of tech firms taking every opportunity to relitigate disputes in new forms, delaying any compensation to claimants, and preventing a new, more worker-protective equilibrium being established (McGaughey, 2017).

*5.1.2 Working time protections for employees* The second problem is that even when employment status is not in question there may be insufficient regulation to protect employees against the erosion of paid working time within the total time effectively devoted to work-related activities and against practices that blur boundaries between free time and work time and reduce recuperation time and time for family activities, domestic work and communal leisure. The extent of working time regulation varies across OECD countries but some practices could be adopted or transferred to countries currently lacking such regulation. For example, there could be a right to a minimum level of guaranteed hours, as in France where part-time workers should be offered a minimum of 24 hours unless they opt for shorter hours. However, even here many part-time workers are excluded—for example, the young, students and those in receipt of benefits. Another approach is to provide guarantees of minimum lengths of continuous shifts (e.g., in Belgium (Piasna, 2024), and for on-call workers in the Netherlands and Germany) and also to compensation if a scheduled shift is cut short (as provided for in California) (Rubery *et al.*, 2023). The use of variable work could be disincentivised by premiums on casual work at least on minimum wages as in the Australian award system or in France where there is a 10% premium attached to temporary contracts (Rubery *et al.*, 2023). Workers could also have a right for their guaranteed hours to be upgraded in line with actual hours of work over a previous period, as again applies in France and in some collective agreements in Germany.

Rights to flexible working can be considered a two-edged sword as they contribute to the erosion of a strict boundary between work and non-work time while also providing necessary accommodations to non-work commitments. Where these are rights to flexible working (e.g. in France, Germany, Spain), not just rights to request flexibility, as in the UK case, it is more likely that the arrangements will be driven by workers' needs and therefore contribute to sustainable work and family arrangements. The weaker right to request leaves workers vulnerable to being obliged to accept employer-driven flexible scheduling and even zero-hour contracts which may not be easy to mesh with their other life commitments. It is therefore also important to provide rights to notice of changes in schedules (already found in France and Germany). Other policies to improve opportunities to manage work–life conflicts such as time banking, frequently used in countries such as Germany and the Netherlands, are more reliant on collective bargaining agreements or voluntary action by employers. There are also efforts to improve boundaries between work and personal time through rights to disconnect at EU level and in individual countries. Action to repeal, for example, the UK's voluntary opt out from maximum working hours, could help reduce pressures for unpaid overtime.

## *5.2 Towards a four-day or 30-hour work week*

As mentioned earlier in this introduction (see also Spencer, 2024) the history of working time reduction research is not short of examples of false optimism that large reductions in working time are just around the corner. If poor Keynes turned in his coffin every

time anyone mentioned his 15-hour week predictions, he would be spinning continuously. So, without wanting to make yet another set of naive predictions, are there any good grounds to believe that working time reduction is about to gather momentum?

We argue here that there are some grounds for optimism. In part, they have been brought about by the labour market shocks that accompanied the COVID-19 pandemic. There is general agreement that the pandemic brought about a major and lasting shift towards working from home and hybrid working, and possibly too a greater awareness that things can be radically different from the pre-COVID-19 norms. In the UK, the working hours of full-time employees for the past year (2022–23) have hovered within the bounds of 36.2–36.7 hours; in the period 1992–2019, it was remarkably stable in the bounds of 37–39 hours, apart from a short blip for the 2008–9 economic crisis, so there is some good evidence that COVID-19 has knocked a good hour from the working day, albeit it may be too soon to say.

But there are other signs that we may be at the start of a shift to shorter working hours for full-time employees. The numerous four-day week trials that have been conducted in the UK (Autonomy, 2023) and elsewhere (Belgium [see Mullens and Glorieux, 2024], USA, Ireland, Australia, New Zealand, Spain, Iceland, South Africa, etc.) have resulted in a deluge of media coverage. Looking at the trend in google searches for ‘four-day workweek’ over the last five years (2018–23) shows a marked rise at the start of 2022. Multi-employer six-month trials of reductions from five- to four-day working (or, more accurately, 20% reductions in working time)—organised by groups such as *Autonomy*, *Four Day Week Global* and *Work Time Reduction Center of Excellence*—have been conducted on hundreds of companies covering thousands of employees, and those trials have claimed very positive outcomes both for the well-being of individual employees and the performance of the companies; there is also evidence that the four-day week might have positive benefits for gender equality and carbon emissions, giving further impetus to some trials in the public sector. A district council (South Cambridgeshire) announced in April 2023 that its three-month four-day week trial had been a success and would be extended for another 12 months. In September 2023, the Scottish Government announced it would go ahead with trials of a four-day week in some of its departments, and the Welsh assembly looks set to follow. In all of these trials there was no cut in pay, and a commitment to maintain productivity through more efficient work practices.

However, there are a lot of uncertainties on the way forward. The industrial sectors covered by the trials have so far been biased towards the service sector and professional services; it is not yet clear whether it would be more difficult to achieve the same gains in other sectors such as manufacturing and retail. Although there was a clear commitment in the four-day week trials to maintain productivity and not to reduce pay, there could be wider implications for minimum wage levels and for in-work benefits if significantly shorter work times were to become the norm. The current trials involve sectors in which work is mostly salaried, meaning that pay is not strictly linked to the number of hours worked per week. In this context, a four-day week can feasibly be achieved without a reduction in pay. In sectors where work and pay are more tightly linked, which is the case with platform work where payment is made by the gig or task, reductions of working hours may be resisted not just by employers but by workers who depend on long hours to maintain income. Norms favouring work are still very strong in many sectors, with moral judgements being made against ‘idle’ employees who prioritise time away from their employers (whether for leisure, caring responsibilities or

whatever) over long hours in employment, although there is evidence of a gradual reduction in the work ethic over the last few decades. Surveys of employees show a very clear majority are strongly in favour of four-day working, and there is a majority of both employers and employees who report that it is a change that is likely to happen sooner rather than later.

## 6. Conclusion

If working time reduction followed on from technological advancements, then we would have seen larger reductions in working time already. Nevertheless, there is plenty of evidence that new digital and robotic technologies will be able to perform a rapidly increasing number of tasks that were previously performed by humans. But technology by itself will not bring about change and reforms are needed to secure a future of both less work and more sustainable and equitable working time. Contingent factors such as higher inflation and the cost of living crisis may prevent moves towards working time reductions in the short-run. Longer-term, reduced working time will require collective action from workers, employers and the state.

Moves towards shorter full-time hours would also need to be combined with moves towards new working time norms for those currently excluded from protections. The way forward is likely to involve a period of organisational experimentation and legal evolution in which new norms are established through a combination of worker resistance, legal pressure and transnational efforts at standard setting, just as it was a century ago when the 'normal' working week was being established in law and practice. Technology, again, is not the only factor in play, and is unlikely to be the determining one. The SER was not at all an inevitable outcome of trends in the technological and organisational basis of work. Mechanisation of production preceded the emergence of the SER by several decades in most countries. There are now wider forces at work in the destabilisation of the SER, including the resurgence of shareholder-orientated forms of corporate governance, and the rise of global value chains. Yet in case it is thought that today's circumstances make efforts at labour protection uniquely difficult, it should be remembered that financialisation and offshoring are not exactly new to capitalism either (Deakin, 2004). As in the past, there remains the opportunity and need for change.

The papers in this special issue have nevertheless demonstrated that the goal of a regular and fairly remunerated working week is not just under threat but has already receded from view for many workers facing the effects of algorithmic management and the fragmentation of the work process. This makes it urgent to update the assumptions underlying the SER and the regulatory models built around it, although predicting what will succeed the SER, if not some modified version of the SER itself, is problematic in our current state of knowledge. With specific respect to working time, the objective of making working time both more stable and better paid remains a valid one, that must be urgently addressed if present trends continue. For some, trapped in casual and intermittent work, regularity might imply longer or at least more stable hours; for others, in full-time work, a four-day working week would mark shorter hours and a better work-life balance. In support of the idea that some degree of re-regulation is possible, renewing labour institutions for present conditions, the fluidity of interests at stake needs to be considered. For a variety of reasons, including maintaining a regular tax base, states are likely to have a strong interest

in promoting employment stability over the fragmentation of the standard employment form (Deakin, 2020). Increasing numbers of employers might be attracted to the prospects of productivity improvements, as they were in the past, when the campaign for the 8-hour day was taking hold in the 1890s (Webb and Cox, 1891). History suggests that worker-protective labour laws are contested and complex, and inevitably involve compromises, but are also an enduring feature of capitalism. As experiments at company and sector level continue, we can expect these to feed into regulatory and legal discourses over time, and to be disseminated through standard-setting mechanisms at both national and transnational level. The pace of change may also be accelerated by workers' demands for work time reduction, although their ability to effect change will continue to depend on their organisation and mobilisation, including via renewed collective bargaining arrangements. In short, a better future encompassing shorter and more regular work hours remains possible, though by no means inevitable.

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