
Although the struggle over working-time plays a key role in Marxist political economy, little has been written on the contemporary transformation of working hours from a Marxist perspective. Instead, the question of working hours has been largely left to Weberian and neoclassical scholars. While the first perceives the development of working hours primarily as a dependent variable of technological progress and the continuous improvement of productivity, the second explains differences in working hours exclusively by variations in income. By doing so, both approaches fail to make sense of the advancement of working-time in the last fifty years and the last twenty years more specifically.

Obviously, working hours have not fallen automatically with growing productivity, as capital forced workers to put in persistently long and, in part, even rising working hours while investing in new and labour-saving technology. From an historical perspective, moreover, earnings (and hence consumption) tended to increase faster than working hours decreased, while, during certain periods, both declined and increased simultaneously (as, for example, in the second half of the 1990s in the United States, when a short-term recovery in wages was accompanied by a surge in working hours). Less dogmatic scholars have attempted to explain these paradoxes through the individualisation and diversification of working hours in postmodern and knowledge-based societies, as well as through the impact of consumerism and consumer cultures that demand excessive working hours and the destruction of natural resources. But these attempts too have no explanation for the substantial differences of average working hours between countries and sectors, and the similar pressures workers are exposed to independently of their individual jobs and consumer preferences.

The neoliberal surge in working hours

In Modern Times, Ancient Hours – Working Lives in the Twenty-First Century, Pietro Basso radically questions such interpretations and instead argues in a traditional Marxist manner that the length of the working day is determined by class and social struggles, not by technological progress and life styles. At the centre of his argument stands the important insight that the substantial rise of working hours in the United States in the 1980s and 1990s is not a specific North-American phenomenon, as argued by Juliet Schor and others. Instead, the extension of working-time is the result of the appearance and spread of neoliberalism that followed the crisis of postwar capitalism in the 1970s. Consequently, the adoption of neoliberal policies in the European Union will most likely lead to a similar extension of working hours in Europe, if European trade-union organisations and working-class parties are not able to withstand the neoliberal offensive. It is important to note that Basso came to this conclusion in 1998 (when his book was initially published in Italian) – the same year the first part of the 35-hour legislation was introduced in France and most commentators were stressing French and European distinctiveness in the maintenance of a certain level of class consciousness.

Since 1998, the situation has changed: the conservative government coming into power in France in 2002 not only introduced permanent exceptions to the 35-hour week for establishments with fewer than 20 employees; but, in March 2005, the government passed a new bill that further eroded the 35-hour standard, after some of the positive aspects of the reduced working week had already faded due to increasing working-time flexibility, which was also part of the 35-hour deal. Among other things, the bill introduced the possibility to work beyond the statutory overtime quota set at 220 hours a year. It also removed the cap on working days that can be accumulated in working-time accounts and abandoned the obligation to balance these accounts after a certain period of time. Instead, these days can now be cashed in. For managerial staff, moreover, the possibility of ‘buying out’ free time goes even further: managerial staff can now choose between the additional days off granted by the 35-hour law and extra-payments.

The effects of this reform are clear: the result will be a creeping working-time expansion. Not surprisingly, the French employers’ confederation welcomed the changes, which were passed against massive protests, including hundreds of thousands workers and supporters rallying at several occasions in the streets of Paris and other large cities in the weeks before the adoption. The employers’ confederation has lobbied intensively to get rid of the 35-hour ever since its introduction in 1998. In the wake of consistently high unemployment, which had increased for very different reasons, including the continuous austerity policies applied on the national and European level, the employers’ confederation nevertheless had some success in spreading the neoliberal argument that the 35-hour week costs jobs because investors move away. A particularly cynical slogan launched by the employers’ confederation in this struggle was ‘time for myself, a job for someone else’.

The same argument – shorter working hours costs jobs instead of creating new employment – has also dominated a debate on the adequate length of the working day in Germany in summer 2004. The discussion started when Siemens publicly announced that it will relocate plants to Eastern Europe, where working hours are longer and wages are lower. In Germany, the once powerful metalworkers’ union IG Metall had won a stepwise introduction of the 35-hour week by a militant strike wave in the mid-1980s. Yet, in this case too, the union had to make significant concessions with regard to working-time flexibility. As a result, Germany has highly flexible working-time regulations on a company-by-company basis, allowing employers to avoid the payment of overtime supplements. Moreover, the 35-hour week was limited to the metal and printing sectors and did not apply to white-collar workers. As a sign of growing weakness, IG Metall failed to extend the 35-hour week to Eastern Germany. In 2003, a strike to force employers to adopt the Western-German standard more than a decade after reunification failed, partly due to the lack of support by East-German workers, who were anxious not to lose their jobs. In the Siemens case, 4,000 workers in Western Germany were threatened with unemployment.

In the ensuing public debate, employer representatives and conservative opinion leaders argued that shorter working hours cost jobs because they make Germany uncompetitive on

2. Information on the 35-hour week reform is mainly drawn from EIROnline 2005a; EIROnline 2005b; EIROnline 2005c.