

CONTINUING THE FIGHT FOR SHORTER WORKING TIME

by Frances O'Grady



Working time has always been a key battleground for working people and their trade unions. Now, as technology and the platform economy increasingly eat into workers' personal time, a shorter working week is again necessary. A four-day week, without loss of pay, is one of our ambitions!

The demand for the ten- and then the eight-hour day was one of the international labour movement's first campaigns, proposed at the International Workers Congress in Germany in 1866. In 1919, the Hours of Work (Industry) Convention was the first convention adopted by the International Labour Organisation (ILO). More recently, unions across Europe worked together to achieve the 1993 Working Time Directive, establishing safe limits on working hours and giving millions of workers paid holidays for the first time.

The scale of our achievements is clear. Since 1868, when the British Trades Union Congress (TUC) was founded, the average working week in the UK has almost halved, falling from 62 hours to around 32 hours. And in much of northern Europe, strongly organised workforces have achieved even greater gains.

But we shouldn't put a stop to our ambitions here. In this century, technology will

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@FrancesOGrady from @The_TUC



continue to transform our economies and the way we work. And trade unions believe that workers should get their fair share of the gains, through both higher pay and more time away from work.

At the TUC, we believe that a four-day week – with no loss of pay – should be among our ambitions in the years ahead. Like our predecessors, we want working people to have more time free from the demands of work, more time to spend with loved ones and with their communities.

We know this is popular with workers. When we asked people how they imagine a world in which more efficient production enabled a reduction in working time, a shift to a four-day week was overwhelmingly the most popular choice.

And looking at our history, we should have confidence in the ability of organised labour to work together across borders to change the norms of working time.

Always on demand

But while technological innovation should be used to liberate people from excess work, in recent years it's seemed to do the opposite. Many employers have used new technologies like smartphones to eat into their workers' personal time.

This is most apparent from the rise of 'on demand' platforms like Uber, which create an expectation that workers always

FOUR-DAY WEEK ?

be available for work without being paid. Trapped in a cycle of low pay and insecurity, workers are forced to compete for ever-smaller parcels of work.

The courts have repeatedly rejected Uber's claim that they're creating a new form of work. Rather, they're using a new technology to deny workers their rights, including the right to rest breaks, holidays and to a minimum wage.

Even for workers with secure hours, the boundaries between work and non-work are blurring. According to TUC research, one in seven workers have seen their hours increase thanks to new technology, since they can be reached more easily when they're at home. And research by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development in 2017 found that nearly a third of workers felt that having remote access to the workplace stopped them switching off in their personal time. Last year alone, British workers alone put in £32 billion worth of unpaid overtime.

So winning more free time for workers isn't the only challenge we face. We must also safeguard the time that's already been won. Because let's be clear: if an employer takes a worker's time without paying for it, that's theft.

Industrial disruption

We're living in a period of rapid industrial disruption. The UK government estimates

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that robots and autonomous systems could deliver a £200bn boost to output, and similar increases in productivity are on their way right across Europe.

But already, super-rich CEOs are trying to hoard those billions, short-changing labour. Amazon's CEO Jeff Bezos is the richest man in the world, but in his warehouses low-paid workers are so exhausted that they're collapsing on the job.

We need to turn the tide and fight back against employers who want to use new technology to revive age-old forms of exploitation.

Stories from across Europe give us grounds for optimism. Union campaigning in Ireland recently delivered a ban on zero-hours contracts. French unions

pioneered collective agreements on the 'right to switch off', now enshrined in a national law that requires companies with 50 employees or more to negotiate the use of communications technology.

Advances like these build on the achievements of the last two centuries. And they remind us that collective action by working people is still the best way to deliver decent pay, more leisure time, higher living standards and better working lives.



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Frances O'Grady is the General Secretary of the British Trades Union Congress (TUC). She has been an active trade unionist and campaigner all her working life and was employed in a range of jobs from shop work to the voluntary sector. Before the TUC, O'Grady worked for the Transport and General Workers Union.