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Abstract

Recently there has been increased attention in critiques of paid work and calls for less work via working-time reduction. Yet except for universal basic income and the shorter working week, few have examined how welfare states, more broadly, can effectively reduce working-time. This article argues widespread change is required to effectively reduce working-time. First, it explores how welfare states have historically affected working-time. Second, it examines universal basic income and the shorter working week as conduits for working-time reduction. Third, the article analyses alternative ways that working-time reduction has been achieved in advanced welfare states through, for example, parental leave policies, sabbaticals, and annual leave entitlements. In doing so, it concludes with a 'life-time' perspective, whereby the goal of less work is imagined and achieved over a whole life. This holds the best hope for a gradual, but profound, change in social and cultural norms around paid work.

Keywords: working-time reduction, universal basic income, shorter working week, work ethic.

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Beyond the Work Society? Social Policy and the Reduction of Working Time

The Work Society

This article examines the role welfare states play in reducing working-time and challenging the work ethic, before offering a strategy of how a less work-focused society can be realized. This is a small but growing area of interest in social policy research, captured recently by debates around universal basic income (UBI) and the shorter working week (Chung, 2022). What these perspectives share is a focus on how social policies can help move beyond the ‘work society’. The article first explores what is meant by the ‘work society’ and shows how welfare states have historically affected working-time. Subsequently, three policy ideas for working-time reduction are presented: universal basic income, the shorter working week, and a broader category of ‘lifetime’ approaches. The main argument of the article is for the latter, lifetime perspective as the most persuasive strategy for reducing working-time.

What is Work?

An initial question is what is meant by the ‘work society’ and ‘work’ itself, which can be defined in many ways. Perhaps the most common understanding of work is activity performed for income: either immediately or in future hope, such as networking. However this definition ignores the diverse range of unpaid forms of work, such as caring, domestic labour, and volunteering, that are necessary for the functioning of societies. There are also activities usually not thought of as forms of work but are nevertheless referred to using the language of work. People may ‘work’ on their running technique or ‘work’ in the garden. Frayne (2015), drawing on Gorz (1989), argues there are three ways work can be understood. First, there is work performed in exchange for money or anticipation of future income. Second, there is unpaid work that has a clear social benefit or necessity. And third, there is work related to self-development, such as hobbies, crafts, skills and interests.

In making the case for working less, it is not the aim of this article to outline policies to bring about less time for socially necessary or personally enriching forms of ‘work’. Rather the aim is reducing the most consuming form of work: that performed in return for income. The pervasive presence of this type of work is what Weeks (2011) describes as the ‘work society’. It is vital however to acknowledge the centrality of this form of work to the functioning of advanced welfare states. This is something that WTR advocates must remain cognisant of; if WTR was to be associated with declining productivity, a lower tax take, more unemployment, and lower wages then the outcome would be profound stress inflicted on the capacity of welfare states to provide social security and social services. The aim and design of WTR thus needs to be considered alongside the broader functioning of advanced economies. This is a central component of the argument of this article: that a lifetime perspective on WTR better acknowledges broader economic priorities when compared to alternatives such as UBI.

The Work Society

There is significant variation around the world when it comes to time spent at work, with countries in the Global South tending to have significantly higher annual working hours. In China and India, annual working hours were approximately 2,150 hours in 2017 compared to 1,757 in the US and 1,354 in Germany (Our World in Data, 2023). As such, debates on working-time regulation vary substantially between developing and developed welfare states, with different economic, labour market and cultural challenges. The article is subsequently focused on WTR in advanced welfare states (for a discussion of working time more globally, see Lee et al., 2007).

In advanced welfare states, full-time hours (Skidelsky, 2019; Eurostat, 2023a; OECD, 2023a) tend to be lowest in north-western European countries like Denmark (38.1 hours) and Norway (37.5). Working hours are highest in the English-speaking welfare states like New Zealand (42.3), the US (41.4) and the UK (41.2). Such hours are far from the prediction of Keynes (1932), who famously

prophesized technological advance would lead to a huge reduction in daily work to three hours. Working time was reduced between 1870-1950, with declines of over 40 per cent in countries like Belgium, Denmark, the Netherlands, and Sweden (Our World in Data, 2023). Since 1950 though, and especially since 1980, most countries have seen the speed of working-time reduction (WTR) slow. Had WTR continued at the same pace as the early twentieth-century, current full-time hours would be around 34 (Skidelsky, 2019). This has emphatically not been the case; looking at the US for example, annual working hours fell by 36 per cent between 1870-1950 but by just 2 per cent between 1980-2017. Working hours are just one measure of Weeks' 'work society'. Other indicators include annual vacations, part-time work, and the duration of working life, which are presented in Table 1. On all there is large variation. Thus whilst many countries offer 25 days of annual vacation, the US offers zero (OECD, 2021); over a third (42.4 per cent) of all Dutch employment is part-time whilst less than 10 per cent is in Greece (Eurostat, 2023b); and an Italian can expect to work just over 30 years compared to a Swede's 43 (Eurostat, 2023c). This demonstrates working-time is best thought of not solely as the length of the working day or week but by what happens over a lifetime. This argument – conceptualizing WTR through the lens of a lifetime – is a central contention of this article.

<Insert Table 1 here>

Recent developments in the organization of work have further contributed to the expansion of the work society (Gorz, 1999). A fifth of European commuters spend over 90 minutes travelling to work daily (Giménez-Nadal et al., 2022) and evidence shows commuting time has increased since the 1990s (Kirkby and LeSage, 2009). This is important as commuting has a well-established, negative relationship with well-being and the enjoyment of leisure (Clark et al., 2020). Technology has reduced commuting for some by making home-working easier, but this is a double-edged sword and has enhanced work intensity for some. In the early covid-19 lockdowns, DeFelippis et

al. (2020) found the average working day increased by 8.2 per cent for people working from home. Such is the scale of technological change – and the difficulty in ‘clocking in and clocking off’ – that the French Government introduced a legal right to ‘switch off’ from work in 2017. Other countries like Ireland, Italy and Spain look set to follow suit.

Technology is not just about the intensity of work but the added control it gives employers. In an ethnography of UK call-centre workers, Woodcock (2017) argues technology has heightened worker surveillance in numerous ways, including data collection on employee performance, output, and behaviour. Woodcock (2017: 50) describes this a “computerized development of Taylorist management principles”, with technology enabling an “unprecedented level of surveillance”. Other industries have introduced innovative technologies to monitor workers: Amazon patented wristbands to track warehouse employees (Solon, 2018), computer programme TeamViewer mirrors employees’ laptops to office PCs (Morrison, 2020), and Sneek software photographs home-workers’ faces every few minutes. Technology is also used to collect employee health data, with companies encouraging or compelling workers to track health via wearable devices (Bearne, 2021). What these stories demonstrate is whilst technology may offer more flexibility and autonomy, employers – utilizing the same tools – can use it to enhance control and surveillance.

Finally, the work society has been strengthened by a transformation in workers’ rights over recent decades. Whilst trade union density varies widely in OECD countries, what all have in common is declining unionization (OECD, 2022). In the UK for example, unionization peaked in 1979 with 13.2 million members; by 2019 this had nearly halved to just 6.7 million (ONS, 2022). Faced with declining membership and political power, unions have largely retreated to what De Spiegelaere and Piasna (2017) describe as “defensive” positions: protecting jobs and wages and promoting ‘better’ work (see also Weeks, 2011). This has come at the expense of more radical aims around

WTR, which unions once pursued aggressively (Aronowitz and Cutler, 1998; Frase, 2016). A cause and consequence of union decline is the increase in precarious work, with one in ten EU-15 workers employed in precarious jobs (Kretsos and Livanos, 2016) and EU data showing insecure, atypical, and anti-social experiences of work are relatively common. An effect of these new realities is some workers are more conservative in switching jobs (Resolution Foundation, 2022): a reluctance indicative of fear of change, lack of bargaining power, or an appreciation to have any job at all. Another effect of workplace anxiety is the long hours culture in many professions, which values presence and visibility over productivity. Across the OECD (2023b), 11.6 per cent of workers report very long weeks working over 50 hours. This culture is linked to the phenomenon of ‘presenteeism’: the act of reporting for work despite being ill. Together, long hours culture and presenteeism are part of a phenomenon of performative hard work: the desire to present loyalty and dedication to your job. In this environment, work-related mental illness is common. In the UK, it is estimated 900,000 workers suffer work-related stress, depression, or anxiety (HSE, 2022), whilst the Japanese have a name for the most serious consequences: *karōshi* (death by overwork).

The Work Ethic and the Welfare State

These trends have contributed to a growing critical movement against the beliefs of the work ethic. These are ingrained norms in most societies, where Gorz (1999: 57) argues:

Never has the ideology of work-as-value been proclaimed, flaunted, reiterated so unashamedly...Never has the irreplaceable, indispensable function of labour as the source of social ties, social cohesion, integration, socialization, personalization, personal identity, and meaning been invoked so obsessively.

The foundations of the work ethic contain numerous beliefs, such as less work would make us poorer and there is a unique moral value to work. Yet the core tenet of the work ethic can be summarized as ‘work is good for people.’ This is a belief – or “official morality” (Weeks, 2011: 38) - held by many, for whom work has a profound, socially integrative function. This is what Jahoda

(1982) described as the essential ‘latent functions’ of employment – time structure, social contact, status, collective purpose, and activity – that paid work becomes the primary source of in industrial societies. The ubiquity of these beliefs makes the task of WTR difficult, yet the work ethic has not always been so dominant. Early reformers sought to challenge the intensity and volume of work, yet over the course of the past century this ambition has been largely neglected (Hermann, 2015). Subsequently, discussions of WTR have been minimal in debates around contemporary social policy; this contrasts to earlier reformers who were clear that the balance between work and free time was not fixed and inevitable but politically contested. Early campaigns for WTR resulted in hours falling from an average of 80 to 60 hours in the nineteenth-century and then down to 40 hours over most of the twentieth-century (Beckett, 2018).

Recently though, the work ethic has been reinforced and the resistance to work typifying early labour movements has dissipated. Since the 1990s, a notable social policy phenomenon has been ‘labour market activation’: programmes designed to reinforce the responsibility to work and consolidate the bond between social security and employment obligations. In the UK, successive governments strengthened work-related responsibilities via benefit sanctions, the imposition of conditionality for disabled people and lone parents, and active labour market programmes (ALMPs): targeted, mostly mandated, re-employment schemes. The evidence on the labour market and wider outcomes of activation is mixed and depends on ALMP type, the outcomes considered, and the degree of conditionality (Card et al., 2017; Vooren et al., 2019; Pattaro et al., 2022). This hints at a second aim of activation: less re-employment and more enforcing a commitment to work. Whilst the ‘activation turn’ in social policy has socio-economic drivers (Bonoli, 2007), ideology is paramount. These include neoliberal critiques of welfare’s ‘perverse’ incentives (Murray, 1990), socially conservative views on the morally corrupting effects of benefits (Mead, 1986) and 1990s’ third-way social democracy (Bonoli and Powell, 2002). Much of the Left and

Right have been united in support of activation, creating a policy hegemony given international backing by the EU, IMF, and OECD (Armingeon, 2007).

There has simultaneously been a shift in how politicians talk about unemployment, benefits, and work. Anti-benefit discourse increased under the UK Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition of 2010-2015; with public spending cuts requiring public buy-in, politicians repeatedly argued how welfare encouraged dependency and discouraged hard work. This was a marriage of convenience between economic liberals like the Chancellor George Osborne and true believers like Iain Duncan Smith. Whilst Chancellor, Osborne (2013) argued how “there is nothing kind about parking people...on benefits (and...) nothing fair about a something-for-nothing culture”. Simultaneously there was a synergy between welfare politics and popular culture, which Jensen (2014) described as “poverty porn”. Programmes like *Benefits Street* (Channel 4, 2014) and *We All Pay Your Benefits* (BBC, 2013) constructed a conservative, neoliberal ‘common sense’ around welfare dependency. National media contributed to this environment, with Turn2Us (2012: 43) showing newspapers shifted towards a “scrounger discourse”, focusing on “large families on benefits, bad parenting, antisocial behaviour (and) people who have never worked or haven’t worked for a long time”. Unsurprisingly public opinion research estimated a profound shift in welfare attitudes starting in the late-1990s and peaking in the mid-2010s. This cannot be explained by changes in the economic cycle alone, suggesting a more “discursive, ideological shift in how we think and conceptualize unemployment” (Sage, 2012: 366). Indeed as the post-2010 economy floundered, welfare attitudes hardened to those without work. There was thus a complex web intertwining political rhetoric, social policy, popular culture, media, and public opinion. In an analysis of political speeches since the 1980s, O’Grady (2017) places politicians as the chief instigators: “as the public heard increasingly harsh rhetoric, their opinions altered”.

There is evidence this environment is now changing and public opinion has softened (NatCen, 2023). Covid-19 also exposed many problems with labour markets and initiated a cultural reaction against some work demands, highlighted by pressure to maintain homeworking, the so-called *Great Resignation* (Klotz, 2022), and small but significant ‘antiwork’ subcultures. There is also evidence that broader public attitudes to work have changed in some countries, with Duffy et al. (2023) finding that the belief it would be a ‘good thing if less importance were placed on work’ has increased in numerous advanced welfare states like Canada, Germany and the UK since the 1980s. This view is especially prevalent in younger generations. There is also evidence that a shorter working week would be popular amongst the public, although this comes with the caveat of maintaining present levels of pay (Autonomy, 2020). Simultaneously a new school of critical voices has emerged, seen in think-tanks like Autonomy (2019), the ETUI (De Spiegelare and Piasna, 2017), and the NEF (2010; 2018); academic theorists (Gorz, 1999; Weeks, 2011; Hochschild, 2012; Hunnicutt, 2013; Frayne, 2015; Frase, 2016; Srnicek and Williams, 2015; Graeber, 2018; Spencer, 2022), empirical researchers (Kamerāde et al., 2019; Sage, 2019) and popular social science books (Mason, 2015; Bregman, 2016). There are at least five common threads between these accounts. The first is economic changes- including flexibility, insecurity, and deindustrialization – have compromised the promises of what work provides: not only income but well-being, health, and social status. The second is new technologies degrade the experience of work (e.g. via enhanced surveillance) but also generate opportunities for WTR; many tasks can now be completed more efficiently by machines. The third is that climate change necessitates a change in how people work to less energy- and consumption-intensive forms (King and Van Den Bergh, 2017). Fourth, WTR promotes gender equality via a more equal distribution of paid and unpaid labour. The fifth and final thread is WTR is, on its own, inherently good and does not require justification by claims of productivity, efficiency, or unemployment rates (Weeks, 2011). This is an argument about freedom, the good life, and happiness. Frayne (2015: 216) puts it simply: “people are happier when they have more time to do the things they want to do”.

Many critics of work however remain vague on how WTR can be realized by social policy (e.g. see proposals in Gorz, 1999; Weeks, 2011; Frayne, 2015), often advocating provocative, performative ‘demands’ designed to stimulate public debate. There is also an absence of acknowledgement of the broader economic effects of WTR and the requirement to maintain an effective labour market that supports the functioning of the welfare state and public services. Yet the real-world role of the welfare state in WTR is not a new idea. Esping-Andersen (1990) famously conceptualized this as decommodification; welfare states could be differentiated by which services and benefits weakened labour market dependence. For Esping-Andersen, the English-speaking welfare states – with low benefits and means-testing – were where citizens’ well-being was most fundamentally linked with work. Alternatively the social democratic states were the most decommodifying: providing “equal benefit to all, irrespective of prior earnings, contribution or performance”. Esping-Andersen’s analysis was rooted in the post-war world, yet recent interest in WTR is part of the same social democratic legacy of decommodification: welfare policies designed to enable people to work fewer hours and be less dependent on employment for quality-of-life. Whether a basic income or retirement ages, advocates propose welfare systems that free people from employment for the living of a good life. The recent campaign for WTR thus shares much with an older demand for the provision of social rights in capitalist economies.

Beyond the Work Society: Three Strategies

This section analyses how welfare states can contribute to WTR: enabling less work without significant drops in income. In the WTR debate, two policies have captured public attention: universal basic income (UBI) and the shorter working week (SWW). This section outlines both strategies, concluding whilst both are important and viable strategies for WTR, there is a third strategy – a lifetime perspective – that should also be considered. This is because the broader welfare state affects working-time in a range of ways. Whether healthcare is universal or not affects employment dependence; benefit generosity determines reliance on work for survival; and parental leave shapes how much time parents can spend with new-borns. Consider a society where healthcare is only available via employers, unemployment benefits and paid parental leave are non-existent, and state retirement ages are over 70. This society would entwine survival deep within employment. The key point, and argued below, is that when considering policies for WTR there is more on the table than UBI or the SWW.

Universal Basic Income

UBI has gained significant global attention recently as a solution to a range of socio-economic challenges (Sloman, 2018). UBI is an individual, regular cash payment provided to all citizens. Crucially, UBI is unconditional: it is not dependent on job-search activity, employment, or means-testing. This gives UBI unique advantages over other ideas it competes against; it is simple to understand, radical, wide-ranging in appeal, and can supposedly remedy an extensive list of socio-economic problems. These include unemployment, automation, gender equality, climate change, benefit ‘traps’, poverty, and work insecurity (Dimick, 2017). A further aspiration of UBI is to bring about WTR: it could provide the choice to reduce working hours and increase time spent in freely chosen meaningful activities. UBI has radical roots; in its early formulations it was largely associated with idealist, utopian, and revolutionary thinkers such as Robespierre and Paine (Sloman, 2018). More recently though, UBI has advanced into more pragmatic, mainstream

political circles: what Sloman (2018) calls the “fifth wave” of UBI as a response to global economic problems. This is indicative of how, in times of disruption, once radical social policies take on unexpected persuasion.

The core question for this article is whether UBI has the capacity to bring about the goal of WTR and, when considering this, a tension emerges between two models of UBI. The first model is a modest weekly sum payable to all, replacing most existing benefits. The limited, minimalist nature of this model is its selling point: compared to alternatives it would be cheaper, more practical to implement and likelier to garner public support. There have been numerous minimalist proposals in recent years. For most working-age adults, the RSA (2015) suggests a weekly payment of £71 and Compass propose (2019) £60, with higher levels for older people and families with children. The minimalist Compass proposal however is seen as a seed to an eventual, more generous UBI. Elsewhere, Finland’s highly publicized guaranteed income experiment had a value of around €129 per week. The downside, at least vis-à-vis WTR, is modest payments would be insufficient to enable meaningful WTR. Ikebe (2016) makes this point, arguing a modest UBI – or a “non-liveable basic income” – would maintain labour market reliance.

The second model is a more generous UBI: a “liveable basic income” (Ikebe, 2016) that goes significantly beyond social assistance levels (i.e. the RSA and Compass models above) and replaces a substantial proportion of median income from work. This version was supported by Gorz (1999), who proposed a UBI “both unconditional and adequate for a decent existence” as opposed to a “minimum income, which permits mere subsistence” (Levitas, 2001: 459). There are two examples of UK pilots employing this model. First, the Welsh Government is providing care leavers with £1280 per month for two years after their 18th birthday. Second, Autonomy (2023) is leading a pilot in two English towns where 30 participants will receive £1600 per month for two years. These pilots provide participants with 53.5 and 66.9 per cent of post-tax, median full-time

income in the UK (ONS, 2023). The 2016 Swiss UBI referendum also proposed a generous scheme of 2500 CHF (£1755) per month. The generous model however is less commonly proposed by advocates. It holds greater potential economic risks and would have significantly higher costs compared to a minimalist UBI, and thus require a corresponding tax rise an order of magnitude greater. Bergmann (2004) argues this would leave governments unable to invest in other welfare state services and in reality there is a choice between either a generous UBI or a generous welfare state: having both is not possible. It would also court more political and public controversy (White, 1997). Social attitudes research shows ambiguous views on the likely popularity of a generous UBI. Whilst there is evidence the public would support some form of basic income (Kirk, 2022), decades of social attitudes research shows public aversion to the much higher tax settlement a generous UBI would necessitate (Hirsch, 2015), belief in the importance of work as a social institution (Sage, 2019), and the prioritization of notions of deservingness, contribution, and reciprocity as fundamental principles of the welfare state (Van Oorschot, 2006). Nevertheless, a generous UBI holds greater potential for enabling meaningful WTR. It is only with an adequate, guaranteed safety net that significant decisions about WTR can be made.

Until recently there has been little evidence for researchers to analyse the effects of UBI on labour market behaviour. The only ongoing, long-term UBI in an advanced welfare state is the Alaska Permanent Fund (Widerquist and Howard, 2012) which, despite its longevity, has “not been systematically examined” in terms of its “impact on the economic, social and political landscape” (Goldsmith, 2012: 84). Forget (2011) argues guaranteed income programmes, trialled in parts of North America in the 1970s, showed significant, downward trends on working hours but only for secondary earners: especially women with children and new-borns. This suggests a modest UBI could lead to WTR but primarily via mothers dropping out of the labour market or reducing their working hours to finance longer maternity leaves. Robeyns’ (2001) argues this point, claiming if UBI is implemented in a context of gendered divisions it could reinforce inequalities. The case for

UBI has gained momentum over the last decade though with various global trials, pilots, and experiments. Programmes have been undertaken in the countries noted above, as well as low- and middle-income countries like Brazil, India, and Kenya (Coote and Yazici, 2019). This has produced new evidence for researchers to examine UBI's potential for WTR. Some results show little if any effect on reducing work incentives. Indeed some schemes have increased employment as a stated aim of trials. Speaking to *The Guardian* (2018), Marjukka Turenen from the Finnish Kela agency said an aim of their trial was to see if it “increases the incentive for people to take on work” (Kangas et al., 2020). The results of Finland's experiment were compromised by other policy changes, but the broad verdict was it had very little effect on employment rates one way or another; if anything, there may have been a small increase in employment amongst UBI recipients of around six extra working days per year (Hiilamo, 2022).

This prompts the question of the *raison d'être* of UBI: is it to increase employment or reduce working-time? This depends on UBI's generosity: it must be sufficient to provide the choice to work fewer hours. This is noted by Sloman (2018), describing this tension as between the technocratic and transformative supporters of UBI, and Spencer (2018: 9) who argues a minimalist UBI is a “prop to consumption and a means to support work -...it offers no radical break with the present”. A minimalist UBI could be less a challenge to the authority of employment and more an activation tool designed to encourage *more* work. Still, a form of UBI could be a powerful tool for WTR. Set at a sufficiently high level, UBI would provide people with the freedom to cut working hours. There is however a paradox at the heart of basic income: the more probable, yet minimalist, UBI is the one far less likely to change societies' work dynamics.

Shorter working week

Like UBI the SWW has also gained attention recently (Beckett, 2018; NEF, 2018; Pang, 2019). In the last decade there have been high-profile European SWWs in Belgium, Germany, Iceland, and

Sweden (Autonomy, 2019). Elsewhere the trial of a four-day week at Perpetual Guardian in New Zealand gained international media attention (McClure, 2022). Most recently, a six-month 2022 trial took place in the UK with 61 companies and 3000 workers (Autonomy, 2023). What is important is that both the Autonomy and Perpetual Guardian trials maintained pay at 100 per cent. This emphasizes that the aim of the SWW, and WTR more broadly, is not to see work itself disappear and unemployment rise, but to redress the long stagnation in time spent at work. Whilst these studies are novel, the SWW does have a longer history. This includes the 1974 UK three-day week, the 1998-2008 French 35-hour week (Askenazy, 2013) and the 1993-1999 Volkswagen 28.8 hour-week in Germany (Seifert and Trinczek, 2000). There have also been many ‘work-life balance’ initiatives, which often involve some form of WTR (Kinman and Jones, 2008), as well as the mass expansion of part-time work the Netherlands (Visser, 2002). An SWW is often imagined as the transition from a five-day work schedule to a four-day one, yet it encompasses more than the four-day alternative (King and Van Den Bergh, 2017). At its core, it involves a reduction in weekly hours by the equivalent of one full workday without – ideally – lower pay. Whilst this could be achieved by eliminating one entire day, different approaches are possible, (e.g. two afternoons per week). The critical feature of the SWW lies in the reduction of each working week by approximately one-fifth.

As with UBI, we must ask two questions of the SWW: (a) will it result in WTR? and (b) is large-scale implementation probable? This first question appears self-explanatory given WTR is seemingly an inevitable effect of the SWW, unlike UBI where it may be a by-product. There are however questions over whether the SWW reduces actual work intensity, which is not solely determined by hours but by factors like sector, management expectations, autonomy, and scheduling. De Spiegelaere and Piasna (2017) point to research that an SWW can increase work intensity and stress in certain conditions (see also Piasna, 2015), arguing WTR must be matched by additional employment (Akerstedt et al., 2001) and autonomy over working hours to reduce

work intensity. This was illuminated by findings from the French 35-hour week, with Fagnani and Letablier (2004) reporting an SWW resulted in a worse work-life balance for those made to accept non-standard shifts in exchange for fewer hours. Similar findings regarding stress were found in Germany (Seifert and Trinczek, 2000).

There are also doubts about the likelihood of a large-scale, nationwide SWW. Like UBI, there are ideological currents running against it (Hussen, 2023) and in the current cost-of-living crisis, the problem perceived by many is too little work ('underemployment', see Bell and Blanchflower, 2021) or pay. Fear of falling living standards following a SWW is a long-standing caveat (NEF, 2010) and, in the present crisis, the idea of working less may fall on deaf ears. This emphasizes the precedence of maintaining full pay alongside shorter hours, which is a central tenet of the UK's 4 Day Week campaign group. There are also questions around which industries a SWW would suit. As Skidelsky (2019) observes, many firms experimenting with a SWW are similar: project-based, knowledge jobs in areas like PR and advertising. These models could not be applied to all types of work. We arrive then at a similar paradox to that facing UBI: the more radical and transformative version of the SWW – a society-wide, immediate, and large cut in working hours – would be the most costly, disruptive, and less feasible. Contrastingly the more probable model of the SWW – a small, scattered, and incremental reduction in hours – may have little impact on work intensity or broader public support for WTR.

This second approach – encompassing either (a) an individual-by-individual and/or (b) an employer-by-employer basis – seems more likely than a collectively agreed and nationally legislated SWW. It also emphasizes personal choice over working hours, yet such choice is not equally and freely made; women for example are far more likely to 'choose' part-time work due to family responsibilities. Indeed a recent trial showed a significant skew towards female participants (Autonomy, 2023). There is thus a risk an individual-by-individual SWW would cultivate gender

inequalities (De Spiegelaere and Piasna, 2017). The second employer-based SWW could be beneficial for eligible workers but evidence suggests an employer-led SWW may be concentrated in smaller organizations with a higher proportion of graduates (Autonomy, 2023). As Chung (2022: 555) argues, this will maintain the “stigmatisation of workers who cannot, or are thought to be unable to, work long hours”. Most supporters of the SWW thus agree implementation should not be devolved to the individual- or company-level. Relatedly, the SWW is often framed by businesses in economic terms: as a tool for greater productivity, efficiency, and profit. Andrew Barnes of Perpetual Guardian, which recently trialled and then permanently introduced a four-day week, argues “right at the heart of this is a rational business decision” (McClure, 2022). The radical goal of working less is subsequently repackaged as a tool for doing more work. WTR thus remains the gift of a benevolent employer rather a right for all. If its business case wanes, then workers could find such gifts withdrawn.

There is no doubt an SWW has the potential for WTR whilst simultaneously improving quality-of-life. The Swedish trial of 2015-16 is evidence of this, where a 6-hour working day for nursing staff found participants had more energy, were more satisfied with their health, experienced less stress and fatigue, and took fewer sick days (Lorentzon, 2017). Autonomy’s (2023) recent trial with 61 companies saw 92 per cent continue with the SWW; 30 per cent did so permanently. However the conditions, roll-out, and model are critical. There is also the problem the SWW is often framed in terms of economic benefit. As with UBI, there is again a choice of two models: a collective, significant SWW as a right to all or a minimalist, employer-by-employer/individual-by-individual SWW for far fewer. And again as with UBI, the most likely option is the least transformative.

A shorter working life

A third way of realizing WTR is by considering less work throughout a lifetime. Many contemporary ideas around WTR focus on the present moment, yet we can also consider WTR

not just as the working day or week but as a year, decade, or entire life. This broadens the potential for welfare state solutions: from considering how an afternoon or day can be freed to how weeks, months, or years can instead. This could be more liberating but also more viable and palatable to public opinion. Providing all with a UBI or adding an extra day to the weekend are perceived as radical proposals to some and are unseen in many – if any – advanced welfare states. These are ambitious and innovative policies but politically, economically, and culturally they face complex implementation obstacles. Yet lowering retirement ages, increasing national holidays, or expanding paid parental leave sound less subversive and disruptive. Despite this appearance however, such policies have a radical potential for expanding free time; indeed, many historic reductions in working-time have been achieved over years or lifetimes. In France for example, workers used numerous ways to reduce working hours, this included a reduction in the length of the day (31 per cent) but also taking extra days off a month (21 per cent). This reflects how there are numerous policy designs for WTR (King and Van Den Bergh, 2016). This section now highlights three, short case studies of how shorter working lives have already been achieved in advanced welfare states.

The first example is of a widely available right to career breaks: compensated, periodic, and extended spells away from work. Although largely associated with academic sabbaticals, some have argued career breaks should be extended to more workers (Carr and Tang, 2005; Bell and Gaffney, 2012). Gorz (1999) describes this as the right to ‘discontinuity’: to intermittent periods of work and non-work to bring about a society of ‘multi-activity’. Since 1985 Belgium has offered the right to one-year career breaks, during which workers are safeguarded from unemployment and able to resume the same position once they return. Unlike the academic sabbatical, where the beneficiary is expected to undertake research, Belgian workers are free to spend career breaks as they wish. Additionally, some workers are entitled to extend career breaks for up to five years. They can also split up the one-year period into shorter blocs and, crucially, receive state allowances during their

leave. This corresponds with Gorz's (1999: 98) idea of "continuous income for discontinuous work".

A second example is shared parental leave backed by generous benefits. Sweden is a pioneer here, providing 480 days of paid parental leave per child that can be divided however parents choose. Crucially, 90 days is reserved for each parent and cannot be transferred. Swedish parental leave benefits are also generous, with eligible parents receiving 195 days at 77.6 per cent of earnings up to a maximum equivalent of €48,000. Studies indicate "almost all families use paid Parental Leave in Sweden" (Duvander and Löfgren, 2021: 581), with estimates that fathers – who across the world traditionally take little time off work following the birth of a child – take an equivalent of seven weeks each. Other Nordic countries such as Iceland and Norway have implemented comparable policies (Windwehr et al., 2021), with less generous – and less effective – schemes in countries like the UK (Birkett and Forbes, 2019).

A final example of a shorter working life can be seen in variation in annual leave entitlement and statutory holidays (King and Van Den Bergh, 2016). Table 1 above shows how much statutory entitlement to time off work varies in OECD countries. The US is an outlier in terms of statutory paid leave. Whilst many US employees receive around 10 paid leave days, the US has no legal requirement for employers to offer any paid leave. In contrast, north and west European countries have the most generous statutory paid leave policies. Annual holiday entitlement is rarely talked about in social policy and WTR, however the difference between living in a miserly or a generous country can stack up over a lifetime. The difference between Austria and Canada is an average of 19 days per year. Over a full-time working life of 35 years, this transpires to 665 days: or just under two additional years off work. There is scope for policy creativity too; Schor (1992) for example proposes allowing workers to forego wage rises in return for more annual leave.

Together these three examples are not concrete proposals of ideal WTR schemes that can be easily applied elsewhere. Belgian career breaks for example are estimated to have low take-up, especially amongst men (Vandeweyer and Glorieux, 2008), and there have been difficulties in ‘exporting’ the Nordic model of shared parental leave (Windwehr et al., 2021). Other policies can also be included in this mix. Generously funded adult higher education would allow people to take career breaks to retrain, as would unemployment benefits with high replacement rates and no conditionality. Universal basic services (Institute for Global Prosperity, 2017) – an extension of the free-at-the-point-of-need, universal principle to services including food, transport, and technology – would make it realistic to live on lower incomes and thus reduce working hours. Together, all such policies are examples about how the conversation on WTR can be broadened out from the SWW and UBI.

Conclusion

This article has argued widespread social policy change is required to effectively reduce working-time. It has explored how welfare states have historically affected working-time and examined UBI and the SWW as conduits for WTR. It has also looked beyond these to analyse ways in which working time has been reduced in advanced welfare states through, for example, parental leave policies, sabbaticals, and annual leave entitlements. The article concludes with a strategy for a ‘lifetime’ perspective on WTR, whereby the goal of lower working hours is imagined and achieved over a whole life. This, it is argued, holds the best hope for a gradual, but profound, change in social and cultural norms around working-time. Such an approach could ultimately see lifetime measures as the beginning of a long-term strategy to transform norms around work and eventually incorporate more radical measures like UBI and the SWW.

There are several reasons why a lifetime, welfare state perspective is necessary to effectively reduce working-time. First, whilst critics like Gorz (1999) are dismissive of public opinion, the work ethic

remains deeply embedded in our economic, cultural, and social systems. It is not something that can be easily changed by individuals or employers acting alone. As De Spiegelaere and Piasna (2017: 81) argue, “the role of culture cannot be underestimated”: hearts, minds, and souls must be challenged and the “socially determined nature of work preferences” (Dimick, 2017: 490) transformed. Critics of work should learn from the cultural success of the work ethic itself, which has proven malleable in the face of social change by adapting to new moralities: from asceticism, consumerism, social mobility, and self-realization to its co-option by progressive movements like feminism and socialism (Weeks, 2011).

Second, the economic impact of such policies would be far less of a shock to existing structures and, subsequently, enable the continued functioning of public services and social security systems. There is a greater economic risk from a generous UBI or SWW in terms of the plausible repercussions for productivity, taxation, and employment levels. A generous UBI for example could have harmful labour market effects, including significantly increased unemployment and business closures. The article, however, interrogates and critiques arguments for UBI from just one perspective: vis-à-vis its aim to reduce WTR. Unfortunately, there is not enough space in the article to include additional, detailed critiques of some of the other potential consequences of UBI. This includes adverse economic effects but also considerations of gender equality and the financing of other public services. These economic considerations of WTR policy are vital; whether a UBI, parental leave or Universal Basic Services, such policies will require investment and healthy public finances. Thus a lifetime perspective can achieve two goals: less economic risk and more congruity with public opinion.

Third, policy proposals should also consider people’s motivations for working less (Balderson et al., 2020) and incorporate these into policy design. One of the advantages of WTR is the capacity to appeal to a broad coalition across class, sex, and generations. Policies like UBI and the SWW

should inspire the drive for incremental changes with the aim of ‘getting there’ in the long run. The question then is how to introduce incremental changes to make something like a generous UBI likely. This will involve challenging and changing social norms and reducing the amount of work people do over a lifetime. A lifetime perspective also recognises people's needs and priorities change over time. For example, parents may want extended parental leave to look after new-borns, whilst older people may want earlier retirement. A lifetime perspective thus recognizes the diversity of ways to reduce working-time. These would not be easy to implement but are essential in achieving a more sustainable, equal, and healthy society. By making more time for less work, we can create more space for leisure, family, community, and life itself.

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Table 1 Variation in Working Time Indicators in OECD Countries

	Minimum statutory annual paid leave	Part-time employment as a percentage of total employment	Duration of working life
Austria	25	30.1	38.6
Australia	20	-	-
Belgium	20	23.7	34.7
Canada	10	-	-
Chile	15	-	-
Colombia	15	-	-
Czechia	20	6.9	37.1
Denmark	25	25.2	41.3
Estonia	20	13.5	40.8
Finland	20	16.8	39.9
France	25	16.6	36.8
Germany	20	28.7	39.6
Greece	20	7.3	34.2
Hungary	20	4	37
Ireland	20	20.3	40
Israel	16	-	-
Italy	20	17.6	32.9
Japan	10	-	-
Korea	15	-	-
Latvia	20	6.8	37
Lithuania	20	5.9	37.8
Luxembourg	25	18.2	35.2
Mexico	6	-	-
Netherlands	20	42.4	43.7
New Zealand	20	-	-
Norway	21	24.2	41.1
Poland	20	5.7	35.2
Portugal	22	7.2	39.1
Slovakia	20	3.3	35.7
Slovenia	20	8.5	36.6

Spain	22	13.1	36.3
Sweden	25	19.9	43.1
Switzerland	20	38.1	42.7
Turkey	14	-	-
UK	20	-	-
USA	0	-	-

Sources: OECD (2021); Eurostat (2023b); Eurostat (2023c).