

The Future of Work: Shorter Hours, Higher Pay

The latest entry in a special project in which business and labor leaders, social scientists, technology visionaries, activists, and journalists weigh in on the most consequential changes in the workplace.

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President John F. Kennedy signing the 1963 Equal Pay Act, a law top women leaders saw as part of a larger movement against underpay and overwork. (Photo: Public Domain)

Most Americans work too much and are paid too little. Reversing these trends is the most important thing we can do to improve the lives of workers and their families today.

Time and money are connected but not in the way we often think. For all too long we've been trying to raise our pay by lengthening our hours. In truth, we need to shorten our hours. Then and only then will we be able to raise our pay.

Less work and more pay is not an impossible dream. Many countries have made great progress toward its realization. Indeed, countries with the least income inequality also have some of the best time policies. A number of European nations mandate a month of paid vacation every year and many have workweeks of under 35 hours; Canada just expanded its paid parental leave to 54 weeks for new parents, putting it ahead of the world norm of three months of paid leave; and

even Japan, famous for *karōshi* or death by overwork, is considering laws to require workers take paid holidays.

But some say America is just different. Our income inequality is among the world's highest. The United States, Swaziland, Lesotho, and Papua New Guinea are the only nations without paid maternity leave. And as of 2015, 42 percent of U.S. employees have no paid vacation at all.

But the truth is that America has not always been an outlier when it comes to overwork and underpay. There's a long and vibrant American tradition of struggle for shorter hours and higher pay and it got results. We lessened both time and income inequality a century ago and we can do so again.

There have been two great American shorter-time movements: the labor movement's shorter-hours struggle and the women's movement fight for work-family balance. Both have much to teach about why less work is essential to economic prosperity, democratic governance, and individual happiness.

Let's look first at the labor movement. The bumper sticker is right: The American labor movement gave us the weekend. It also helped give it to Europeans and others. Ending long hours was the top demand of American workers in the 19th century. In 1886, a general strike for the eight-hour day called by the American Federation of Labor inspired similar movements throughout the industrializing world.

But the shorter-hours call was not just for action; it was for a new economics. In the century leading up to the New Deal, the American labor movement was an intellectual hotbed, the center of some of the most creative economic thinking around. Shorter hours solved the problem of overwork *and* underwork. "As long as there is one man who seeks employment and can not obtain it, the hours of work are too long," Sam Gompers, president of the AFL, explained in 1887.

Shorter hours increased profits and raised wages. Shorter hours meant greater productivity, more technological investment, lower turnover costs, and less worker illness and job injury. Employers could afford to pay workers more, and limiting the supply of work time increased its value. American workers organized for shorter hours and higher pay. They insisted that the real American work ethic—one that valued a worker's time and effort with fair pay—be honored in practice, not just in rhetoric.



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The political and moral case for shorter hours was just as important as the economic. Without time for education, reflection, and civic participation, the American experiment in representative democracy was doomed. Shorter hours, the American labor movement claimed, made us better citizens, better family members, and better people.

This first great movement for shorter hours negotiated agreements with employers allowing workers more control over when and how much they worked. It passed living-wage ordinances and fair-hour laws in states and municipalities across the country. It helped secure the 1938 Fair Labor Standards Act, the first federal law setting minimum wages and maximum hours for men and women.

After the 1930s, the labor movement shifted its focus from a shorter workday to a shorter work year and a shorter work life. At mid-century, big labor negotiated what Walter Reuther, the visionary head of the Congress of Industrial Organizations, called “lumps of leisure”: paid vacations (an unheard-of benefit for blue-collar workers), paid holidays or the three-day weekend, and retirement (a new idea!) paid by Social Security and company benefits.

The second shorter-time movement is what I call the other women’s movement. A century ago, American feminists donned their white dresses and, with American flags fluttering, marched in massive suffrage parades in cities large and small. They also took to the streets and to the ballot box to end overwork and underpay. This second movement, like the first, believed shorter hours raised pay, created more jobs, and preserved American democracy. But they also wanted to end women’s “double day,” or long hours at home and on the job. They sought more choice in where they spent their work time and they insisted that family work was as important as market work.

They led the fight for work-family balance before we even had a name for it: they changed public opinion, laws, and employer practice, gaining job-protected leave during childbirth and childrearing, restrictions on involuntary overtime, and more flexibility in work time and place. Time and money were connected, they argued, and leaves must be paid for most women to benefit.

Raising women’s wages was an integral part of their work-family agenda. They helped extend minimum-wage protections to the majority of women, including domestic, retail, and service workers. Beginning in 1945 and for the next 18 years, they introduced “equal pay for comparable work” legislation. In 1963, John F. Kennedy signed the Equal Pay Act, a law they hoped would be the first step toward ending sex-based wage discrimination.

Today, the struggle against overwork and underpay is gaining ground. Laws mandating paid family leave have been secured in California, New Jersey, and other states. Campaigns for paid sick leave are succeeding. The Fight for Fifteen and other efforts to raise wages are making a difference and show no sign of waning.

What's crucial is to connect these efforts and to understand them as part of a long American history of successful struggle for shorter hours and higher pay.

A few months ago, my Rutgers undergraduates and I met for one of our last classroom discussions of the semester. Many of my students hold multiple jobs even as they attend school full time. As I've done many times, I assigned readings on overwork and the history of American shorter-time movements. It was late in the semester, late in the afternoon, and very hot. For the first time in many years, the importance of the topic needed no explanation. They raised their tired heads off their desks and began talking animatedly.

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For the [Future of Work](#), a special project from the [Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences](#) at Stanford University, business and labor leaders, social scientists, technology visionaries, activists, and journalists weigh in on the most consequential changes in the workplace, and what anxieties and possibilities they might produce.