

Working Hours and the Climate

The Greens-European Free Alliance

The Swedish Green Party (Miljöpartiet de Gröna)

Introduction

Work is a source of joy, development, social networks, creativity and, of course, income. However for many it is also a source of stress, repetitive tasks, burnout and being trapped in a low wage group. Labour policy is being put forward, by both the left and the right as the cure-all for just about all of society's problems. A hundred years ago the eight hour working day could be seen on the Swedish Trade Union Confederation's posters and almost 40 years ago a forty hour working week became law. Statistics have long been shouting out loud that labour policy is naked: every year we become a little bit more efficient and the amount of working hours needed decreases. Instead of celebrating this progress, both the Social Democrat- and the Moderate parties' answer to this is: Work more, produce more, buy more, more growth! This demand for constantly increasing input at work is not only causing stress to us as people, but puts pressure on the planet we live on.

Remember your three happiest moments...

For most of us, these kinds of moments have something to do with relationships – children, love or friendship. A new job or a project well done can bring great pleasure, but people rarely think of income or purchases of consumer goods when they are asked the above question. Nevertheless, since the '70s, we have chosen to develop Sweden towards the goal of increasing purchasing power. All of society's resourcefulness and growing productivity has been invested in increasing the desire and inclination to buy rather than shortening working hours. Perhaps the resistance to shorter working hours is the result of our current economic system, a system which persistently devotes itself to growth; perhaps too, shorter working hours can be the beginning of the road leading to a more sustainable, solidary and democratic economic development.

Our civilisation suffers from a lack of resources and increased competition for dwindling natural resources. We, as people, are experiencing time constraints and increasing competition for the remaining jobs. Many people see the challenge of taking action for the climate as burdensome and demanding in spite of the fact that a significant part of the solution probably means less stress and shorter working hours.

Shorter working hours give us more spare time and fewer emissions, more jobs and less stress, more time for one another and for democracy. The forty-hour week is not the eleventh commandment chiselled into stone but a number in an absolutely ordinary law, which we, absolutely ordinary people, can change. Let us do it!

Short history

What are people? Individuals who decide over themselves and who choose their own developmental path or a workforce stuck in the conditions shaped by their surroundings?

The labour movement was born out of the demand for general suffrage and shorter working hours. Striking construction workers in Australia succeeded in 1856 in bringing through the world's first legislation on the eight hour working day, something that inspired workers in other countries and led the American unions to call a general strike with this demand. When Swedish Social Democrats gathered in 1890 for the first major May Day Demonstration on Gärdet in Stockholm a resolution was adopted with the text:

WE DEMAND THE LIMITATION OF WORKING HOURS MAINLY FOR THE FOLLOWING REASONS:

The eight hour working day would put in place a barrage for the physical and intellectual degeneration that now threatens the working class as a result of these inhumane, long working hours, which prematurely wear people out and destroy their health.

The eight hour working day would give the worker time and energy to partake in intellectual and moral development as a free person and citizen.

The eight hour working day would, if generally enforced, result in an immediate reduction of the reserve army of unemployed people that the current economic system creates.

After several decades of political struggle, within and outside of the governing assemblies, the Swedish parliament adopted, in 1919, a law concerning the eight hour working day. The resulting 48 hour working week (at this time people also worked on Saturdays) was gradually shortened and, in the 1970s, a 40 hour working week was introduced. Throughout the 1970s support for continuing to shorten working hours to a 6 hour working day/30 hour working week surged and was carried forward by an increasingly militant women's movement, while a grey suit-wearing concrete wall of business representatives and union opponents managed to stop any further reductions in normal working hours using the idea of "economic responsibility". The result of this "responsibility" for the economy is now clear. The earner's share of value added has fallen from 55% to 45% since the start of the '80s. Furthermore the dispensable income of the richest tenth has increased by 88% during the past 16 years whereas the dispensable income of the poorest tenth has only increased by 15%. These years have also been characterised by steadily increasing profit dividends. Upholding the 40 hour working week has, in summary, not only led to an increasing structural unemployment, that which is independent of economic cycles, since the 70s but has also meant that those with the highest income have received a steadily increasing share of the profits of productivity.

During the last two decades of the 1900s the number of working hours per year has actually risen in two countries in the industrialised world: the USA and Sweden. SCB's (Sweden's Statistical Central Bureau) Statistical Yearbook for Sweden (2009) states that "138.6 million hours per week were worked on average for the year. This is the highest value for labour supply that has been measured since measurements started in 1963." This increase in working input has, in the meantime, as we see, not benefited most people but rather paid for a growing misallocation of income. Shorter working hours would, on the other hand,

benefit everyone equally and in addition lead to a fairer distribution of the profits of productivity.

It is hardly a coincidence that the increasingly deregulated capitalism of our time exchanges an increased productivity for a higher purchasing power for a few, instead of for lower working hours for everyone. An economic system built around maximum returns for funds invested is programmed for constantly growing production and consumption and growth without end.

35 hour working week in France

In the middle of the 1980s a 35 hour working week was introduced in the German metal industry and at the turn of the century in France normal working hours were reduced from 39 to 35 working hours per week. The extensive French workinghours reform generated hundreds of thousands of new jobs and is based, in short, on the fact that companies that take on new employees as a result of the reduced working hours get a reduction in employer's contributions and this is partly financed by the lower cost the state has for supporting unemployment. Unemployment in France fell by just over three per cent in conjunction with the introduction of the 35 hour reforms and for the first time in several decades earners' share of GDP increased whereas the share that made up company profits fell slightly. This is probably the main reason for the right's compact opposition to "les 35 heures" and President Sarkozy's attempt to roll back the reforms, which 70% of earners believe have brought considerable improvements in quality of life.

Many economists and different kinds of "experts" predicted that the 35 hour working week would place the French economy in a deep crisis. We can now point out that they were wrong. The declaration that it is too expensive to change business for social and ecological sustainability returns time and again in the initial stages of major processes of change. Once upon a time it was claimed that we could not afford to ban DDT and other cancer-causing pesticides. Later we were led to believe that "expensive" wind power would never be profitable, and now we are being told that the law about the 40 hour working week is as difficult to change as the law of gravity.

Increasing productivity and increasing unemployment

Scientific and technical successes lead to continually climbing productivity - fewer and fewer can produce more and more - and tend to increase structural unemployment (the part of unemployment that is independent of economic cycles) or "technological unemployment", as the English term goes. Statistics from the industrial countries' economic organisation OECD show unequivocally that increases in productivity in Sweden and other Western European countries since 1970 have successively lowered the amount of available salaried employment per person.

Structural unemployment can be reduced if:

- GDP growth is greater than the increase in productivity; currently unusual in industrial countries and furthermore not ecologically sustainable (unless something even more unlikely happens: that, with this high growth rate, the consumption of resources per GDP unit falls faster than growth increases).
- There is a proportionally faster reduction in the working population than there is an increase in productivity, which is hardly going to be the case in Sweden; the dependency ratio (number of children and elderly per working age person) is estimated to increase by around 15% by 2050 whereas productivity is likely to multiply.
- Working hours are lowered; since the start of the 1970s the industrial countries have exchanged a smaller and smaller portion of the increase in productivity for shorter working hours and have consequentially been affected by growing structural unemployment.

It is difficult to do anything about the two first points above, if we do not want to invest in ecologically unsustainable GDP growth or ban technological developments that create productivity. The growth route to full employment is closed, other than if energy and resource efficiency in GDP is greater than growth. This can happen in the short term during a shift in technology but it can hardly make up the foundations of a sustainable economy.

On the other hand it is easy to exchange increases in productivity for shorter working hours, rather than increased salaries. According to several opinion polls this is exactly what the majority of the population wants. It is worth thinking about why this is not happening, and why no party is even seriously pushing the issue. Is representative democracy on the way to becoming less and less representative? Founder of the welfare state Per-Albin Hansson, the former bricklayer who became Prime Minister 1932-46, strived to “keep a large ear turned to the people”. Who are the ears of today’s popularly elected representatives turned to? If we had exchanged half of the increase in productivity that has taken place since 1980 for shorter working hours then today we would be down to a 32 hour working week. However, the parties whose party programmes promote shorter working hours have not taken up the issue and instead no party dares to push the issue any more.

Elsewhere in public discussions among debaters and researchers a new interest in working hours is dawning. In his thought-provoking book *Keynes’ grandchild (Keynes barnbarn)* Christer Sanne writes,

“Around 7 billion paid working hours are carried out in Sweden annually. The volume of working hours per year has amounted to around 6 and 7 billion as far back as statistics go, to the end of the 1800s. This is “the work socially necessary ” to support everyone at a reasonable level of needs, both those who are employed and those who are outside the labour market. However, while the population has grown, working hours per worker have fallen quite considerably. Therefore today one million Swedes of a working age, more or less, depending on the point of view, are without work. Society cannot function like this in the long term: it is not socially sustainable.”

In the book **Arbeitswut** (*The Cult of Work*), which drew much attention in Germany, the prestigious economic journalists Philipp Löpfe and Werner Vontobel write that the available amount of salaried employment divided among the number of Germans of working age is

only 25 hours per week and continues to fall. Their conclusion is crystal-clear: we are never going to successfully abolish unemployment as long as we persist in retaining the 40 hour working week. They state that instead of talking about shortening working hours we should talk about the **distribution of working hours** and ask ourselves if today's society, where 40% work "normal working hours" whereas 30% have to be satisfied with more or less enforced part-time employment and the rest fluctuate in and out of unemployment, is really the optimal way to distribute the available salaried employment?

As is often the case when talking about distribution, the distribution of available salaried work also has to do with solidarity. Do we want a winner-takes-it-all society divided into included classes and excluded classes or do we want an inclusive society where everyone participates? Do we want a working life characterised by tough competition between employees over the shrinking amount of salaried employment? What sort of workplaces does this create? A more equal and more solidary distribution of paid work would most likely reduce the competitive pressure and instead promote trust and cooperation, with, in the long term, most likely large benefits for both companies and society.

Working hours and the climate

The extent to which productivity increases are exchanged for shorter working hours instead of for higher salaries does not only affect the level of unemployment but also has significant consequences for energy consumption, emissions of greenhouse gases and the ecological footprint.

The American sociologist and consumer researcher, Juliet Schor has, in a study of 18 industrial countries, shown a clear link between the number of hours worked per person of a working age and the ecological footprint of inhabitants, the more work performed the greater the burden on the environment. She stresses that the entire increase in productivity that has taken place in the American economy since 1948 has been taken out as salary increases and profit dividends – and she points out that if this productivity boom had instead been taken out in the form of shorter working hours then a 4 hour working day, or alternatively a 6 month holiday, could have been realised. Her conclusion is that the introduction of resource-efficient green technology is not enough to attain sustainable development as long as we persist in exchanging increases in productivity for increases in income.

"I argue instead that in the global North a successful path to sustainability must confront our commitment to growth and will ultimately entail a stabilization of consumption through reductions in hours of work. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine a globally ethical, timely, and politically feasible resolution to the global ecological crisis in which populations in the North do not reduce the number of hours worked per capita."

David Rosnick and Mark Weisbrot from the **Center for Economic and Political Research in Washington** promote similar ways of thinking. In the report, "**Are Shorter Work Hours Good for the Environment?**" they point out that Americans have 16% longer working hours than Western Europeans and that this is the main reason that both GDP/capita and emissions of greenhouse gases per capita are significantly higher in the USA. They believe that the USA would have been able to meet the Kyoto targets if they had reduced working hours to West

European levels. If instead the rest of the world draws close to the high level of American working hours they warn that it could bring a 1-2 degree increase in the global average temperature by the middle of the century.

A couple of other economists active in the USA, Samuel Bowles and Yongjin Park, have shown that the more inequalities there are in a country the longer the working hours tend to be. In low-tax countries with a large socio-economic spread, having money is almost completely essential in order to gain access to education and healthcare, and, in addition, status consumerism is important for people's identities; together this leads to an iron cage of work and consumerism.

The Canadian environmental economist Peter Victor has developed a noted model for low or no growth in the economy (LowGrow), where an important feature is shorter working hours:

"If more people worked fewer hours then it would be possible to achieve full employment without having to depend on growth to such a great extent."

The UN's environmental organ UNEP also highlights, in the report **Green Jobs**, the link between shorter working hours and ecological space:

"Industrial economies are extraordinarily productive—meaning that the same quantity of output can be produced with less and less human work. In principle, this can translate into either of two objectives: raising wages (in line with productivity) while holding working hours constant, or providing greater leisure time while holding income from wages constant. In practice, it has mostly been the former. Most people have been locked into a "work-and-spend" pattern.

Since the rise of mass industrialization in the late 19th century, there has been an ongoing tug-of-war between employers and unions over working hours. Employees have struggled for less work time—in the form of shortened workdays or weeks, extended vacation time, earlier retirement, or paid leave. These efforts were primarily motivated by a desire to improve the quality of life and to create more jobs. While environmental issues have not played a central role, channelling productivity gains toward more leisure time instead of higher wages that can translate into ever-rising consumption also increasingly makes sense from an ecological perspective."

The **International Trade Union Confederation** and the **International Organisation of Employers** are both co-publishers of this UN report.

In Sweden a group of researchers, from the Institute of Physical Resource Theory at Chalmers in Gothenburg, published a report that comes to the conclusion that "an increase or decrease in working hours causes an almost proportionate change in energy consumption and emissions of greenhouse gases. A 10 per cent reduction in working hours reduces, on average, energy consumption and emissions of greenhouse gases by 8 percent..."

In order for a reduction of working hours to have a positive climate and environmental effect it ought also, unless costs are covered by climbing productivity, result in a salary

drop. Low income earners ought then to be compensated by, for example, tax reductions, perhaps financed by tax increases for high income earner, and the introduction of tax on trade of shares and currency transactions. High income earners are therefore, hopefully, less inclined to work overtime and instead have more time over for a social life and societal engagements – money and gadgets are shifted to time and experiences, and the already over-sized ecological footprint will not grow even bigger.

What kind of society do we want?

The founder of social liberalism, John Stuart Mill, even back then, questioned the possibility of constant growth and writes in his principle piece, *The Principles of Political Economy* (1848):

“I know not why it should be a matter of congratulation that persons who are already richer than anyone needs to be, should have doubled their means of consuming things which give little or no pleasure except as representative of wealth. It is only in the backward countries of the world that increased production is still an important object: in those most advanced, what is economically needed is a better distribution.

Nor is there much satisfaction in contemplating the world with nothing left to the spontaneous activity of nature; with every rood of land brought into cultivation, which is capable of growing food for human beings; every flowery waste or natural pasture ploughed up, all quadrupeds or birds which are not domesticated for man's use exterminated as his rivals for food, every hedgerow or superfluous tree rooted out, and scarcely a place left where a wild shrub or flower could grow without being eradicated as a weed in the name of improved agriculture.

If the earth must lose that great portion of its pleasantness which it owes to things that the unlimited increase of wealth and population would extirpate from it, for the mere purpose of enabling it to support a larger, but not a better or a happier population, I sincerely hope, for the sake of posterity, that they will be content to be stationary, long before necessity compels them to it.

It is scarcely necessary to remark that a stationary condition of capital and population implies no stationary state of human improvement. There would be as much scope as ever for all kinds of mental culture, and moral and social progress; as much room for improving the Art of Living, and much more likelihood of its being improved, when minds ceased to be engrossed by the art of getting on. Even the industrial arts might be as earnestly and as successfully cultivated, with this sole difference, that instead of serving no purpose but the increase of wealth, industrial improvements would produce their legitimate effect, that of abridging labour.”

Democracy and Working Hours

We are moving towards a time of harder conflicts for dwindling natural resources. Developing countries are knocking on the door of our welfare. Therefore we cannot constantly chase after even more material consumption, if countries in the South were to fire upon such a moving target the climate and the environment would be sunk. Equality, peace and environment call out for less consumption of resources in rich countries. Shorter

working hours give us a solution, which, in addition, increases our welfare. The relative value of even more income increases added to an already high income is marginal. The time gains are, on the other hand, absolute. Research into happiness shows that if a greater proportion of the earth's resources went to the poor it would lead to greater economic efficiency, if you exchange the development index from the unsustainable GDP per capita to the amount of happiness per utilised natural resource.

More spare time also increases the potential for political engagement and social participation. Studies show a great variation in how you use the time that is freed up when working hours are shortened; part of it goes to more voluntary or political work and helping others in everyday life.

It is hardly a coincidence that it has often been women's organisations in different parties that have pushed for shorter working hours, which is viewed as a central equality issue. In the female dominated union "Kommunal" the grassroots at the congresses have been those pushing for shorter working hours while the leadership has been stalling.

It is doubtful whether the current economic system is going to be able to deliver happiness and welfare in a sustainable way. Our current policies manage, rather than change, our society. However, without fundamental changes, this management runs the risk of becoming more difficult and, in the end, impossible. It is time to update the old green slogan "Share jobs!" to "Share jobs – heal the climate!" Shorter working hours are a prompt and effective measure for both an overheated economy and an overheated climate.

Carl Schlyter realised after working with people on a rubbish dump in Brazil that a better environment goes hand in hand with better social conditions. That was his way into the green movement.

Carl is now an MEP for the Swedish Green Party. In the EU Parliament he is vice chairman in the environmental committee and replacement in the committee for international trade, which gives him the opportunity to tie together different aspects of the work for sustainable development.

The greatest political challenges of the future lie at a global level. Environmental problems, war and famine are things we must solve together. However in order to solve these problems we need insight into how they are linked. It is not enough just to create powerful unions between rich countries. Therefore we are working together with countries that are seeing the consequences of the problems and where there is the greatest will for change.

The rich countries of the world have a huge responsibility for breaking the spiral of poverty, not least by giving the poor countries fair conditions of trade and by stopping exploiting their commodities and labour with unsolidary methods and agreements. For us, The Green Party, taking that responsibility goes without saying, and you can help.

Sources

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The Greens-European Free Alliance

The Swedish Green Party

Yes, I would like to

Have more information about the Swedish Green Party

Become a member of the Swedish Green Party

Become a member of the Green Youth (I am under 26)

Become a member of the Green Students

Name

Address