From the unions

Winning back our time

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The four-day week, its proponents argue, holds the potential to answer many of society's current challenges, such as the automation of labour, health and wellbeing, and environmental sustainability. Working time is historically core trade union territory. So how are unions engaging with the concept of the four-day week and all of the practical questions it throws up? It's not always a straightforward issue for the labour movement, but it is one up for discussion.

The four-day week is having a moment. From business journals asking if it's good or bad for productivity, to high-profile magazine features questioning if it really makes employees happier, to even the World Economic Forum analysing the apparent benefits emerging from the latest experiments, the question is being asked increasingly frequently: could the four-day working week become the new norm?

The current, and by now widely accepted, norm of a five-day week has reigned supreme for a long time now. Following some significant gains in working time reduction in the 19th and 20th centuries, in big part due to worker and union activism against brutal industrial-era working regimes, most commentators identify a stagnation in working hours setting in in advanced economies from the 1980s on. But the push for a shorter working week is finally once again regaining momentum, with a slew of pilot schemes rolled out in recent years to trial it in selected companies.

The main thrust of the major campaigns for a four-day week is that employees should retain the same pay and companies can retain the same level of productivity (the so-called 100:80:100 model, reflecting the proposed pay/time/productivity dynamic). A number of pilot programmes have been rightfully gaining attention in countries such as the UK, Portugal and Germany (as well as outside of Europe) due to their generally positive results of improved employee wellbeing.

However, if a rollout on a mass scale is to happen as advocates wish for, it will require the involvement of organised labour. To ensure that such a transition is made in a way that benefits workers, workers need to be engaged in the process. These questions become particularly pertinent when we see that the 'four-day week' term has occasionally been co-opted to describe arrangements that either result in a loss of pay (for example in part-time work, which is often negotiated at the induvial level) or that do not constitute an actual reduction in working hours. In Belgium, for instance, legislation was introduced in 2022 allowing full-time employees the option of compressing their hours into four days rather than five. Something similar has been touted by the UK's recently elected Labour government.

Well, organised labour is paying attention. At its 2023 Congress, the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) committed to '[F]acilitate and support union and other campaigns for reduced working time and other means of sharing the benefits of new technologies fairly', as stated in its 2023-2027 Action Programme. The ETUC along with several of the European Trade Union Federations (ETUFs, sectoral representation bodies affiliated to the ETUC) have since launched calls for expert studies on the topic of working time reduction, with a particular focus on the role of trade unions and collective bargaining. As Deputy General Secretary Isabelle Schömann states, 'We want to be equipped.'

Beyond the slogan

What some of the mapping on working time reduction initiatives in the world of labour has revealed is that, for many trade unionists, the matter is a little more complex than a 'four-day week' campaign goal may be able to capture. A broader conception of 'working time reduction' is in fact key to understanding how unions campaign and negotiate on the issue. If we look beyond the four-day week pilot schemes, we can see that, whether in the form of reduced hours or more annual holidays, cuts in working time are constantly being negotiated by unions for workers across Europe. According to a recent study by Torsten Müller, senior researcher at the European Trade Union Institute, 'A comparison of statutory maximum working hours and collectively agreed working hours illustrates that collective agreements lead to considerably fewer weekly working hours.'[1]

Stan De Spiegelaere, Director of Policy and Research at UNI Europa, believes that the significance of these cases is sometimes missed as they are not always the stories that receive a media spotlight, perhaps because of the arguably stronger narrative power of a story about a pioneering company, in which 'there's a hero (usually an employer), not a compromise,' as he explains. 'In fact, collectively bargained working time reductions are everywhere. These guarantee that solutions reflect the needs of the workers, but they never make headlines.'

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'Working time reduction is about much more than the four-day week,' says Isabelle Barthès, Deputy General Secretary of industriAll Europe, the ETUF representing industry workers. 'It's a catchy slogan, and it's important to have slogans because people can visualise it. Everyone can relate to the possibility of a three-day weekend. But the reality in industry is slightly different, and you need to look at it sector by sector.'

This is confirmed to some extent by Müller's study, which features a survey of the collective bargaining experts of industriAll's affiliates. While a general reduction of working time (without loss of pay) was a priority for these experts, it was not necessarily important that it be framed as a demand for a four-day week. This reflects both a diversity of preferences amongst their members concerning how they organise their working time, and also a geographical diversity across Europe. The study found that four-day week initiatives in the manufacturing sector were limited to western Europe; in many central and eastern European countries, on the other hand, working hours are much longer, and so the starting point is further back for unions.

Nevertheless, industry has in fact been a part of the economy which has seen real union wins in working time reduction, and even the four-day week. Car manufacturer Lamborghini, for example, signed a collective agreement in 2023 offering a rotation of five and four-day weeks to its workers, without loss of pay. Industrial workers are particularly vulnerable to the impacts of the so-called green and digital transitions, and working time reduction may offer some solutions by way of work distribution. With a prevalence of shift work and long hours, industrial workers could also gain in terms of their wellbeing. 'Affiliates want greater work-life balance for their members,' explains industriAll's Barthès. 'We have workers who are not even able to see their kids because of their working time and patterns.'

The German trade union IG Metall has a particularly strong track record on winning cuts in working time, going back to the 1950s. And last year, Europe's largest industrial union went into the bargaining round for the steel industry with demands for 'a reduction in working hours from 35 to 32 hours per week with full pay compensation'. According to Sophie Jänicke, who works on collective bargaining policy at IG Metall, one of the results of the negotiations was 'an agreement called "safeguarding employment in transformation". It focuses on working time reduction as a tool to safeguard employment, with the possibility to reduce working time on company level if both parties agree that they are in a transformation process. They can reduce up to 32 hours a week with partly wage compensation.'

Jänicke cites the primary motivations for IG Metall's prioritisation of the topic as, amongst others: improved work-life balance; more gender-balanced division of work; tackling the shortage of skilled workers; and a response to the digital and climate-induced transformations. However, she specifies some caveats: 'The demand of workers to go for more money is visible in all sectors. After times of high inflation and prices still on a very high level this is more than understandable.'

1. Müller T. (2023) Friday on my mind - Working time in the manufacturing sector, Working Paper 2023.08, industriAll, ETUI, p. 5.

2. Piasna A., Cetrulo A. and Moro A. (2024) Negotiating working time reduction, Working Paper 2024.12, ETUI.

'Not a standalone issue'

Pay is of course intrinsically linked to working time, particularly for those on an hourly minimum wage, on which it is only possible to make anything close to a dignified living by working 'full time'. While some ideas for working time reduction involve a gradual 'trading' of money for time on the part of employees, this is obviously more possible for higher earners. With workers seeing their purchasing power battered by a cost-of-living crisis in recent years, there is a need to ensure that the fight for better wages is not damaged. 'Working time reduction, yes, but only without reduction of salaries,' insists industriAll Europe's Isabelle Barthès. 'The main concern for most people is purchasing power.' ETUC Deputy General Secretary Isabelle Schömann makes a similar point: 'For many workers, even with a full-time job, it is difficult to earn a living. It's not an easy discussion in the union movement.'

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And it's not just the question of pay. Long hours are still a reality for many across the continent. As Schömann points out, 'Some workers are not even at a five-day week.' Working time arrangements in the EU are currently regulated within the framework of the Working Time Directive, which limits weekly working hours to a maximum of 48 hours, including overtime. The standard full-time working week across most of Europe is lower, at 40 hours, but of course, actual working hours can vary greatly between Member States. Eurostat figures indicate that while Greek workers worked on average 39.8 hours a week in 2023, those in the Netherlands averaged at 32.2 hours (a figure which includes part-time work). In the EU as a whole, 37.1 % of employed people worked on average between 40 and 44.5 hours per week.

The ETUC is not in favour of a revision of the Working Time Directive, its concern being more with the effective enforcement of the Directive and ending the allowance of individual opt-outs. According to Schömann, alarm bells sounded for the ETUC when it noticed that the European Commission were more detailed than usual in a recent, standard evaluation of the Directive. We can look to a country like Greece, where the government recently allowed for the introduction of a six-day week in some industries, to see the kind of policy that unions are fearing. As Isabelles Barthès points out, 'We shouldn't forget that there is a push to increase working time.'

On top of these concerns, many in the labour sphere are sensitive to the way in which working time reduction is carried out. 'I see many potential risks in a situation where the business case for reducing working hours is overemphasised, rather than being a policy to improve working conditions for workers,' says Agnieszka Piasna, senior researcher at the European Trade Union Institute and author of a recent study on negotiations around working time, in which she emphasises the importance of centralising job quality.[2] 'This is the example of the premise of maintaining 100% productivity with reduced working hours. The simplest way to reduce working time while maintaining productivity is to speed up the performance of tasks so that the same amount of work can be done in less time. Another easy way is to reduce breaks or time for socialising. All of which leads to more intense and rushed work.'

'There is a risk of apparently gaining on working time reduction while losing out on other things,' emphasises Schömann. 'The Belgian case is an example of this, where the unions were very unhappy with the government's 'four-day week' that actually just offers the opportunity of doing the same weekly hours but pushed into four days. It's been a flop.' The essential point for the ETUC is that the interaction of working time with so many other core trade union concerns means that it 'cannot be looked at as a standalone issue'.

For her part, Piasna thinks that the four-day week remains a goal to hang on to. Despite her concerns about the methods of implementation, she believes that what makes the four-day week 'a more powerful route than others' is that it 'has the potential to establish a new norm regarding the duration of the working week and to have a more profound transformative impact on time in society'.

Mixing methods

India Burgess, General Secretary and Coordinator of the European Work-Time Network, a coalition of trade unions, academics and campaigners who promote working time reduction, agrees that the complicated terrain of working time requires attention and deliberation. 'We definitely also take a more holistic approach to weekly reduction in working hours. Even if there's a 20% reduction in working time, it doesn't always follow the four-day week pattern. There's so much diversity, and you're always starting from a different place.'

In many ways, the four-day week campaign bears much resemblance to the push for an eight-hour day in the 1800s – and this also didn't happen overnight. Right now, there are examples on the ground of successful working time reduction led by many different actors, taking different approaches, which can be mutually studied for lessons of how to move forward in a way that helps rather than harms the cause of labour. Such interaction can also create a

↑ **Car manufacturer Lamborghini signed a collective agreement in 2023 offering a rotation of five and four-day weeks to its workers.**
Photo: © Belga

virtuous loop. 'An increasing number of organisations are approaching us after a working time reduction obligation has been included in their collective agreement,' says Burgess, who is also Head of Advocacy at Autonomy, a think tank behind the UK's 4 Day Week campaign group. 'This has been the case recently with a couple of big charities in the UK, for example.'

While four-day week campaigns are generally focused on pilot programmes, and trade unions take more of a bargaining approach focusing on working time reduction more generally, the methods are not necessarily mutually exclusive. A successful example of working time reduction in recent years can be found in Iceland, a country with particularly high working hours. In this case, two pilot projects testing shortened hours were agreed upon between the BSRB, Iceland's largest public sector union federation, and the state and the city of Reykjavik, respectively. They were implemented between 2016 and 2019. In Reykjavík in particular, the project expanded from just a few workplaces to cover a quarter of the council's total employees by the end of the scheme. 'I think the pilots really helped us,' says Dagný Aradóttir Pind, a lawyer at the BSRB. 'It's a smaller step, to get employers to agree to do a pilot. The implementation can be tricky. It's a marathon – building experience, trying things out… There's no one size-fits-all.'

It was a long and complicated process, and particular care had to be taken over the complexity of arrangements for shift workers. But it ultimately culminated in major collective agreements signed in 2019 and then in 2020 for the private and public sectors respectively. A 2021 assessment found that 160 out of 174 workplaces in the capital had cut the working week to 36 hours, without a loss in pay.[3] This is not quite the ideal four-day week of 32 hours, but it gets closer to it. Crucially, Aradóttir Pind thinks that it could lay the ground for this next step, which the BSRB is now looking into. And looking more broadly, Icelandic unions' push for shorter hours has had a clear impact on wider society, with national statistics showing a clear drop in overall working hours in the past few years.

As IG Metall's Sophie Jänicke points out, 'Rome was not built in a day. Every step that reduces working time is a step in the right direction.' ●

3. For more information on this case and others in the public sector across Europe, see 'Reducing working time: case studies from across Europe', EPSU, https://www.epsu.org/article/reducing-working-time-case-studies-across-europe