

“Become a man instead of a mere machine”: The ILO and trends in working hours

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In 1930, John Maynard Keynes imagined a world in which, a hundred years later, work would be to a large extent replaced by leisure. He speculated about a three-hour shift and a 15-hour working week by 2030. In so doing, he was reflecting the general expectation of economists during that period that rising incomes would be converted into both higher levels of consumption and shorter hours of work.

But working time has proven to be much less sensitive to income than is commonly believed, particularly in more developed countries. Despite a long-term trend towards a reduction of average working hours over the last 80 years in most countries of the world, and even though we still have another 20 years to go till 2030, Keynes' vision is clearly out of reach. What's more, recent ILO research shows that 22 per cent of the world's workers were working more than 48 hours per week at the turn of the 21st century, more than 80 years after the adoption of the ILO's first labour standard – the Hours of Work (Industry) Convention, 1919 (No. 1) – which sets this as a maximum working week for industrial workers.

It was not an accident that the ILO's first Convention set a 48-hour limit on weekly hours of work in industry. Limits on working time had been one of the principal demands of the international trade union movement for many years, and was widely regarded as legitimate and a suitable subject for international legislation, not only to discourage competition among countries and enterprises, but also as a concession to workers' demands which could help contain the influence of the Bolshevik Revolution.

Addressing the International Labour Conference in 1921, when the Weekly Rest (Industry) Convention (No. 14) was adopted, the French government delegate Arthur Fontaine put it this way: “It is essential that the worker should be able to recruit his strength after his week's work, and should have time to fulfil his duties as father and as a citizen and have some intellectual distraction, so as to become a man instead of a mere machine”. If one substitutes the word “parent” for father”, this far-sighted quotation continues to have resonance today.

Hours of work remained on the ILO agenda throughout the 1920s and 1930s and the Organization was the principal forum for international debate on the issue, although the impact of its work was largely indirect. In practice, national legislation has been progressively converging towards the aspirations of the ILO's Forty-Hour Week Convention, 1935 (No.47), as envisioned by the Reduction of Hours of Work Recommendation, 1962 (No. 116). The evidence from a 2005 data collection confirms that the 40-hour limit is now the dominant standard across the world, in the sense that it is the standard to which the largest number of countries adheres.

But working time cannot be analysed in isolation from the wider economic and social setting of work. Around the world, many people are actually working shorter hours than they would wish: ILO research shows that many part-time working women are typically in this situation, and such time-related underemployment has become even more widespread during the economic crisis. However, the greatest challenge 90 years later still lies in the persistence of long or inadequate working hours, despite the existence of extensive national regulation of working time. For example, more than a third of workers in many developing countries are working excessive hours – more than 48 hours per week.

For further information see the ILO-TRAVAIL Database of Conditions of Work and Employment Laws at <http://www.ilo.org/dyn/travail/travmain.home>