

Panel 8: ‘Working time reduction as a trade union strategy for a changing world of work’

After kicking off with a presentation from Aidan Harper of the UK-based New Economics Foundation, trade unionists from four different European countries each spoke about the initiatives their unions had been involved in for promoting a reduction in working time.

Presenting the case for working time reduction (WTR), Harper listed four areas which WTR can bring benefits to: the economy; gender equality; society, health and wellbeing; and the environment. Harper argued that there is no clear correlation between working longer hours and greater productivity. On the contrary, shorter hours lead to fewer sick absences and in-work accidents as well as greater motivation for workers. The uneven distribution of unpaid care work between genders and the fact that women are more likely to work part-time also favours a more just distribution of working time. Finally, it has been found that longer working time correlates with higher energy consumption and a bigger carbon footprint. Harper stressed that in the context of increasing automation, presenting both a threat and a promise for workers’ jobs, WTR is, firstly, above all a political question and, secondly, entirely feasible with the current levels of technology.

Lucie Studničná from the Czech-Moravian Confederation of Trade Unions began the trade union presentations by pointing out how far behind Czech workers are compared to their western European counterparts when it comes to WTR; for example, in five years a Czech worker will work one entire year more than a German worker. Studničná’s confederation has been pushing for quite a ‘typical’ reduction of 30 minutes off each working day.

Speaking on behalf of the Austrian union GPA-djp, Christina Hoefler outlined the details of the ‘leisure option’ that this union had negotiated. This option means that additional leisure time can be chosen by the worker as extra compensation instead of a salary increase. Hoefler admitted that the option had only been negotiated for the electronics, paper, mining and metal industries – all well-paid sectors – but that at least it was a ‘foot in the door’.

Sophie Jänicke from IG Metall dispelled some myths that the German union had negotiated a collective reduction of working time. What they had done, rather, is achieve individual rights for employees to reduce their week to 28 hours without having to give a reason (and also without wage compensation). After two years, the worker can revert to full-time if s/he wishes, which addresses the ‘part-time trap’ of women never returning to full-time work after having children. The individual focus in this ‘short full-time work’ initiative was strategic – and even this took a tough industrial struggle to achieve – but a collective WTR policy remains the long-term aim. In Jänicke’s words: ‘time is worth more than money’.

Jacqie van Stigt from the Dutch union FNV rounded things off by presenting the ‘generation pact’ in the Netherlands that allows workers in the metal sector aged over 62 to choose between different combinations of reductions in time and wages (while keeping 100% of their pension). The moderator, Stan de Spiegelaere, noted that such arrangements are often achieved in very unionised sectors, which shows the importance of unions in advancing WTR.

In the discussion that followed, there was some debate over whether less work can actually lead to poorer health, with panellists and participants responding to this claim by stressing the difference between the state of unemployment, a social construction, and having more free time. On the possibility of fighting for more radical solutions, de Spiegelaere argued that the first important step was to reclaim the discourse around working time. Jänicke pointed out that working time has never suddenly decreased; it has always been a broader historical process. Closing the final contributions, she argued that the more natural allies for unions in this debate are to be found in social movements and even churches rather than political parties and governments.