

## **The New Time Movement: The Human Right to a 40-Hour Workweek**

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How would you like to work an extra month this year? In her book *The Overworked American: The Unexpected Decline of Leisure*, Harvard economist Juliet Schor estimates that Americans worked an average of 163 hours more per year in 1987 than they did in 1969. That adds up to approximately an extra month of work a year. During the same period, those of us experiencing unemployment or underemployment rose from 7.2% in 1969 to 16.8% in 1987.

These trends are brutally reflected in the experiences of our members. Garment workers commonly toil up to 100 hours a week, often 14 to 17 hours a day, 6 days a week or with no weekend at all. These women work so hard, repeating the same motions again and again, that eventually they become paralyzed, unable to work. Some complain of bladder infections brought on because they are not allowed to use the toilet during working hours. Mothers, unable to spend time at home, bring children to the factory where bosses demand that the kids also work.

Restaurant workers also toil up to 70 or even 100 hours a week, often with no weekend. They have no right to sick leave. If they cannot come to work, they must find and pay someone to take their place, losing two days wages. In some restaurants workers actually have to pay money to get hired.

In terms of work opportunities and hours, Chinese-immigrant construction workers face underemployment. Excluded from construction because of racism, these workers have to demonstrate, picket, and organize for months just to get a few jobs. They also have to fight for a decent number of hours when firms try to give them only 20 or 30 hours of work a week. At other times they are overworked, often putting in six days a week. Grueling schedules often lead to injuries on the job.

However the work-time problem is not confined to any one community. Just blocks south and west of Chinatown, in the Wall Street area, white collar workers are putting in 100-hour workweeks. Some keep cots and fresh suits in their office closets for when they have to stay over night to meet deadlines. And north of Chinatown, on the Lower East Side, the Puerto Rican community is ravaged by unemployment and the effects of so-called welfare reform and workfare.

All over, young people, even those with college degrees find themselves freelancing, temping, or working short-term jobs while dreaming of something better. Fearing downsizing, many with stable jobs accept longer, more intense hours of overwork. By expanding work hours, firms find that they can hire fewer people. Why hire two full-timers to work 40 hours each, when you can pressure one person to put in 80 hours?

How many of us begrudgingly accept longer hours when faced with the possibility of unemployment? On the other hand many of us can barely find enough work to pay the bills. How does this affect us on our non-working hours?

Since last October, when we launched our National Mobilization Against Sweatshops (NMASS) to fight for the human right to a 40-hour workweek, the extent of the work-time problem has become more evident. In 1996 and 1997, *New York Times Magazine*, *The Nation*, and *US News and World Report* all ran cover stories about the time crunch. The time issue was also central in the recent UPS-Teamsters contract fight,

when full-timers complained of overwork and part-timers demanded full-time positions. As public support for the UPS workers showed, these issues resonate strongly with people of all backgrounds across the country.

On the political front, Democrats and Republicans have been debating the time-work issue. Legislation has been introduced into Congress that would amend overtime laws, so that workers would receive overtime pay for hours worked beyond 80 hours in a two-week framework, rather than the current standard of 40 hours a week. In addition, workers could receive compensatory time off instead of overtime pay. Conservatives have hailed this legislation as pro-family, allowing parents to spend more time in the home. Liberal or pro-union opponents of the proposed changes argue that workers need to receive overtime pay for longer hours of work in order to survive. Both sides are evading the real question.

For most of us, neither the union movement nor the politicians can offer a solution to the time-work problem. What is needed is nothing less than a new labor movement to fight to reclaim control over our time. Through NMASS, we are offering a political and human rights framework for the work-time issue, connecting the sweatshop problem to the work-time problems we are all facing. NMASS is a project of people of all backgrounds and communities.

Everyone deserves the opportunity to provide a living for him or herself. Everyone should have the right to say no to being overworked like an animal or machine, without fear of getting fired. People should be able to make choices about their time, while still being able to make a living. That is why we are bringing people together to call for a 40-hour workweek as a human right – for those who are underemployed or unemployed, as well as for those who are overworked.

The work-time issue calls for a new kind of identity politics that recognizes and combats racism, sexism, and heterosexism, while organizing around what we hold in common as working people. We need a new politics, a new culture, a new sense of community. Whether we are union or non-union workers, unpaid parent who work in the home, the unemployed, students, retired persons, temps – all of us have an interest in reclaiming control over our time, our communities, and our lives.

Join us.