

WHEN TIME ISN'T MONEY

THE CASE FOR WORKING TIME REDUCTION

AN INTERVIEW WITH
ANNA COOTE
BY **AURÉLIE MARÉCHAL**

In the world as we know it, work is the boss of time. The lives of all, from the overworked to the unemployed, are dictated by work, or lack thereof. Though some may protest, reducing working hours will be an integral part of shifting to a fairer, healthier, and more sustainable society. Analyst and working-time expert Anna Coote explains why the time for change is ripe.

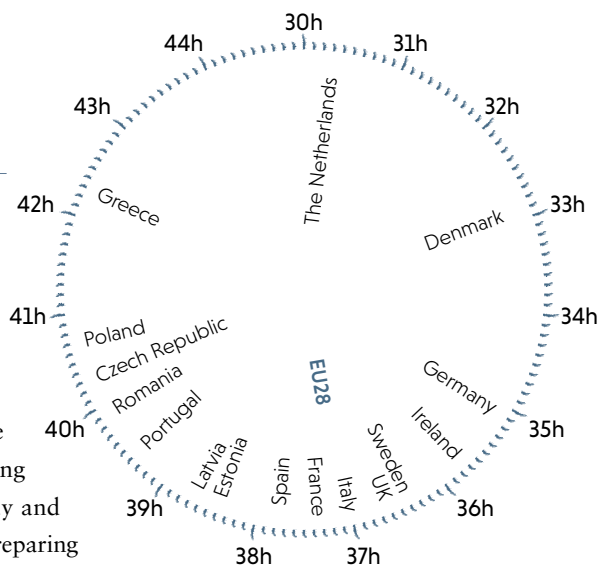
AURÉLIE MARÉCHAL: You advocate, like many others, for a reduction of working time, whether through a 30-hour week, longer holidays or other working-time arrangements. Could you summarise the main reasons for this proposal?

ANNA COOTE: Three main categories of reasons for a shorter working week are the distribution of paid work, the redistribution of unpaid work, and more time to live sustainably. We anticipate there being less paid work in the future, partly because of automation and partly because of the need to change the way the economy works so that it is not simply driven by growth. Exponential growth is not compatible with meeting carbon reduction targets and is not good for the planet, both because of emissions and because of material surplus. It is in the interest of social justice to distribute the work that is available more evenly across the population.

The second reason is the redistribution of unpaid work, such as childcare and domestic responsibilities. At the moment, there are huge inequalities in the amount of disposable time that people have, particularly between men and women. Women have very little disposable time, often due to caring responsibilities for children or elderly relatives. It's important to release men from the imperative to work long hours so that they can share the unpaid work with women more equally.

Average number of working hours per week in 2016

SOURCE: Eurostat [lfsa_ewhun2] – all jobs, sexes, professional statuses, full-time/part-time and economic activities



The third reason is because if people have more disposable time, they may be able to live more sustainably. Sometimes doing things that are sustainable takes more time: repairing things instead of throwing them away and buying new ones, and growing and preparing food rather than buying heavily processed ready meals. In addition, in many cases we buy energy-intensive things because we are busy, due to our lack of time: airline tickets, convenience foods, travelling by car instead of walking or taking the train, and a lot of domestic gadgetry.

Sustainability is a relatively uncommon argument in favour of the reduction of working time, but it might not be sufficient. In a hyper-consumerist society, would freeing up more time not just reinforce unsustainable patterns of consumption?

ANNA COOTE: The reduction of working time is no silver bullet. It is one policy that is needed alongside other policies, not least improving the living wage. There is some quite interesting work – although it certainly does not give us any definitive answers – on whether freeing up more time will just reinforce unsustainable patterns of consumption, which looks at leisure activities. Hobbies can either be cruel or kind to the environment, depending on the way we go about them. There's a kind of gradient of possibilities for the way we use our time.

For example, growing vegetables can be done in a very energy-neutral way, or you can use polytunnels, artificial lighting, and so on. So, it does depend on how everything is done. Juliet Schor has done an analysis of OECD countries that looks at their average paid working hours and their carbon emissions, and there is a correlation between shorter working hours and lower carbon emissions.

More generally in terms of sustainable development, my research on reduced working time started out based on the anticipation that the economy is not going to keep on growing. A lot of work has been done by Peter Victor, Tim Jackson, and other economists on this. An economy driven by the growth imperative is unsustainable. We cannot decouple growth from carbon emissions. Therefore, if you are going to have an economy that isn't growing, what we might call prosperity without growth, you've got to think about what it will do to the job market. A lot of people would say, and they'd be right, that if we don't change, there's going to be a lot of unemployment, a lot of unhappiness, and people would resist that kind of move.

Hervé Kempf in France has written on how the rich are destroying the planet – the more money and less time you have, the bigger your impact on the environment. How can we – structurally and through policy – address this link between sustainability, time, and individual purchasing power?

ANNA COOTE: First, we need government policy to improve the quality and quantity of public services, including public transport. We should also look at a maximum income, as a complement to a minimum income. Minimum income is quite well established now, the idea that nobody should fall below a certain level, the poverty line, and then you've got the living wage line. So could we identify – through dialogue – what is the maximum that people should have? This is a political challenge, an economic challenge, and a statistical challenge.

Wealthy people usually do have a higher environmental impact when they have several homes, lots of cars, and they fly a lot. But there does come the point at which people's income is still increasing but their damage to the planet does not continue to grow at the same pace; they can buy expensive things like paintings, which you can do with a lot of money, but it doesn't do much damage to the environment. We need to look in detail at the idea of a 'riches line', with a view to curbing the consumption patterns of those on higher incomes.

Some Green parties and trade unions are calling for a reduction of working time without loss of pay, or at least not for those with a low income. Is that realistic? What would be your policy recommendations to ensure that working-time reduction doesn't reinforce income inequality?

ANNA COOTE: You need to put any advocacy for reduced working hours with advocacy against low wages and practical steps to establish decent hourly rates of pay. For example, you need to ensure a guaranteed minimum income and to strengthen the bargaining power of trade unions so that they can make sure that hourly rates of pay are more compatible with reduced working hours. Then you have more innovative suggestions, like time-care credits, so if you are caring for a child or an elderly relative, you get a credit that can be paid towards your pension or redeemed in some other way. And then, most important of all in my view, is the social wage: the benefit of public services such as healthcare, education, social care, and public transport – all the things which enable us to meet our needs, which are partly or fully provided collectively through the state. The social wage has been estimated to have a massive redistributive effect because it amounts to a far higher proportion of the income of those who are poor than those who are better off. In a nutshell, reduced working hours must go hand in hand with a strong social wage, better power for trade unions, and decent hourly rates of pay.

Another reality across all sectors and positions in the labour market today is 'burn out': overworked employees pushed towards 60-hour weeks, unachievable deadlines, and constant online availability. Resistance to working-time reduction often comes from top executives who cannot imagine doing their job in fewer hours, thereby confusing leadership with control and power centralisation. How do we tackle this mindset in society and convey that it's also about sharing power?

ANNA COOTE: There is a quite large and growing group of top female executives in the UK, possibly in other countries too, who are campaigning for things like job sharing and reduced hours because they have often brought up children as well and it's been a struggle. Some of these senior female executives might be a good resource. A lot of senior male executives never see their children and are effectively cut off from their own family lives. Women are probably the key to the change.

Also worth considering are the chairmen and women who sit on the boards of big companies and work two or three days a week. We overlook how they almost prefigure the way we would like senior executives to work. They do important work, they work very little, yet they are paid very handsomely and are often extremely influential. So these are at least two routes for achieving that cultural change.

One of the most recent European experiences of working-time reduction has been the French 35-hour week introduced in 1998. While often criticised, detailed studies point to positive impacts as well. What lessons can be learnt from the French experience and what are the key aspects that should serve as guidelines for other initiatives in Europe, including in terms of implementation and political bargaining?

ANNA COOTE: The first of the two laws that introduced a shorter working week in France, the Aubry Laws, was mainly popular with the workforce, particularly with parents of young children. And many people were satisfied with it. Then there was a second law in response to a big lobby from employers who didn't want the 35-hour week. The second law shifted the balance of power from the workers to the employers by giving the employers more control over when the workers use their time. All in all, France still has much lower working hours on average than the UK does, for example. So it was a good innovation and we learned a lot from it about the importance of flexibility and arranging working hours to suit the needs of workers.

We have also learned about the dangers of governments introducing change too suddenly, making it too vulnerable to political opposition. If you have a much more gradual transition, say over 10 years, to shorter working hours, then you can change the climate of opinion as you go and build political support.

You mentioned the distribution of unpaid work as one of the reasons for the reduction of working time. Would this reduction help some of the long-lasting feminist struggles, such as narrowing the gender pay gap or achieving a more equal division of labour? What might the potential challenges or counter-productive effects be?

ANNA COOTE: The reduction of working hours could unlock the intractable problem of gender inequality. I would not like to suggest that this is the single solution, but I do think it would help to tackle the root of the problem. But this would only work if men as well as women take reduced hours and share more of the burden at home. The worst thing that could happen is that we get shorter working hours and it's mainly women who take them up, because that would just entrench this pattern of women doing the unpaid labour and men doing the paid labour. So there needs to be a lot more sharing of unpaid labour as well as reduction in paid working time for men and women. When you envisage a man and a woman living together with one or two children and they are both working 40 hours a week, for example, and they take a cut to 30 hours a week, you've got 20 additional hours that can be used for childcare. I am not in favour of exclusively domestically-based childcare, but I do think it could help to make childcare more affordable in countries like the UK where it's very expensive.

Whenever we talk about the reduction of working time, and this goes back now about seven or eight years, it is hugely popular with the media. When I go for an interview or I talk to somebody, it's nearly always women who are so keen on the idea because they are trying to juggle parenting and their career and so on, so there is a lot enthusiasm for it.



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