

Working Women's Centre

Melbourne 3000

Telephone

Discussion Paper No. 8

June 1976

ALTERNATIVE WORKING HOURS

Onethird of all married women work. Most of them work because they need money. Many more would work outside their homes if adequate childcare facilities were provided and if working hours were arranged to meet family responsibilities. Women with children at home face limited work alternatives and serious inequalities.

Working hours should reflect the different lifestyles and needs of the community and should permit all people who wish to be gainfully employed to contribute their skills.

EFFECTS OF UNSUITABLE WORK HOURS

The present system does not make allowances for the special needs of parents. It presumes that workers are all equally capable of fitting into the existing 40-hour 5-day week timetable. The real situation is that a great percentage of people can only do so at great cost and with great effort. The consequences of attempting to fulfil work obligations, raise a family, run a household and participate in union activities are very often marital and family problems, mental stress, physical fatigue, industrial accidents etc. This results in general dissatisfaction and poor job attendance.

The following propositions are suitable for all workers. However, because women are traditionally thought of as the "homemakers", they bear the full brunt of the household and family chores. They are therefore in more urgent need of flexible work arrangements.

PART-TIME WORK

Although married women form the largest proportion of the part-time labour force, this type of employment is also sought by other groups of people - the aged, the handicapped, students etc. Any consideration of part-time employment should not therefore be restricted solely to married women but should include all persons who, for special reasons, may wish to work part time.

Union Attitudes

Traditionally unions have not looked favourably on part-time employment. The factors inhibiting the expansion of part-time work (i.e. the negative attitudes of trade unions and employers) are determined by the inadequacies of the existing system.

Major Objections and Ways of Overcoming These

1. Part-time work has been regarded as competitive with fulltime employment. It has been believed that increased part-time employment could lead to a reduction in the number of fulltime openings and so deny fulltime employment opportunities to union members, particularly during periods of under-employment.

The above argument does not acknowledge the fact that part-timers are also potential union members. Similarly it refuses to admit that employers will always favour and need fulltime workers - for continuity if nothing else.

What is closer to the truth is that ALL workers can benefit from the extensive introduction of part-time work. In the same plant full-timers desiring to work only part time could be given preference for any part-time positions and part-timers who subsequently wish to work fulltime could move on to fulltime. In such situations trades would retain the skills and training of workers wanting to retire from fulltime work and incentive and security would be provided for a fulltime or part-time worker wanting to change his/her work pattern.

The fear that hordes of fulltime staff would switch to part-time, thus diminishing the ranks of skilled labour, is unfounded. It has been shown that people go from a no-employment situation to part-time and thence to fulltime work unless there are strong reasons for doing otherwise, e.g. health, old age, family responsibilities. Those who are unable to work fulltime should not be thrown on to the scrap heap.

2. Some women's sections of the trade union movement have put forward the view that wide acceptance of part-time employment might result in an even further lowering of the general status of women's work as it would reduce the likelihood of promotion. However this view is based on the assumption that employers do - or should - use part-timers only in lower-level work and reserve positions of responsibility for fulltime staff.

Part-time work does not have to be low-status, badly paid and with no prospect of advancement. Any job where the work is constant, such as process worker, moulder, librarian, teacher, researcher - whether skilled or not - can be done on a part-time basis. Unions should make it their business to see that fair wages and opportunities are accorded all their members, including those who, for various reasons, can only work part-time.

Part-time work enables women with children to keep up their skills until such time as they are able to re-enter the fulltime labour force. Older women and men achieve a great deal of mental, financial and emotional support from part-time work. Many men, forced to retire early because health prevents them from continuing in a fulltime position, suffer grave emotional disturbances. Doctors ascribe this to a feeling of no longer being useful. In view of the fact that the percentage of older people in the population has risen steadily it is socially desirable that those capable of productive work should be encouraged.

3. Some unions fear that an increased part-time labour force would result in weakened union membership, less worker involvement in union affairs and a less enthusiastic struggle for wage improvement. However it should be obvious that part-time workers have the same needs and problems as fulltime workers. Since they receive a pro-rata share of all the benefits which fulltimers enjoy, it is in their own interests to support activity for better conditions and pay. It is up to unions to concern themselves with part-time workers as well as fulltime workers so that all workers will see advantage to themselves in joining their union.

4. Unions also seem to fear friction between part-time and fulltime workers. They suggest that fulltimers may be dissatisfied and resentful to see part-timers gain the benefits of employment without the responsibilities.

The introduction of tandem jobs should do much to diminish this resentment. By this arrangement two workers share the responsibility for one particular job. The working day (or week) is divided into two and, depending on the arrangements, one person works in the mornings and one in the afternoons or one works 2(2½) days per week and the other works 3(2½) days. This allows for the maximum benefit from the machinery and from continuous work and lays no extra burden on full-timers who might otherwise be obliged to finish work left uncompleted by part-timers or to clean up machinery used by all etc.

5. Another fear expressed by some unions is that better provisions for part-time work could prove to be an obstacle in the struggle for a shorter working week. However many part-timers are also interested in a shorter working week which would enable some of them to enter the fulltime labour force. It is only fair that work should be distributed among ALL those who want to work and not reserved only for those who are able to work a certain minimum of hours per week.

6. Unions have suggested that increased part-time work might result in employer demands for faster work rates for fulltime workers. This is based on findings that part-timers have a higher average productivity than full-timers who may also be under-employed during part of the day. However in the UK the higher productivity of part-timers resulted in their claiming a higher hourly rate of pay. It is imperative that unions ensure that neither fulltime nor part-time workers are exploited.

7. Finally, unions must keep in mind that part-time workers cost the community less than imported workers who make additional demands on housing, schools, hospitals, welfare etc. Part-time employment helps to overcome not only labour shortages but also specific skill shortages. Australia still imports both skilled and unskilled labour and yet the Australian economy is under-utilizing the human resources it has readily available. By part-time work we can make use of latent skills of people who cannot find work within the traditional employment pattern.

It is essential that in future part-time employment be organized to suit ALL needs. Part-time work should be accepted as a regulated feature of the employment situation and as a lifestyle for men and women wishing to work less than full time during certain periods of their lives.

SHORTER WORKING WEEK

Some Australian companies (especially in the clothing trades which employ mostly women) have introduced the "longer hour-reduced working week"; e.g. 10-hour day/4-day week, 4-day/35-hour week.

The above experiments are being used as one measure to combat particular problems such as excessively high absenteeism and staff turnover. They are very popular with women despite the fact that the 10-hour day would seem to upset the family routine. Most problems, however, can be overcome by the introduction of a variety of shifts.

The reduced working week recognizes the special needs of the individual in an ever more complex society. The three-day weekend gives workers considerably more freedom to pursue their interests, duties and family activities and also reduces commuting time, stress and expense.

The four-day working week experiments should only be the beginning of experimentation with a multitude of different types of work schedules; e.g. once-a-month 3-day weekends; nine-day fortnight, etc.

FLEXITIME

The most usual forms of flexitime are:

1. Work day is divided into "core" and "flexible" time. So long as workers are present for the total standard number of hours and during certain "core" hours - usually from 10 am to 2 pm - they are free to choose their time of arrival and departure.

This system provides special benefit to people with commitments early or late in the day; e.g. parents with school-age children. If both parents are working under this arrangement they can divide their responsibilities, one taking the child to school in the morning and one picking it up in the afternoon. The system also allows for visits to doctors, teachers etc. and for household chores and shopping.

2. So long as workers are present for the total weekly number of hours they can absent themselves for half a day or more. This allows workers to visit the doctor, to shop, to cope with an emergency and still work a full week.

3. Time-banking, whereby a worker can carry debits or credits of hours from one day to another. To receive the fulltime wage he/she has to achieve a required monthly total of hours. Of all the flexitime experiments this offers workers the greatest autonomy. It allows the opportunity to participate in other activities and to regain touch with families.

FLEXIBLE HOLIDAYS

There is a need for greater acceptance of the right of workers to take their holidays at times which suit them best. Parents and children should be given the opportunity to take their holidays concurrently; or parents should be free to arrange their holidays as best suits them and their families; e.g. one parent taking them during the term holidays and one during the long Christmas vacation.

People of different cultural and religious backgrounds should be able to take their holidays at the times of their different religious festivals. It is meaningless for a Moslem, Jew, Hindu, Buddhist to be on vacation during

Easter and Christmas. By denying these workers the opportunity to celebrate their own religious feast days we exacerbate the friction which divides workers and the frustrations and stress which so many individuals experience. Australia is a multi-cultural society and, as such, we need new concepts and provisions. We must accept the demands which our migration policy creates.

CASUAL WORK

Casual work is a totally unsatisfactory arrangement. Women form the majority of people involved in this type of work. It offers next to no security or protection because of its arbitrary and temporary nature. Employers exploit women by classing them as casuals despite the fact that they may work regularly for years. Because of this classification they are denied long-service leave, promotion, sick leave etc.

Women only take up casual employment when all else fails - when there is no childcare available and/or because of the lack of suitable provisions in other jobs. Under this type of work situation unions actually lose out on members and the workers find themselves with no strong organizational voice with which to fight for better conditions.

"OUTDOOR" WORK

Under the existing employment conditions paid work at home is the only option for some people. Mothers or single parents with very young children and no childcare facilities, the old, the infirm find that this is the only way they can earn any money. However almost all people so employed work under the iniquitous "piece-work" system. Consequently they suffer all the stress and safety hazards of fulltime workers under the same system but without the protection and solidarity which unions are able to give.

SHIFT WORK

Writing of Work Hazards, Patrick Kinnersley⁽¹⁾ says: "In terms of damage to physical, mental and social well-being, shift work is probably the worst of all." People working under this system suffer from a condition termed "shift lag" which disturbs the body's natural rhythm and causes physical disorders. The "body clock" is set to a certain programme and cannot be wholly reset unless one changes completely to a new sleeping/living routine. What really happens is that shift-workers try to follow two programmes - one for work week and one for weekend. "Mucking around" with the "body clock" causes dangerously slow reactions. A survey carried out in the car industry in England found that the highest accident rates were after midnight. Further research has shown that shift-workers do not get as much sleep as is needed; nor is the sleep they do get as deep as it should be. The reason for this is that they are attempting to sleep when their bodies are set for action. Permanent tiredness, irritability and constipation are among the "minor" effects of shift work. A five-year study of workers in a Norwegian electro-chemical industry found that shift workers were much more likely to suffer from nervous disorders and ulcers than day workers. Shift systems which force workers to change back and forth are the most disruptive.

Shift work also puts a heavy strain on family and social life. A person on shift work has to go to work when others are coming home to relax and socialize. He/she is therefore divided from communal activity. Shiftwork also disrupts union activity and strength. Shift workers find that they cannot attend union meetings, training sessions, demonstrations, all activities which are normally conducted during the day. The loss of contact deprives the workers of union solidarity and organization precisely when they need it most, i.e. when their health and safety are seriously at risk.

WHAT CAN UNIONS DO TO PROTECT WORKERS FROM EFFECTS OF SHIFT WORK?

They can demand: (1) Protection from "shift-lag" by shorter hours, extra days off, longer holidays; a four-day week is realistic. (2) Safety, health and welfare facilities of equal standard on all shifts; i.e. safety officers, first aid rooms, emergency arrangements, canteens. (3) The right of organizers to have access to workers during all work hours. (4) The right of shop stewards to meet with management during their normal working hours - not during sleeping hours. FINALLY, unions should make it their objective to explore ALL the possibilities for a re-organization of the labour market. Greater flexibility in working life implies a possible increase in the time spent away from work and a more just and equal sharing of family and work roles by both men and women.

(1) Patrick Kinnersley: The Hazards of Work: How to Fight Them.