We Need Five Days' Pay for Four Days' Work

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Aidan Harper, *Jacobin*, December 2020

Working time reduction has always been used as a way of distributing available work and reducing unemployment. In our era of crisis, we need to fight for a four-day week.

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This week, at their annual conference, the Scottish National Party overwhelmingly backed a reduction to working hours. The motion, which passed by 1,136 votes to 70, called on the Scottish government to launch a review of working practices in Scotland, including the "possibility of a four-day week."

The SNP's motion is the latest bright spot – but promising moves are not confined to the UK. Unilever in New Zealand put their employees on a trial four-day week this week, with no reduction in pay, and last week, in Spain, the center-left party Más País put forward proposals for the Spanish Finance Ministry to consider providing financial aid to companies that cut the working week to thirty-two hours, with no loss of pay, as part of its 2021 budget.

The German metalworking union IG Metall have also announced plans to campaign for a four-day week in order to prevent mass layoffs in the New Year — just two years after they won a 4.3 percent pay rise and the right to reduce their working week to twenty-eight hours. And last month, a group of politicians and union officials from across Europe, including Unite's Len McCluskey, the Green Party's Caroline Lucas, and Die Linke's coleader Katja Kipping, argued that a four-day week would help economies recover from the pandemic.

The New Economics Foundation's new book makes the case that shorter working time should be at the heart of a post-pandemic recovery. Critics argue that a reduction in working time is exactly the wrong thing to do during a crisis — but over the last century, the most rapid reductions in working time came in the immediate aftermath of world wars, and during periods of economic crisis. Working time reduction has always been used as a way of distributing available work and reducing unemployment, most famously during the Great Depression.

There are important economic reasons for reducing working time without reducing wages. The UK economy relies heavily on domestic wages and spending power, which intuitively makes sense: a functioning economy is dependent on the constant circulation of money, and the more people earn, the more they spend.

Increasing leisure time while protecting pay can be expected to increase spending in the economy overall. The measure could be especially pertinent for industries like arts and culture, and domestic tourism, which have suffered due to COVID-19 and depend on people having both money and the time to spend.

As we attempt to move toward recovery, workers and their unions should feel emboldened knowing that they are owed a significant reduction in working time after four decades of stagnation: the working week has barely decreased since the 1980s.

They should also feel confident in the knowledge that countries who work fewer hours are likely to be more productive. Germany, the Netherlands, and all of Scandinavia work far fewer hours than in the UK, and yet have much higher levels of productivity. Workers are happier, less stressed, and healthier, too.

Shorter working time is a way of future-proofing our economy and ensuring that the impact of automation is one that benefits workers. Unions are already campaigning on this and winning. The Communication Workers Union (CWU) have agreed with Royal Mail to shorten the working week from thirty-nine to thirty-five hours for 134,000 postal workers, a concession which was a direct response to the impact of automation: postal workers, it was argued, should benefit from the mechanization of the parcel packaging process in the form of shorter hours.

Despite these pockets of change, we can't sit back and wait for a shorter working week to arrive. We know that working time doesn't reduce by itself. Instead, the four-day week must be fought for, alongside demands for better pay and more secure work.

In the early days of this crisis, there was hope that we could emerge from it with a new determination to build a better world. Since then, claps for key workers have been converted into a public sector pay freeze, the government has doled out billions of pounds to incompetent and exploitative contractors like Serco and G4S rather than investing in a public health system, and a huge death toll — accompanied by social and economic hardship — has grown out of the mismanagement of the virus.

But the hope that we had for a fundamental shift in our relationship to work has persisted. Now, hope is leading normal people to demand permanent change in the form of a reduction in working time. And that change would give us something that we understand the importance of in 2020 more than ever: time to do the things we want with the people we love.