

Labouring Hours: Sweden's Six-Hour Working Day

By [Dr. Binoy Kampmark](#)

Global Research, August 22, 2016

Region: [Europe](#)

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*“The establishment of a normal working-day is the result of struggle between capitalist and labour.” — Karl Marx, *Das Kapital*, Ch 10*

Lengthy hours of work are never a good recipe for feeding the productivity machine. In Calvinist notions of hard work, the harder such toil is engaged in, the greater the prospects of gain. Combined with industrial rapacity, this doctrine produced terrible results for the toilers of the Industrial Revolution. Men, women and children were drawn into the machine and ruined to the sound of rising capital. What, however, of actual productivity?

Karl Marx, ever the historical digger, was onto the point in Chapter 10 of *Das Kapital*: lengthier working days do not a more productive worker make. Taking aim at his ever familiar target of capital, “the labourer is nothing else, his whole life through, than labour-power, that therefore all his disposable time is by nature and law labour-time, to be devoted to the self-expansion of capital.”[1]

Those things such as time spent for education and intellectual development; or social intercourse and “the free play of ... bodily and mental activity, even the rest time on Sunday” would be mere “moonshine”. Capital, having a “were-wolf hunger for surplus-labour” usurps “the time for growth, development, and healthy maintenance of the body.”

Sweden has been in the news of late for attempting to take the Marxist spirit to heart, with employers seeking to maximise the value of labour from the shorter work time offered. The latest reduction will take the form of a six-hour working day, though trials were already taking place last year.

Some work places in Sweden will not find the moves particularly novel – the Toyota centres in Gothenburg have been engaging in the practice for 13 years. Staff have registered levels of high satisfaction, which has been rewarded with low turnover rates and, shockingly to those across the Atlantic, high profits.

Linus Feldt, CEO of the Stockholm-based app developer Filimundus, has had his reservations of the eight-hour day for years. “To stay focused on a specific work task for eight hours is a huge challenge.” His strategy entails using pauses, improving the work mix “to make the work day more endurable.”[2]

Sweden's more than mere flirtation with this idea has its roots in a broader historical debate. The balance between work and leisure, along with the ever increasing rise of capital, has been the battle of industrialised societies, typified by the rise of organised labour.

Australasia, in its pugnacious infancy, tended to be strides ahead of the pack in accepting that more leisure, better working conditions, and importantly, less work hours, would be

productive to company profit and physical health. Chartist men such as James Stephens, a Welsh-born agitating mason derided by the *Melbourne Daily Herald* as a “stupid mischievous blockhead”, saw organised unionism as a weapon to blunt the broader ravages of unaccountable capital.

On April 21, 1856, stonemasons working on the site of the University of Melbourne made their point in marching on Parliament House, largely at Stephens insistence. The result of their pluckiness? The 48-hour week.

Some of their views were sensibly observant, and the working movement in the antipodes took heed of the stresses inflicted by the environment on the working body for lengthy periods of time. As the Victorian Operative Mason’s Society Report (11 June, 1884) observed, “the period of labour under the relaxing influence of an Australian climate, cannot extend to the length of daily toil in the mother country [Britain], without sacrificing health, and shortening the duration of human life.”

In the manner that now sounds like textbook socialism, the mind of such working folk would also be deemed important. This entailed, as the same report noted, “The self-cultivation... of the ‘adult man’.” Give the worker time to read and study, “and to progress in knowledge and virtue.”

Airing and feeding the mind, while providing more leisure, would also have a lasting effect on family life and engender in a citizen the values of civic understanding. The “natural flow of the animal spirits” needed to be unleashed, and in so doing would come “self-respect, and respect for other, for law, order, and forms so essential to freedom, domestic virtues and good citizenship.”

Other states have made the shorter work week famous in the last few decades. France’s 35-hour working week was introduced in 2000 by a socialist government as a threshold measure “above which overtime or rest days start to kick in.”[3] With a certain bitter irony, it is the current socialist government that is having severe reservations about it.

The vigilantes of productivity always saw little merit in cutting back such hours. The 35-hour week entailed higher labour costs while tying French hands in the global market place. “Labour reforms” have been touted as necessary to unclog the disincentives.

As Prime Minister Manuel Valls explained in January, “Exemptions to the legal duration of working time at 35 hours are no longer a violation of the law.”[4] Economy minister Emmanuel Macron preferred to be even blunter, suggesting that legal requirements to pay overtime rates of at least 10 percent more than the standard rate should be abolished altogether.

Even in Sweden, there are those sceptics who insist that less work risks becoming a matter of idleness. The mining town of Kiruna, for instance, saw a trial that ran for 16 years examining the shorter work day. It was abandoned amidst political acrimony and a lack of reliable data.

For all that, it is still comforting to note that cultural changes in environment, given the appropriate nudge along, do help. While the six-hour day, like any such work programs, can become a caricature, they are very much part of a social welfare sentiment distinctly absent in US or Japanese workplaces. The rationale is hard to fault: the happier the employee, the

greater the productivity.

Dr. Binoy Kampmark was a Commonwealth Scholar at Selwyn College, Cambridge. He lectures at RMIT University, Melbourne. Email: bkampmark@gmail.com

- [1] <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch10.htm>
- [2] <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/sweden-introduces-six-hour-work-day--a6674646.html>
- [3] <http://www.bbc.com/capital/story/20140312-frances-mythic-35-hour-week>
- [4] <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/france/12120927/France-reviews-its--35-hour-working-week.html>

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