

...and sparing the workers too

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Sharing the Work, Sparing the Planet

[Anders Hayden](#)

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This is a very fine book : thought-provoking, fact-filled, useful and readable too! It's about the world-wide movement for Work-Time Reduction – referred to throughout as WTR. Its author, Anders Hayden, is Research and Policy Co-ordinator for 32 Hours: Action for Full Employment in Toronto. He has done us all a great service by marshalling so much information and analysis about this important topic in just under 200 pages.

Hayden's main thesis is that WTR will help to sustain the environment and increase employment, social justice and the quality of people's lives. He presents various social, economic, environmental, ecological and gender equality arguments for WTR and is basically urging all of us – men, women, employed, unemployed, unions, governments, environmentalists, ecologists, greens, reds, whatever – to join the world-wide campaign.

Hayden also presents a fascinating account of that campaign and the developments that have been taking place in many countries, including Canada, the United States, Japan, China, South Korea, Brazil, France, Germany, Denmark, the Netherlands and others. What's particularly interesting is that in each country the emphasis, motivation and experience has been quite different.

For example: working hours have been increasing in the US, whereas they have been falling in Japan. France took the statutory route and legislated for a 35 hour week in 1998; whereas in Germany, the trade unions used collective bargaining to reduce working hours, in the face of considerable employer anger; and for them the emphasis was very much on job maintenance and creation. In the Netherlands, which is now probably the industrial country with the shortest

average annual working hours (less than 1,400 a year), WTR was achieved both through collective reductions of standard hours and an increase in individualised part-time options; and it was achieved fairly harmoniously, in contrast to the experience in countries like France and Italy.

The Dutch experience is particularly interesting for Ireland not only because WTR has been achieved through social partnership, but also because, along the way, the debate about it has changed significantly. The emphasis has shifted from collective reductions towards greater individual flexibility; and, with unemployment falling, the reasons for WTR have also shifted from job creation to personal choice, quality-of-life and gender equality arguments. And, after many years of women calling for men to work fewer hours on a paid basis - to share the paid work - as well as to share more equally in the unpaid work of the family, household, community, or society generally, this has actually started to happen. (Well, *some* of it has started to happen ... Dutch men are working shorter hours for employers - one in five now works part-time - but Dutch women, like women everywhere, are still doing most of the unpaid household work!)

However, at least in the Netherlands it's becoming 'fashionable' for men to spend more time at home and play a bigger role in raising their children! The Dutch trade unions ran a big campaign in the early 1990s to encourage men to work part-time and these efforts seem to have succeeded in breaking the stigma that's generally attached to male part-time work. In this regard, Hayden quotes a Dutch doctor with three children who, when interviewed about working a 4-day week, was asked if part-time work and less money made him 'less of a man'. *'No'*, he replied, *'not less of a man, but maybe more human'*.

Hayden also mentions the fact that in 1997, the Dutch Minister for the Economy 'took pains to excuse himself from a parliamentary debate to get home for his daughter's birthday' (a bit of a first, at the time: since then, a Finnish Prime Minister took a week's parental leave and UK Prime Minister, Tony Blair, took a little parental leave on the birth of his son last year). Also, in 1997, the Dutch government introduced a new Career Breaks Bill - similar to some of the paid leave provisions pioneered in Denmark - giving Dutch workers the equivalent of Unemployment Benefit when taking leave for caring or for studying (on condition that the employer consented and hired an unemployed person for the same period).

Another proposal before the Dutch parliament at that time was a 'Work and Care Bill' that included the right to 10 days' paid leave for the care of family members. It was expected to become law by 2000 but Hayden's book went to print in 1999 so we'll have to find out what happened from some other source. As far as I know, we in Ireland have actually beaten the Dutch to it, thereby becoming only the second country in the EU (after Germany) to introduce a statutory right to Carer's Leave. It took effect in October 2000, accompanied by a social welfare payment - Carer's Benefit - for those who meet the PRSI requirements; and it gives people the right to take up to 15 months' leave.

Our new Carer's Leave legislation is a real advance, but what relevance does WTR have in general for a country like Ireland today? We currently have one of the highest growth rates in the world. Our income per head is just starting to reach European norms. For the first time, most people are able to get jobs; indeed there are skills shortages in some sectors. But although our working hours are supposed to be reducing, as a result of both collective agreements and national

legislation (implementing the EU Working Time Directive), no-one's showing much sign of actually reducing the number of hours worked per week. The national average remains firmly around 40-41; less for women, more for men. British and Irish workers still work among the longest hours in Europe and have the shortest holidays, no payment during parental leave, very short paid maternity leave and no study leave worth speaking of, for most workers. And the one breakthrough, the new paid Carer's Leave legislation – first mooted by former Minister for Social Welfare, Proinsias De Rossa, in 1996, and campaigned for by SIPTU and the ICTU since that time – has barely been noticed by most people, never mind being hailed as progressive or even significant.

Generally speaking, the 'official' reduction to a 39-hour week in Ireland has simply meant more time being paid at overtime rates, rather than less time being worked. Because, of course, the grossly inflated price of necessities such as accommodation, childcare and transport to work has been putting huge pressure on people – particularly young couples – to work longer and longer hours, if they can benefit financially from doing so.

Which, of course, makes the issue of WTR all the more relevant, though not necessarily more popular. What young worker, nowadays, can contemplate WTR – to study, be with children, or elderly relatives, or do something else of particular interest - if they have to pay a mortgage and/or heat their house or flat and/or pay for childcare and/or meet the rising cost of transport to and from their work?

Hayden's book doesn't cover WTR developments in Ireland, which is probably just as well because – apart from the Carer's Leave breakthrough - we wouldn't look too good on any international league table. North-European countries like Denmark, Finland, and the Netherlands are very much the 'leaders' in this field and the information Hayden provides on them, including many interesting quotes and anecdotes, are invaluable to all of us arguing for similar rights here.

For example, since 1994, all workers in Denmark have been able to take educational, parental and sabbatical leaves of up to one year (subject to their employers' agreement, during which they get 100% of unemployment benefit if it's educational leave or 60% if it's parental or sabbatical. This is in addition to fairly generous maternity and paternity leave.

Not content with all this paid time off, Danish workers went on a nation-wide general strike, in spring 1998, for a sixth week's paid holidays. The strike lasted 11 days and ended when each worker was granted an extra two days' leave per year; while those with children under 14 got an additional two days in 1998 and one more in 1999. Of course, there were mixed views about this strike – some labelling the demand for a sixth week's paid holidays as excessive; others seeing it as not only a justifiable attempt to share in Denmark's economic success, but also, as Hayden puts it, 'an enlightened choice of putting time over money as the way to take that share'. Women trade unionists in Denmark were a major force behind the demand for more free time in the 1998 strikes. The KAD - an all-female union with 100,000 members – had wanted to strike for an extra twenty days, not just an extra week! For them, the demand for more free time was 'an absolute priority'.

And for us in Ireland? It's probably true here, as well, that women in the unions have been the main proponents of WTR – indeed, some of us have been on about it for the past 20 years and more, with varying degrees of support, at different times, from our colleagues and friends!

I remember a seminar in 1982, run by the Trade Union Women's Forum in the North Star Hotel in Dublin, on just this topic (and others). WTR featured prominently in my own paper to that seminar, entitled *'Time versus Money – the need for re-organisation of work'* in which I argued the case for WTR on grounds of 'women's equality ... economic efficiency, social necessity and human development in general', elaborating on each of these in turn. In my paper, which was later published by the TUWF as part of a pamphlet *'Topical Issues for Women at Work'*, I argued that there had to be national legislation, or at least coherent national policy, on WTR; plus a host of other changes including reforming and greater integration of the tax and welfare systems, legislation to introduce a national minimum wage, an end to discrimination against part-time workers, more childcare facilities, greater working-time flexibility, better leave arrangements, including paid educational leave and restructuring of pension arrangements to suit women and part-time workers better.

Progress on all these fronts has been slow over the past 20 years but just recently there have been spurts of activity - arising partly from EU Directives, partly from collective bargaining and partly from commitments secured by the unions in the context of national agreements - on tax, social welfare and pension reforms, on better rights for part-time workers and on better leave and greater work-time flexibility (if not reduction).

We in Ireland have a long way to go to catch up with countries like Denmark, but at least WTR is firmly on the trade union agenda, in the form of our demands for paid parental leave, longer paid maternity leave and the introduction of paternity leave on a statutory basis; and our current insistence that the two Framework Agreements (on Family-Friendly Policies and Developing Equal Opportunities at the level of the Enterprise) contained in the Programme for Prosperity and Fairness be used effectively by employers and employees to make working hours more flexible and shorter wherever possible.

As regards Hayden's thesis that WTR is about 'Sharing the Work and Saving the Planet': my own view is that it's very much about 'saving the workers' too. Today's workforce in Ireland – men and women alike, are stressed out working long hours to pay for over-priced accommodation, high transport costs and hugely expensive childcare (if indeed they can find any). Working parents, especially, are generally exhausted from juggling the competing demands of work and family life – never mind dreaming about other quality-of-life issues. Of course it makes sense to reduce working hours, but only if everyone does so, or has an equal opportunity to do so, without loss of essential income.

The vital instruments and ingredients now exist in Ireland for squaring the circle and solving the problem: very high labour productivity, a statutory minimum wage, legal limits on working hours, fiscal instruments, welfare policies, anti-poverty strategies and a huge Exchequer surplus. Not forgetting the needs of children, older people, those with disabilities or special needs – who want us to spend time with them, as well as earning enough money to support them and also produce the goods and services that people want and need. We have both the reasons and the

resources to make major progress towards a more human and humane working environment. But will we? - that's another day's work!

Meanwhile, Hayden's book should be read, or at least kept as a reference, by everyone who already believes in WTR and everyone who doesn't. It will convert the sceptics and energise, or perhaps re-energise, the converts.

Rosheen Callender is an economist who works for SIPTU, Ireland's largest trade union. She has specialised in social policy, pensions, company and employment law and equality issues; and is currently the union's National Equality Secretary. Prior to that, she worked in the union's Research Department from 1973. She was seconded to the Department of Social Welfare between January 1995 to June 1997 to work as Special Advisor to the then Minister for Social Welfare..



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