

## Of sunshine, flowers, work and the Mayday

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*We want to feel the sunshine, and we want to smell the flowers,  
We are sure that God has will'd it, and we mean to have eight hours.  
We're summoning our forces from the shipyard, shop and mill,  
Eight hours for work, eight hours for rest, eight hours for what we will!  
Eight hours for work, eight hours for rest, eight hours for what we will!*  
- Eight Hours, written in late 1860s

Summer of 1930. Spain. The world was reeling under the impact of Great Depression of 1929. John Maynard Keynes, the economist, was talking about 'Economic Possibilities for our Grandchildren' amidst the palpable gloom in Madrid. He started with the acceptance, 'we are suffering just now from a bad attack of economic pessimism.' Optimistic, as he was, he noted, 'We are suffering, not from the rheumatics of old age, but from the growing-pains of over-rapid changes, from the painfulness of readjustment between one economic period and another. The increase of technical efficiency has been taking place faster than we can deal with the problem of labour absorption; the improvement in the standard of life has been a little too quick.' Setting to explain further, 'The prevailing world depression, the enormous anomaly of unemployment in a world full of wants, the disastrous mistakes we have made, blind us to what is going on under the surface to the true interpretation of the trend of things.' He went on to say, 'My purpose in this essay, however, is not to examine the present or the near future, but to disembarass myself of short views and take wings into the future. What can we reasonably expect the level of our economic life to be a hundred years hence? What are the economic possibilities for our grandchildren?' Within a hundred years, (by 2030), Keynes imagined, that for the first time since his creation man will be faced with his real, his permanent problem-how to use his freedom from pressing economic cares, how to occupy the leisure, which science and compound interest will have won for him, to live wisely and agreeably and well. He predicted that we would be working just fifteen hours a week, 'three hours a day is quite enough to satisfy the old Adam in most of us!'

No, the intent here is not to debate whether Keynes was right or where he went wrong. It is interesting to note that there was a great economist who once imagined that the increase in technical efficiency and the resultant improvement in the standard of life would lead to three hours a day/ fifteen-hour work week! Contrast this to the current day calls exhorting people to work 70 hours a week.

The length of the working day has been a question many a historians and economists debated and the answers vary as our perceptions about work, work day, 'leisure', 'clock time' too have evolved. And it is not just a matter of perceptions. Chaucer's Canterbury Tales considers the cock as nature's timepiece in its immemorial role during the fourteenth century. By the middle of eighteenth century, clock had penetrated to more intimate levels. Rutger Bregman notes in his book Utopia for Realists, that, 'where an English farmer in the year 1300 had to work some 1500 hours a year to make a living, a factory worker in the (John Stuart) Mill's era had to put in twice the time simply to survive.' The transition to industrial society

entailed a severe restructuring of habits. Working people had to be compelled and disciplined. Edward P. Thompson, the historian, shows in his essay, *Time, Work-Discipline and Industrial Capitalism* says that new labour habits were formed, and a new time-discipline was imposed *'by the division of the labour; supervision of labour; fines; bells and clocks; money incentives; preachings and schoolings; suppression of sports and fairs.'*

Neo-classical economists consider the length of the working day as a matter of individual choice wherein workers base their decision on the trade-off between their consumption acquired from work-based income and free time. Institutionalists, stress on the social norms and institutional arrangements in determining the work day. The reduction in the length of working day is assumed to be result of growth of living standards and/or productivity with differences in the emphasis. Karl Marx, on the other hand says that the establishment of a normal working-day is the result of centuries of struggle between capitalist and labourer. Thus, the length of the work day is determined by class struggle, rather than by changing living standards, productivity, or institutional traditions.

Marx explains *"What is a working-day? What is the length of time during which capital may consume the labour-power whose daily value it buys? How far may the working-day be extended beyond the working-time necessary for the reproduction of labour-power itself?" It has been seen that to these questions capital replies: the working-day contains the full 24 hours, with the deduction of the few hours of repose without which labour-power absolutely refuses its services again. Hence it is self-evident that 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. Time for education, for intellectual development, for the fulfilling of social functions and for social intercourse, for the free-play of his bodily and mental activity, even the rest time of Sunday (and that in a country of Sabbatarians!) — moonshine! But in its blind unrestrainable passion, its were-wolf hunger for surplus-labour, capital oversteps not only the moral, but even the merely physical maximum bounds of the working-day. It usurps the time for growth, development, and healthy maintenance of the body. It steals the time required for the consumption of fresh air and sunlight. It higgles over a meal-time, incorporating it where possible with the process of production itself, so that food is given to the labourer as to a mere means of production, as coal is supplied to the boiler, grease and oil to the machinery. It reduces the sound sleep needed for the restoration, reparation, refreshment of the bodily powers to just so many hours of torpor as the revival of an organism, absolutely exhausted, renders essential. It is not the normal maintenance of the labour-power which is to determine the limits of the working-day; it is the greatest possible daily expenditure of labour-power, no matter how diseased, compulsory, and painful it may be, which is to determine the limits of the labourers' period of repose. Capital cares nothing for the length of life of labour-power. All that concerns it is simply and solely the maximum of labour-power, that can be rendered fluent in a working-day. It attains this end by shortening the extent of the labourer's life, as a greedy farmer snatches increased produce from the soil by robbing it of its fertility.*

*'The capitalistic mode of production (essentially the production of surplus-value, the absorption of surplus-labour), produces thus, with the extension of the working-day, not only the deterioration of human labour-power by robbing it of its normal, moral and physical, conditions of development and function. It produces also the premature exhaustion and death of this labour-power itself. It extends the labourer's time of production during a given period by shortening his actual life-time' (Capital).*

History shows us the reduction of work time has been a result of the persistent struggle of the working classes. Cristoph Hermann, in his book, *Capitalism and the Political Economy of Work Time*, compiled these changes and notes the four phases. *'A first cycle spanned roughly the second half of the nineteenth century and resulted in the introduction of the ten-hour work day. A second phase started in the late nineteenth century and ended with the establishment of the eight-hour work day or the 48-hour work week after the end of the First World War. A third phase began in the 1930s and in some countries led to the adoption of the 40-hour week before the Second World War or shortly thereafter. Devastated by the war, most European countries lagged behind and introduced the 40-hour week in the 1960s and 1970s. A fourth phase of work time reductions evolved in the 1980s and 1990s and led to the introduction of the 35-hour week, but only a few countries took part in this movement'*

By the end of twentieth century, with the neoliberal turn, the decrease in the work hours is no longer seen as a sign of social progress. Instead, longer work hours are being touted as a means to safeguard jobs. In 2003 the Cologne Institute of Economic Research initiated a public debate in Germany by arguing that a one-hour extension of work time would create an additional 60,000 jobs; while in France the conservative government, which took office in 2002, used the slogan "working more, earning more, and creating more jobs" to justify its changes to the 35-hour week. The ascendance of neoliberalism has halted, reversed the trend of secular decline in work hours and has led to gradual increase in the work hours across the globe. The current clamour and exhortations for 70-hour work week in India has to be viewed from this context. The calls are synchronised the imposition of labour codes extending the work hours from 8 to 12 in a day.

There is another important dimension to the increase in the work hours. Work time has not only increased, it has also become more intense. Research by David Maume and David Purcell in 2007 found that the pace of work increased significantly in the United States between 1977 and 1997, mainly because of increasingly complex tasks. The European Working Conditions Survey also shows a persistent intensification of work measured since the first survey was conducted in 1990. All this is leading to blurring of boundaries between work and personal life. A study conducted at the Harvard Business School has shown that, thanks to modern technology, managers and professionals in Europe, Asia and North America now spend eighty to ninety per week 'either working' or 'monitoring' and remaining accessible. And according to a Korean research, the smart phone has the average employee working eleven more hours per week. Added to this the wages have either remained stagnated or reduced.

Longer working hours, growing intensity of work are increasingly affecting the health of workers. Long work hours and growing work intensity are increasingly threatening the

health of workers. As Robert LaJeunesse notes, a *'growing body of empirical research is suggesting that excessive work hours adversely impact the health, well-being and longevity of workers.'* Among the diseases frequently linked to long work hours and over-work are hypertension, cardiovascular disorders, mental health problems, and reproductive disorders. However, among the costs of work-related health conditions are not only individual pain but also family distress and ultimately burgeoning healthcare expenses. (Robert LaJeunesse, Work Time Regulation as a Sustainable Full Employment Strategy: The Social Effort Bargain).

During the 1770s, 'for "extirpating idleness debauchery and excess," promoting a spirit of industry, "lowering the price of labour in our manufactories, and easing the lands of the heavy burden of poor's rates' there were proposals to set up 'ideal workhouse' for paupers. It was proposed that such ideal workhouse must be made a "House of Terror," and not an asylum for the poor, "where they are to be plentifully fed, warmly and decently clothed, and where they do but little work." In this "House of Terror," this "ideal workhouse, the poor shall work 14 hours in a day, allowing proper time for meals, in such manner that there shall remain 12 hours of neat-labour..... The "House of Terror" for paupers of which the capitalistic soul of 1770 only dreamed, was realised a few years later in the shape of a gigantic "Workhouse" for the industrial worker himself. It is called the Factory. And the ideal this time fades before the reality. (Karl Marx, Capital). With the suggested changes and increase in the working hours from eight to twelve hours a day and calls for seventy hour work week, there are now attempts to establish 'ideal workhouses' / 'house of terror' albeit in a changed environment. The werewolf hunger for profit is insatiable and the physical maximum bounds of work day are being stretched.

Karl Marx envisaged a life where everyone would have the time *'to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, raise cattle in the evening, criticize after dinner.. without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, headsman or critic.'* This can be juxtaposed with the ideal workhouse dreams of capital. The human urge to feel the sunshine, to smell the flowers is not mere dream. *'Eight hours for work, eight hours for rest, eight hours for what we will'* isn't just an ideal that is swept away by the reality. May day is a reminder to struggle against the reality and change it.