The Great Time Squeeze
By Jeremy Brecher & Tim Costello

It's been a great deal for employers. Since 1973, real weekly wages have fallen by 15 percent, and to compensate, American families today are working between one and two days a week more, just to maintain the same family incomes they had in 1973.

According to a Harris poll, the average work week as estimated by workers themselves has increased from 41 hours in 1973 to 48 hours today. In the same time period the proportion of mothers who are holding down jobs outside the home has virtually doubled, from 30 percent to nearly 60 percent. If these mothers hadn't gone to work, U.S. family income would have fallen by nearly 20 percent.

For employers, all this adds up to more labor for less money. It helped make possible the economic growth and price stability of the Reagan era. It represented a sweet payoff for business' attack on the economic, political, and social power of working people.

For working people, especially working women, the price has been a pervasive degradation of everyday life. This degradation manifests itself in the most intimate aspects of individual health, social activity, and personal relationships.

Family life has been a primary casualty. A recent poll in southern California found that 51 percent of men and 39 percent of women believe their work interferes with their parental responsibilities; 57 percent of fathers and 55 percent of mothers said they felt guilty about spending too little time with their children. Most surprising, 79 percent of the mothers and 39 percent of the fathers said they would quit their jobs if they could to stay home with their children. There is little reason to think research in other parts of the country would not produce similar results.

Community life has been another major victim of the great time squeeze. Extensive studies show that the great American tradition of voluntarism has been devastated over the past decade or so by the decrease in "discretionary" time. Anyone who works in voluntary organizations doesn't need a study to know that those who made up the backbone of community groups, especially women, have sharply reduced their involvement because of an increased necessity to work for pay.

The time squeeze also threatens individual health. Stress and stress diseases are intensified by the pressure of constant time shortage. A recent article in the New York Times Science Section suggests that shortage of sleep may be a major medical problem in the U.S., as well as a major cause of accidents on and off the job.

Virtually everybody can feel the time squeeze; it is a topic of constant conversation in the most varied milieus. But it is usually experienced as an individual rather than a social concern. It is not immediately apparent that the Volvos of the Yuppies, the yachts of the Milikans, and the executive jets of the Lorenzos have been paid for by the stress diseases, marital breakups, and underparented kids of working women and men. It's time to recognize that the great time squeeze is a result of some people squeezing others.

Labor Time And The Labor Movement

In the past, the demand for shorter hours has been a galvanizing issue for the labor movement. According to the recently published book Our Own Time: A History of American Labor and the Working Day, "The reduction of working hours constituted the prime demand in the class conflicts that spawned America's first industrial strike, its first citywide trade union councils, its first labor party, its first general strikes, its first organization uniting skilled and unskilled workers, its first strike by females, and its first attempts..."
European unions during the 1980s made a powerful and largely successful push to cut working hours. In 1987 German metalworkers struck and won a 37.5-hour week; many are now winning a 35-hour week. This year hundreds of thousands of British workers have won a 37-hour week.

Given the great time squeeze, the hours of labor may be an issue waiting to explode in the U.S. as well. It provides an opportunity for organized labor to address the needs of workers both within and beyond its own membership. But that opportunity has been difficult to grasp because of labor movement policies deeply rooted in the history of American gender and work relations.

The Liberty Term

BEFORE THE rise of industrial capitalism, the basic unit of production in North America, outside the plantation South, was the patriarchal household. Typically, men owned farmland and tools which they and their wives and children used to produce agricultural and craft goods for their own use and for sale. Hours of labor could be long but work tended to be varied and spasmodic, paced by the demands of weather and limited by the length of daylight. The dominant political ideology of the era—what historians have dubbed "republicanism"—was based on collective self-government by economically independent men who had the freedom, capacity, and time to manage their common affairs.

The industrial revolution and the rise of the factory system meant the transformation of the self-employed farmer or artisan into an employee. Employers regarded labor as a commodity to purchase in the market; workers could accept whatever hours an employer set or look elsewhere for work. Workers in response developed a labor movement whose goal was to retain as much as possible of the dignity, autonomy, and equality of the independent producer even within the new world of capitalist industry.

Central to this goal was limitation of the hours of labor. A worker who could be forced to labor for unlimited hours was in fact just a slave by another name—someone the time of whose life was entirely at the disposal of another. Wave after wave of shorter-hours movements swept the working class during the 19th century, articulating in the rhetoric of republicanism that a limited workday was essential for free men.

The authors of the influential 1835 "Ten Hour Circular," for example, claimed "by the blood of their fathers, shed in the War of the Revolution, the rights of American Freemen." They maintained that workers had "duties to perform as American Citizens" and could therefore not afford "to dispose of more than Ten Hours for a day's work."

Other arguments besides civic obligations were marshaled to support a limit to the working day. Long hours were portrayed as a threat to mental and physical health. Shorter hours would counter unemployment by spreading work more evenly. Above all, shorter hours would make possible the cultural uplift of the working class. As National Labor Union organizer Richard Trevellick wrote after the Civil War, "The educational advance made by the laboring classes since the inauguration of the ten-hour rule of labor has been more than equal to every step taken since John the Baptist. Add two hours to the liberty term, and we shall increase the ratio of progress threefold. Our country shall have all classes of laboring men and women educated to a standard of physical, mental, moral and social excellence that will be its own security against idleness, vice, degradation and misery."

Breadwinners

UNFORTUNATELY, THE labor movement's drive for shorter hours took place in the context of assumptions about the gender division of labor which impede the development of effective resistance to the great time squeeze today.

While many of the first industrial workers were women, much of the labor movement came to accept the presumption that working women were only temporarily "on leave" from the households of their fathers or husbands. For males, in contrast, "employee" gradually came to be accepted as a normal lifetime status.

Unions, therefore, generally advocated a wage level that permitted a male "breadwinner" to adequately support a nonworking wife and children. The labor movement used as an argument for higher wages the principle that a workingman's wages should be high.
enough to support his family. The labor of running the household would be the responsibility of the wife. The preservation of prevailing gender roles thus became a goal of the labor movement.

Many unions deliberately excluded women from membership and tried to drive them out of their crafts either directly or by "protective" legislation which encouraged employers to discriminate against women as unable to work under the conditions required for the skilled workforce. An article in the American Federation of Labor (AFL) magazine American Federationist in 1897 entitled "Women as Bread Winners—the Error of the Age" spoke of the "invasion of the crafts by Women" as an attempt to undermine wage scales of skilled male workers and "an insidious assault upon the home." Ultimately unions realized that, since women were irreversibly in the workforce, they would have to be organized. But most unions long continued to operate on the assumption that female labor was principally a temporary expedient of the unmarried.

The labor movement accepted this orientation well into the second half of the 20th century. As a result, it was poorly prepared to respond constructively to the labor market revolution that today has brought 70 percent of all women between 25 and 54 into the workforce.

The Full-time, Lifetime Job

The skilled workers of 19th century industry were often "all-round craftsmen" who could move with ease from one employer to another. Unskilled laborers were even more interchangeable, often moving from one job to another many times in the course of a year. An 1878 Massachusetts study found that 65 percent of workers studied had been in the same occupation for more than ten years but only 15 percent had been that long with the same firm.

In the 20th century, corporate capitalism began replacing skilled craftsmen and unskilled laborers with semiskilled machine operators who needed skills specific to their particular jobs. But major employers in the years before World War I found two-thirds of their workers quitting each year. In response, managers began developing job structures designed to stabilize the workforce. Employers developed crude seniority systems which secured for a core of loyal employees whatever work was available.

When the labor movement revived in the 1930s, it did not attempt to resuscitate "republican" notions of the independent worker. The new industrial unions largely accepted the concept of a job that bound the worker to one employer that corporate managers had promoted in the preceding decades. The new unions did insist that job classifications, job ladders, layoff and recall procedures, and other personnel practices be administered fairly on the basis of seniority, without discrimination or favoritism.

The fundamental goal of this insistence was job security. Ideally, a man who started working for a company would, after accumulating a certain amount of seniority, experience steady employment for the rest of his life, receive enough income to support a wife and children, and steadily advance through whatever higher skilled and better paid jobs became available. This ideal roughly corresponded to the actual life experience of tens of millions of unionized men who entered the American workforce from the 1940s through the 1960s. By midcentury, the average annual turnover for all occupations had reached an all-time low of less than 10 percent.

Permanent employment with a single employer became the premise for many institutions. Health insurance, pensions, and other welfare benefits, which in most countries are provided to all workers through the government, in the U.S. were largely provided through particular employers, further tying workers to their jobs. Mortgages and installment credit were provided to workers with steady jobs, allowing higher levels of consumption for working class families which conformed to the model of female homemaker/steadily-employed male breadwinner. Industrial unionism itself, with the individual employer as the prime unit for collective bargaining, was largely based on this structure.

Employment stability represented a tremendous advance for insecure, casualized workers. But in the long run the industrial relations structures which provided secure, full-time employment with a single employer would make it difficult for organized labor to respond to the needs of a changing workforce and the conditions of a changing economy.

Workers Against Shorter Hours

In the early years of the Great Depression, shorter hours were widely supported as a means to stabilize employment by spreading work. In 1933 the Senate—somewhat to its own amazement—passed the Black-Connery bill which would have barred from interstate commerce articles produced in establishments "in which any person was employed for more than five days in any week or more than six hours in any day." President Roosevelt's opposition doomed the bill in the House.

Roosevelt subsequently supported the milder Fair Labor Standards Act, which established a minimum wage and ostensibly limited work to 40 hours per week. (The National Association of Manufacturers called the Act "a step in the direction of Communism, Bolshevism, fascism, and Nazism.")

This 1938 Act did not ban excessive hours outright, but rather required that overtime be paid at a rate of time-and-one-half of standard wages. In the long run this has led to paradoxical results: Workers have been given an extra incentive to work long hours. And since so many health, pension, and other benefits are paid on a per-worker basis, employers are often eager to schedule those currently employed for overtime rather than hiring additional workers.

The end of the Great Depression marked the end of shorter hours as a central labor objective. As one historian has written, "The work week was reduced gradually but steadily for a century before the Depression and has remained stable since then... The cause of shorter hours was a crucial liberal reform from the 1830s to the 1930s, but since then it has dropped from view."

By 1963 a Gallup Poll found only 42 percent of union members in favor of a 35-hour work week.

We suggest that the explanation for this shift lies at least in part in the industrial relations system itself. For male workers and their unions, the primary goal became to protect the stability of
full-time work and to bring home a paycheck which made it possible to meet the mortgage and installment credit payments that supported an expanding level of family consumption. This system both required and was made possible by a nonworking wife who was available to address those family and community needs which could not be met by a paycheck. With the workingman's life responsibilities limited to bringing home that paycheck, the hunger for overtime replaced the desire for shorter hours as an objective of working class life.

End Of The Old Industrial Relations System

The industrial relations system that grew up in the 1930s and 1940s ultimately collapsed in the face of two forces that developed gradually during the 1950s and 1960s and accelerated during the 1970s and 1980s. The first was the decline in U.S. dominance of the world economy, the consequent intensification of competition for U.S. companies, and the resulting pressure on employers to attack the existing standards of workers. The second was the transformation of gender roles which turned a life of paid labor from the exception to the rule for American women. These are of course the very same trends that underlie the "great time squeeze" itself. And the two forces interacted: declining job security and real wages for men was one of the principal factors encouraging married women to enter the workforce.

Several factors gave employers the motive and the opportunity to attack and dismantle the structures of job stability and security. Computers, high-speed communication, and other technological developments made production much more flexible and therefore also made such flexibility a competitive necessity. The declining power of the labor movement made it far easier to impose part-time and flexible work schedules, ignore seniority, and utilize temporary and contract labor. And the increasing acceptability of employment for married women provided a labor force for whom the full-time lifetime employment relation was often more of a liability than an asset. Managements seized the opportunity to recasualize the workforce.

Why Labor Slept

Most mainstream unions responded by defending the existing job structures against management demands for "flexibility." While they were able to rally a diminishing core of male workers around such a program, their approach became increasingly irrelevant to the majority of workers whom it no longer protected.

Militants in the labor movement often pushed "30 for 40" and other campaigns to shorten the work week. But such objectives won limited support from the rank and file. The principal reason is that a reduction in hours in itself would do little to solve the problems workers were actually facing within the existing job structures.

The proliferating two-breadwinner and female-headed families had very different needs from traditional male-breadwinner families. The increasingly complex structure of daily life, with its need to move among and coordinate different social spheres, further transformed the time needs of various groups of workers. But neither the mainstream of the labor movement nor even its left fringe seriously discussed the changes in jobs structures and social policy that would address contemporary workers' needs—and define goals they would find it worthwhile to mobilize to achieve.

Women Workers' Response

Fortunately, those unions which have seriously organized women workers are on the way to developing a new strategy to combat the great time squeeze. That strategy is based on a rejection of the norm of unremitting full-time employment with a single employer for an entire working life.

What this means in practice can be seen in the contract provisions that have been fought for by predominantly-female unionized workers. Many hospital workers in the Service Employees International Union, for example, have won a single seniority list for part-and full-time workers, based simply on hours worked. (Some workers even hold two part-time jobs and positions on two seniority lists.) Part-time workers are included in employer benefit plans. Workers who leave and then return to work are protected against loss of their seniority. Workers who move to a different hospital in the same region are credited for their work experience, rather than being paid at an entry-level rate. While unions have traditionally fought part-time and irregular work, these provisions remove the penalties for workers who work part-time, move in and out of the workforce, and change jobs from one hospital to another.

Many traditional trade unionists—including some on the left—view such proposals with alarm. They see them playing into the hands of management demands for "flexibility." But it is time
for proponents of this view to ask themselves whether the job structures they defend were really originated to meet the needs of workers or of employers—and whether they correspond to the genuine needs of working people today. Like employers, workers today want flexibility—but a flexibility which is adapted to their needs, not just the convenience of their employers.

The changes in job structures being pioneered by woman-oriented unions also require complementary changes in public policy. The tying of medical, pension, unemployment, and other benefits to an individual’s job constitutes de facto discrimination against those who require a more flexible worklife pattern. The demand for a national health system is important for the entire workforce has been the drive for the Family and Medical Leave Act, passed by Congress and vetoed by George Bush this July. This legislation would have required large employers to provide up to three months of unpaid leave for workers to care for a newborn child or sick family member. Despite the fact that three-quarters of Americans support legislation guaranteeing unpaid parental leave, and despite the fact that Bush supported parental leave during his campaign as a feature of his “kinder, gentler” America, business organizations (no doubt aware of its threat to their control of labor) fought the bill bitterly and successfully.

Despite Bush’s veto, guaranteed family leave is far from dead. Sen. Christopher Dodd, its chief sponsor in the Senate, said, “George Bush is going to have a family leave bill on his desk every year he’s in office.”

Furthermore, similar or even stronger bills are currently being proposed in dozens of state legislatures. A 1990 Connecticut law gives men and women up to 12 weeks off to care for a newborn or newly adopted baby, a sick parent, spouse or child, or to recuperate from an illness of their own. In many workplaces family leave provisions are also being won through collective bargaining.

Unlike demands for shorter hours per se, family leave and similar proposals provide workers time when they need it. And while the movement for such protection started with demands for pregnancy leave, it has evolved into a much more general push for time to meet family responsibilities.

According to one expert, “While many of the laws on the books for a while are pregnancy disability laws applying only to women, the new laws now being considered tend to be gender-neutral, recognizing that men and women equally can have family or medical problems.”

The family leave provisions reflect a crucial and fundamental concept: a worker remains a human being who has other roles and responsibilities in life besides work. It should be regarded as a violation of basic social norms to force people to abandon these in order to make a living. A work structure is socially unacceptable if it prevents a worker from functioning as a complete human being. Like the authors of the 1835 Ten Hour Circular, “We have duties to perform”: political, civic, and social.

A New Labor Standards Act

The United States’ policy regarding labor time is formulated in the Fair Labor Standards Act—a policy which has barely changed since passage of the Act in 1938. Since that time both the workplace and the workforce have been transformed. It is time to start asking questions about the framework this law creates. For example: Does “time-and-a-half” overtime pay achieve its purpose of limiting the hours of labor, or does it rather create an incentive for overwork? Is some other way of capping the work week needed?

Should workers’ need for flexibility be protected by law? Should a Fair Labor Standards Act appropriate to the coming half-century include a right to go on sabbatical? Educational opportunities for career changes? Protection of part-time workers against discrimination?

Should overwork on any job be limited if it causes health problems, just as exposure to chemicals is under the Occupational Safety and Health Act (OSHA)? Should compulsory overtime be outlawed? Should shift work be forbidden or discouraged?

The International Dimension

The hours of labor are becoming an international issue. When Pittston Coal provoked a strike last
year, it claimed its demand for Sunday labor was justified by the international market in which it operated. British workers are currently making a big push for a shorter work week in order to bring British industry into line with Western Europe’s before the creation of the European Single Market in 1992. Global standards for conditions affecting workers are increasingly necessary in the globalizing economy. [See“A Worldwide Social Charter?” by Jeremy Brecher and Tim Costello, Z, January, 1990.]

One element for such standards might be a limit on total hours worked per year. In the U.S. the average yearly hours worked is around 1900. In West Germany it is 1725 and in The Netherlands and Denmark 1740. A little-known clause in the 1938 Fair Labor Standards Act set maximum hours under a union contract at 2,000 per year. Perhaps such a global maximum could help protect workers from employer efforts to force longer hours on them in the name of international competitiveness. An initial focus for such efforts might be a demand that the GATT trade negotiations declare excessive hours of labor an unfair trade practice.

Further Reading

SELF-MANAGEMENT of Time: A Democratic Alternative,” by Carmen Sirianni, (Socialist Review, October-December, 1988, Vol 18 #4) provides a profound analysis of the issues surrounding the reorganization of time in contemporary society.

Our Own Time: A History of American Labor and the Working Day by David R. Roediger and Philip S. Foner (London: Verso, 1989) gives a vast amount of detailed information on struggles for shorter hours in the U.S.

The Liberty Bell

From an employer’s point of view, the life of a worker exists solely for the sake of the work she or he can perform. Resistance to the great time squeeze is fundamentally a rejection of that concept and an assertion that work should be a means to the full and free development of human beings in all aspects of their lives. Today that means not only shorter hours, but control by workers over when they work and when they don’t. Freedom today requires (in Carmen Sirianni’s telling phrase) “the self-management of time.”

In 1831, carpenters and caulkers in the New York shipyards erected a “Mechanics’ Bell” to ring out the meal breaks and closing hours they had won in a series of strikes. Labor activist George McNeill wrote, “As the ‘Liberty Bell’ rang out the proclamation of liberty from monarchical control, so the ‘Mechanics’ Bell’ proclaimed the liberty of leisure for the sons of toil.”

It’s time for that bell to ring for the sons and daughters of toil all over the world.


“Facing Layoffs” by David Montgomery and Ronald Schatz in Workers’ Control in America by David Montgomery (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979) analyzes the origins of seniority systems and their impact on worker aspirations and expectations.