

# TIME

# AND

# WORK

In an age of expanding business and shrinking jobs, could time become an equalizer? Or will it be the Great Divider?

by JAMIE SWIFT

*"Business is keeping its head in the sand if they think this issue will go away. It won't disappear so long as you have so many people unhappy about their working hours and as long as you have such continuously high unemployment. Not considering hours of work a factor is bonkers."*

— economist Arthur Donner, chairperson of the Advisory Group on Working Time and the Distribution of Work

Canada is becoming a more polarized place, where a yawning good jobs/bad jobs gap is now accepted as a fact of national life by the grandees of the corporate and political classes.

Of course, things haven't unravelled as they have south of the border. Canadians still gaze in wonder at the United States, a fearful place where the rich and alarming numbers of the middle class have seceded from the public sector, their private enclaves manifested by gated suburbs and private police and more generally by an apartheid-style form of separate development — complete with separate schools, hospitals and generalized fear of "the other". Our welfare state, though under assault, manages to hang on. But the trends are clear.

In 1993 sociologist John Myles and StatsCan methodologists Rene Morissette and Garnett Picot completed a generally unnoticed but hugely important study titled "What is Happening to Earnings Inequality in Canada?" Their results confirmed what many Canadians already knew: income inequality is on the rise among Canadian men as well as women employed full-time. The reason? A decrease in real wages of workers and a "marked decline" in the numbers of Canadians earning middle-class wages and salaries.

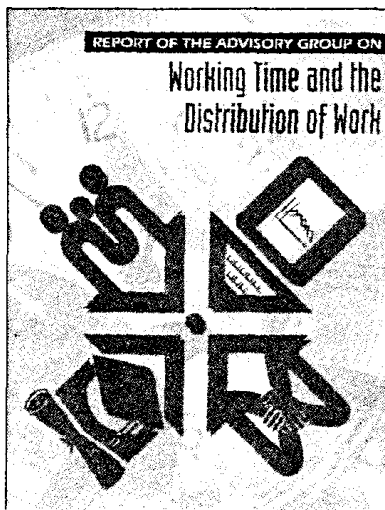
What distinguished Myles, Morissette and Picot's study was their conclusion that it is "quite

clear" that access to working hours has been a crucial factor in the growth of inequality in Canada. Their study adds weight to the arguments of those advocating a renewed interest in the issue of working time. Shorter-hours crusaders

usually nod to countries like Germany where long holidays and short days have not apparently affected competitiveness.

In the face of Lloyd Axworthy's social policy review (quickly eclipsed by Paul Martin's assault on the welfare state), Canadian labour pressured the Liberals to establish an Advisory Group on Working Time and the Distribution of Work. The Group, composed of both labour and labour-friendly people as well as three business representatives, was chaired by economist Arthur Donner. The Donner committee discovered that although manufacturing had recovered to pre-recession levels, only a quarter of the 400,000 people who had lost their jobs had been re-hired. Some jobs had migrated south, some had been eradicated by further mechanization. But overtime still persists as a factor in the equation. According to members of the Advisory Group, those who have jobs are working more hours — 2.2 hours of overtime per week on average.

Not only are Canadians experiencing a polarization of rich and poor, of good jobs and bad jobs, we are experiencing an increasing polarization in hours worked.



Although most of us still think in terms of the “forty-hour week” (the legislated norm), Canadians now average only 37 hours on the job. While this may seem like good news to the growing number of shorter-hours advocates, the principal reason for the decline in hours is the rise in part time work. Part-timers average only fifteen hours a week, while full-timers work more than the standard – an average of forty-two hours. One in five people, mostly men, work over fifty hours; 69 per cent of the more than two million who get less than thirty hours are women.

The time polarization applies to age as well as gender. We hear so much about “learning a living” and the training imperatives of the information age that one might assume that today’s young people, the most highly educated generation in Canadian history, would be thriving. Not so. Only forty per cent of people under 25 have full-time work. Those who have partial jobs have taken the training gospel seriously, however. Of the 925,000 young people working part time, 722,000 are enrolled in classes.

Having learned that the workforce is becoming polarized along the lines of both time and money, Ottawa’s Advisory Group concluded that reduced work time is a good idea, that overtime be curtailed and that anything over a hundred extra hours a year be taken in the form of time off. It also told the government that the growing reserve army of contingent workers should get “at least the minimum hourly wage and other workplace-related social benefits”.

Axworthy received this advice in December, before the budget crystallized the Liberal agenda. Labour remains cautiously hopeful that Ottawa will do something about work time, but Axworthy’s attention has been diverted by fights over cuts to UI – and particularly the protection of seasonal workers. Although all the proposed changes to working time and its distribution must make their painstaking way through the consultative corridors of the labour/management Canadian

## Access to working hours has been a crucial factor in the growth of inequality in Canada

Labour Market Productivity Centre, cuts to UI seem to be a different matter.

For its part, business is unlikely to embrace legislated changes that would give part-time and temporary workers access to the benefits enjoyed by full-timers. There is a slogan-word echoing around in what are now known with a sort of brutal honesty as “Human Resources” departments. That word is *flexibility*. Flexibility means that employers want maximum freedom to bring people in on an as-needed basis, with minimal benefits and minimal commitment to secure employment.

When the Saskatchewan government introduced changes to labour standards laws aimed at improving the lot of part-timers, it faced a deluge of business opposition led by the provincial Chamber of Commerce and the Canadian Federation of Independent Business. As a result, Roy Romanow’s NDP administration watered down some of the changes and opted to bring others in through regulation rather than legislation, thus making it easier for present and future cabinets to address things further.

Unions have internal problems of their own when it comes to the issue of work time. Bob White, who was a co-author of the Advisory Group’s report, has told the CLC executive council that the group’s recommendations “will be controversial within the movement given that many people want the extra pay that comes from long hours”.

But White, a seasoned negotiator, sees working time as a major initiative in bargaining with government. While some activists within the labour move-

ment want to organize the unemployed, union leaders can’t afford to ignore the need to serve their existing members – a group feeling uneasy about a future where job security is a commodity as slippery as a politician’s promise.

The reduced work time proposals of the Advisory Group could be a win for the unemployed (more jobs) while giving the labour leadership something to negotiate for their members (shorter hours). Still, business is on a roll and can’t bear the thought of any losses, any decreases in flexibility.

Bob White, however, apparently recognizes that the issue of working time won’t go away. It has potential political traction.

In 1994 the Vanier Institute of the Family issued a profile of Canadian family life showing that more than a third of dual income families would sink below the poverty line if one partner stopped working, and that family incomes were going “nowhere fast”.

According to Statistics Canada, one in three Canadians feel “constantly under stress” trying to do more than they can handle. A quarter see themselves as workaholics. When presented with the statement “I often feel under stress when I don’t have enough time,” 45 per cent (and more women than men) agreed. Nearly as many (44 per cent) said that when they needed *more* time, they skipped sleep. One in five had resolved to slow down next year.

Many Canadians are working harder, longer hours and standing still. When people are afraid for their jobs, their children’s futures, when they worry about strangers rather than the needs of strangers, they search for answers. For White and others groping for universalist ideas with the potential to end the winning streak of the right, time has appeal.

Two years ago B.C. employment counsellor and messianic shorter-hours crusader Bruce O’Hara came out with a book sporting what was surely the longest title in Canadian publishing history. The success of Working

Harder Isn't Working: How we can save the environment, the economy and our sanity by working less and enjoying life more was a sign of the times.

Meanwhile, the CAW introduced a pocket-sized booklet called *More Time, for ourselves, our children, our community*. Amidst slogans like "Getting our time back" and an analysis of labour's long fight for shorter hours, the CAW included the story of a worker who had wondered aloud, "Will there be jobs for our kids?"

In the midst of an unnoticed year-long strike that began in 1994 against Irving Oil's attempt to increase the work week from 37 to 42 hours, the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers adopted a shorter hours policy. The CEP, however, recognized that it would not be easy to make inroads into a culture of work-and-spend that had done much to bring labour's long battle for shorter hours to a halt at the onset of the postwar boom.

"Consumerism," observed the union with a wry nod to countless social theorists, "fulfilled a powerful need in modern society in ways that are not entirely understood."

American economist Juliet Schor (who was imported to advise the Advisory Group) pointed out in her book *The Overworked American* that business has generally been "explicit in its hostility to increases in free time, preferring consumption as the alternative to taking economic progress in the form of leisure".

Yet shorter-hours crusaders point to the irrationality of having so many stressed-out people working long hours, ruining their physical and psychic health, while so many others languish in poverty or near-poverty because they don't have enough work. They have an obvious point. But how do we deal with the paradox?

In a 1993 travel article aimed at upscale couples, journalist Judith Timson offered a typical suggestion, the "energizing" quicky vacation. She and her husband had tried it, and it worked. Costing up to \$1,200 for two or three

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days, her advice to fast track careerists was to be goal-oriented in their leisure. "Stay focused" on shopping (one recommended destination is Minnesota's 360-store Mall of America – the "ultimate shopping binge"), sightseeing, eating or whatever.

We learn that "life in the nineties means more work and no play", especially for the self-employed and the tense survivors of corporate downsizings.

"We're in hot pursuit of the one commodity eluding us all these days – not money, not even happiness, but time."

This is essentially the remoralization of the rich. Not that overworked professionals see themselves as "rich" in the old liveried-chauffeur sense of the word. Harried representatives of the upper reaches of the middle class doubtless regard themselves as people deserving of everything they have; after all, they work so hard for their money that they have little time to spend it. From this perspective, it's not hard to imagine that the people at other end of the social scale – those whose surplus of time may take, say, the form of underemployment in a part-time job – comprise the undeserving poor.

For those accustomed to punching a clock, overtime means the time-and-a-half chance to cash in (see sidebar). For much of the professional class as well as those who have survived in the realm of the lean corporation, mind-numbing hours are far from voluntary. Indeed, they are part of a manic, Type A culture of overwork characteristic of the *fin-de-siècle* era. If you don't join the rest of the "team" that stays late or takes the laptop home, you just don't fit in and you might as well get out. And

getting out is a daunting prospect in an age where job fear has eclipsed job security.

The link between work and consumerism makes the issue of working time attractive to environmentalists who are aware of the crucial importance of overconsumption but also stymied by the temporary eclipse of the politics of pollution by "the economy". The paradox of (jobless) growth coexisting with overflowing garbage dumps and the packaging from multiplying McJob sites is too apparent to ignore.

Similarly, feminists have long pointed out that market capitalism has falsely undervalued women's time. It's a commodity that has no price-- ergo, no value. Add this to the growing time squeeze on women who work for both a wage and their families and you can understand why the issues of hours has a lot of potential traction for this social movement.

The question of time – time for work, for the family, for anything else – is an obvious potential unifier for disparate social movements that feel a visceral kinship in the bleak landscape of *fin-de-siècle* politics.

Time, however, is a thorny issue that goes beyond the question of hours passed doing this or that. Amidst the hype surrounding the computer's Second Industrial Revolution, the enormous implications of strict timekeeping are unsurpassed – and unscrutinized.

Teaching (or, perhaps, "training") people to internalize the discipline of the clock involved a massive transformation, an aspect of the First Industrial Revolution that E.P. Thompson described as a "severe restructuring...a new human nature". Clearly, a challenge to the culture of the clock would be a major undertaking. But an essential one nonetheless.

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# OVERTIME

**B**ack in the days when he worked stamping automobile bumpers out of sheet steel, Dave Lachapelle could never understand the men who grabbed every hour of overtime they could, working Saturdays and Sundays. He detested overtime with what he describes as "a passion". His favourite clause in the union contract at Windsor Bumper was the one that said that overtime was strictly voluntary.

Lachapelle, a soft-spoken, reflective man, recalls the one time that he did go all out for hours. He wanted to find out what it was like, so he spent six months working seven-day weeks, twelve-hour shifts.

"I found myself snapping at my family," he recalls. "I found myself looking at the calendar to find out what day it was. I worked holidays – triple time!"

One night, driving home, he almost fell asleep at the wheel. He pulled over, emotionally and physically exhausted.

"To be perfectly honest with you I cried. It scared the shit out of me that I had almost fallen asleep. I sat there and cried like a baby. I asked myself, 'Am I losing my mind?' Everything I had been saying about working long hours was right... there was no question."

"When I used to say that I had spent a nice weekend with my wife, they'd look at me and say, 'What the hell you want to stay home with the old lady for?' I knew then that I was right and it just reinforced my view."

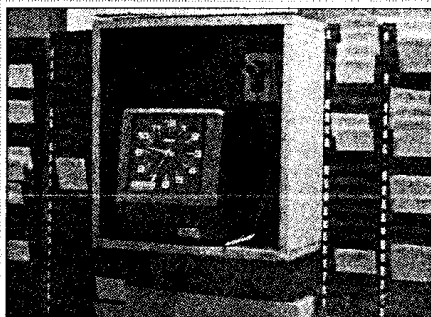
Still, there was never a shortage of volunteers for overtime when Windsor Bumper wanted to keep production going. But they didn't stick around for twelve-hour shifts because they liked the mind-numbing work. Some people felt they just had to work long hours to live a certain lifestyle. For others, the job had become all there was.

Lachapelle had worked over half his life at the bumper plant when corporate restructuring and free trade closed it down in 1990.

At 46, he found himself with a grade 10 education and few apparent prospects. Things were changing all around

him and the world was different than it had been back in the sixties.

Lachapelle realized that the best thing he could hope for was to get a job paying half of what he used to make. He hopped aboard the training bandwagon. High school upgrading and another round of re-training gave him a Health Care Aide certificate and, eventually, a job on call as a part-timer for something called the Reliacare Corporation. The hourly pay – not to mention his access to hours – was much less than his former full-time job. Nevertheless, he found that he was now doing really useful work, something to-do with human needs – both his own and



those of others.

He finds work in the nursing home more humane, explaining that it's rewarding to deal with people who appreciate his efforts.

"It's part of being whole and remaining sane in a society which continually tries to drive you nuts."

Still, despite the attention to shorter hours and slowing down, it is very hard to escape the demands of an accelerated society. Work in the home for the aged is like any other job in today's health care sector. The voices from above constantly emphasize speed. Such 'management-by-stress borrows from Japanese manufacturing's just-in-time techniques, applying them to human care services with devastating results.

At Windsor Bumper this was known as a speed-up. According to one workplace study based on focus groups of health care workers, the staff are moving too quickly to talk with the patients, to be with them.

"You used to say, 'Well, hi! How's so-and-so? And how's your mother doing?'" reported a hospital clerical worker who explained that now "You don't have time for idle chit-chat."

Patient's rights programs have been put in place but, according to a dietary aide, "They're not in there long enough to complain." ■