GAME CHANGERS
Economic Policies for a Working America

POLICY BRIEF

America's Workers Deserve a Four Day Week

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The U.S. workweek has remained unchanged for 85 years, despite a 4-fold increase in labor productivity. As a result, American workers are on the job many more hours than workers in other wealthy countries and have among the highest stress levels in the world. However, a growing body of evidence shows that many organizations can thrive with a 4-day, 32-hour weekly schedule. Employee well-being increases, and employers report improved company outcomes. Especially as the threat of AI-induced job loss looms, the 4-day workweek is an extremely popular, realistic and necessary reform that benefits both workers and employers. **It's time to amend the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) and institute a standard thirty-two-hour workweek.**

A four-day, thirty-two hour week, with no reduction in pay

In the 1930s, amid widespread unemployment, the U.S. government took a giant step toward eliminating a six-day workweek by setting a standard five-day, eight-hour schedule. The road to five had started in the 1920s as organizations began to end Saturday work. Since the pandemic, we're seeing a similar trend, with an increasing number of companies offering four days of eight hours, with no reduction in pay. They report success for employees and company performance. Legislative interest in company trials and amendments to the FLSA is also growing, at the local, state and federal level.

Americans need a 4-day workweek

American workers put in between 200 to 400 more hours a year than their counterparts in wealthy countries. They also have high levels of full-time work in dual-earner households, many single-parent families, and low social support for child and elder care. As a result, American workers are especially squeezed for time. A two-day weekend is not sufficient to do the basics--household labor and care, "life admin," sleep and self-care—let alone social engagement, community work, or even just having a life. Time pressure is a

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major reason why 50% of US workers felt stress "a lot of the day yesterday," and worker engagement ("quiet" and actual quitting) haven't reverted to pre-pandemic.

Improvements in well-being

A growing body of research from hundreds of organizations shows that shifting to a 4-day, 32-hour week without reducing pay yields large improvements in worker well-being. Stress and burnout are reduced, people sleep and exercise more, negative emotions decline and work-family and work-life conflicts ease. People are more satisfied with their lives. It's described as "game changing.

It works for employers too

While employee benefits may be expected, the more surprising finding is that organizations are also thriving on this schedule. One reason is that happier, better-rested employees are more motivated, effective, and engaged. But it's also because many companies prepare for the new schedule by reducing time wasting in excessive meetings, offering focus time, changing communication styles, or investing in time-saving practices. Some organizations benefit because people stop leaving and they get more applicants for open positions. A study of organizations who instituted a 4-day workweek found that 90% of them were still on this schedule after at least a year.

Why AI makes a 4-day week urgent

Since the late 19th century, as labor-saving technologies have been put in place, working hours have been reduced. It's an important reason why we haven't had steadily growing unemployment as labor is displaced. In many countries this process has continued, but in the United States, annual hours stopped falling in the 1970s and have risen since then. If new forms of AI result in the possibility of replacing large numbers of workers, we can't assume that in a global labor market, the US will produce enough new jobs to employ everyone. It'll be imperative to reduce the hours required in each job—thereby allowing workers to benefit fro*m AI technology, and to avoid mass unemployment.*

Getting to four: amend the FLSA

The path to a standard 4-day, 32-hour workweek requires federal legislation, in particular an amendment to the Fair Labor Standards Act. Such an amendment has been introduced in both the House and the Senate. However, it has not yet moved forward to passage.

First steps can be taken at the state level. To date, bills have been introduced in twelve states. These include amendments to State FLSAs for a 32-hour workweek and bills to run pilot programs similar to those that have taken place since 2022. We also call for the Federal government to follow the lead of other countries that have conducted national voluntary trials of companies. Government-sponsored trials are especially important to expand the 4-day week to the types of companies and workers that are under-represented in the voluntary trials and adoption trends. These include blue-collar workers, lower-paid workers, workers of color, men, and workers with lower levels of education. It is important that the 4-day week not become another axis of inequality between higher and lower-paid workers. Only government action can prevent that from

occurring. Inclusion should be built in, not just in any eventual legislation, but in earlier steps, such as government sponsored trials, incentives and research. For both state level and national amendments to the FLSA, there should be a stepwise shift that occurs over a number of years. In the bill proposed by Senator Bernie Sanders in 2024, the shift occurs over four years, with a two-hour reduction each year. Smaller reductions in hours are easier to achieve without loss of productivity, both because it is easier to find small efficiencies and because these reductions will be occurring alongside ongoing productivity growth.

The FLSA workweek amendments which have been proposed to date, including Sanders' bill, require overtime pay after 32 hours. Our proposal has one difference. Instead of requiring overtime pay at 32 hours, we propose compensated (or "comp") time for the hours between 32 and 40.

The reason for this is that the 40-hour workweek failed to achieve 40 hours for full-time employees for many decades, because firms opted to pay overtime premiums instead. Many workers came to depend on and prefer overtime. One reason for this provision is that in the presence of ongoing overtime, many employers have been shown to reduce base wages. This "blowback" effect is also plausible for a shift to 32 hours. If employers are required to offer compensated time between 32 and 40 hours, many more workers will actually get the 32-hour week. Our proposal would leave the overtime premium in effect for schedules over 40. After 85 years, it's high time that America's workers get the break they need—a four-day workweek.

*For more information on this topic, including the **Background Paper**, please visit our policy page.*

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