

A Union Justifies the Introduction of the Forty-Hour Work Week (1966)

Abstract

A spearhead of organized labor, the German metalworkers' union IG Metall fought for the work week to be reduced to forty hours. According to the union, this step would improve workers' health and make them more productive. More leisure time, the union argued, would give workers more opportunity to recover from the demands of the modern industrial workplace.

Source

As of July 1, 1966, the 40-hour work week will be a reality for the metalworking industry in the Federal Republic. All attempts by employers, both the Confederation of Metal Industry Employers [Gesamtmittel] and the Confederation of German Employers' Associations, to achieve a further postponement in implementing the work-hour reductions agreed upon in wage contracts six years ago failed on account of IG Metall's unwavering stance.

The employers tried to assert that a contractual reduction in working hours would lead to prohibitively large increases in wage costs and would worsen the economic situation of the metalworking industry, especially in comparison with other countries with which the Federal Republic competes on international markets. But even the comparative account of the contractual or statutory weekly working hours submitted by Gesamtmittel proves that the forty-hour work week is already a fact in the most important industrialized countries in the European economic sector.

This is especially true for Great Britain and France, which are Europe's largest metal-processing industrial nations after the Federal Republic. In the USA, working hours are even shorter than in the Federal Republic. Presently, only some smaller European states still have longer working hours. [...]

Industrial output in the metal-processing industry has increased every year in the ten years since 1956. In characteristic fashion, in 1964, the year in which contractual working hours were lowered from 42.5 to 41.5, output rose 7.9% above the previous year. This year also showed one of the strongest increases in labor productivity (output per work hour): a 7.4% rise. These objective figures were carefully calculated by the economic division of IG Metall. Employers could not even attempt to cast doubt on these findings.

Shorter working hours are just as important for the employee as higher wages. Only through shorter working hours can the employee maintain the capacity for work in the long run. Modern industry demands from the worker a much greater expenditure of energy during work hours than previous methods of production. This greater expenditure of energy must therefore be accompanied by more leisure time.

Over the past few years, early disability has increasing alarmingly: 1.6 million pensions are currently being paid to people under 65 who are drawing on disability insurance. The number of early retirees continues to grow. Every year, 300,000 employees have to retire prematurely at an average age of 57 on account of disability. Early disability is not only a tough blow to the individual; it simultaneously reduces macroeconomic productivity and therefore contributes to higher cost burdens for firms, pension funds, and the federal budget. Not least for the sake of the people, IG Metall had to insist that the reduction in working hours to 40 hours a week, as agreed upon six years ago, finally became a reality. IG Metall has

achieved this goal, against the strongest resistance, in the interest of the working people.

Source: “Mehr Freizeit—Mehr Freiheit. Ab 1. Juli ist die 40-Stunden-Woche in der metallverarbeitenden Industrie Wirklichkeit,” *Metall. Zeitung der IG Metall*, no. 3 (1966), p. 8f.; reprinted in Christoph Kleßmann and Georg Wagner, eds., *Das gesplante Land. Leben in Deutschland 1945–1990*. Munich, 1993, pp. 430–32. Republished with permission.

Translation: Jeremiah Riemer

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