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U.S. Works More, for Less

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A report from the International Labor Organization recently got headlines for its finding that American workers work the longest hours in the world.

Not exactly news to readers of this space - ahem, ahem - but it's good to see the word getting out. American workers now average 1,979 hours a year. That's 137 hours (about 3 1/2 weeks) more than Japanese workers, 260 hours (about 6 1/2 weeks) more than British ones, and 499 hours (about 12 1/2 weeks) more than Germans.

So to get in line with, say, German working hours, the average American worker would need to take about three months' extra vacation each year.

Which sounds like a terrific idea until you remember that she'd probably go broke if she did so. American workers already make a lot less than those Germans working shorter hours - in real "purchasing power parity" terms, the bottom tenth of American workers, for example, already make less than half their German counterparts. If we all took off for a quarter of the year, well, we'd be earning a quarter more less.

And note too that these numbers are just about individual workers, and not the married couples who typically head American families. On their status we need to look to yet another report, this one from our very own Center on Wisconsin Strategy, issued around the same time as the ILO's but relying on more complete data. It found that those couples too or both of them, as it were, are now working all the livelong day, or "full time" if you prefer.

Let's define our terms here. I'm going to define "full time" work for a single individual as 2,000 hours of work a year or 50 weeks at 40 hours per week (with the missing 10 workdays lost to national holidays or the occasional sick day). For a two-earner family, "full time" means both earners work this much, so between them their family unit puts in 4,000 hours a year.

It turns out that Wisconsin families are very close to this already. Specifically, two-earner families in Wisconsin now work an average 3,952 hours per year, or just 48 hours shy of full-time family work. Nationally in the United States, families average 3,693 hours - 258 hours less than in Wisconsin, or about five hours less each week. Let no one say the work ethic isn't alive and well in Wisconsin!

Indeed, it's sort of killing us. If you did international comparison on this family measure of working hours, they'd be even more striking than the individual worker comparisons just reported. The reason is that the overall labor force participation rate - that is, the percentage of the adult population in the labor force at any given time - is much higher here than there. It's not just that workers in the United States are putting in longer hours; it's also that a much larger share of the U.S. population works.

This wasn't always the case. Back in the mid-1970s, the labor force participation rates in the United States and Europe stood almost exactly the same, at 65 percent. Since then, however, the European rate has dropped to about 60 percent, and ours has risen to the low 70s. And for the families from which those workers come, that implies a huge difference.

So, for example, to return to the German example above, the average worker in Germany works only about 75 percent of the hours that the average American does, and the labor force participation rate among married couple is only about 75 percent as well. So the average German two-earner family is actually working only about half as long as the average American one.

And now remember, for example, that bottom tenth of workers. Those families are working half as long, and in some measure living twice as well! This gives a whole new wages and hours meaning to the "Faktor vier!" demand long heard from German environmentalists (in their case, the demand - now widely realized in Germany over the past decade - of redesigning production systems to get twice the productivity with half the waste).

And these family effects are even more pointed when you consider that all of the difference in working hours we're talking about - both the increase in average American work-years, and the increase in overall labor market participation rates - is accounted for by increased (paid) work effort by women, who do this "second shift" on top of their already disproportionate share of household and care- giving duties.

American women entered the labor force in record numbers in the early 1970s and haven't returned home since. (Here too, by the way, Wisconsin is a leader, with about the highest female labor market participation rate in the country.) Partly this was a result of the "women's liberation" - albeit largely to low-wage service sector work - that achieved for women newfound job access and labor market mobility, and the reasonable delight of women in finally getting compensated for their work.

* Mostly, though, it was a coping strategy by working families to make up for the stagnation or decline of American wages that started around the same time. Married women in particular entered and stayed in the labor force, even during their child-rearing years, because their families

needed the money. And indeed the only reason that family incomes have held up over the past generation is because of their work effort.

But now that mom and dad are both working full time - with mom basically having added a week a year for the past 25 years - we seem to be reaching the almost natural limits of this coping strategy.

What's next? Should we start eliminating national holidays? Or maybe the institution of the "weekend"? Or maybe, to get through another 25 years, we could all just add another spouse?

Joel Rogers teaches at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and is founder and director of the Center on Wisconsin Strategy (COWS), which administers the Sustaining Wisconsin campaign. This is another in a weekly series of Capital Times columns he's writing on issues in the campaign. For more information, see www.cows.org and www.sustainingwisconsin.org.

Joel Rogers is director of COWS, the Center on Wisconsin Strategy, at the UW-Madison. On Jan. 29, COWS debuted "Sustaining Wisconsin," a statewide dialogue about the future of Wisconsin. The themes expressed in this view of the state of the state will carry through the next 18 months as COWS uses Sustaining Wisconsin to put the Wisconsin Idea into action.

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