

# 6-Hour Working Day: the Swedish Story

*Or Whatever Happened to the 6-Hour Day?*

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## 6-Hour Working Day: the Swedish Story Or Whatever Happened to the 6-Hour Day?

***“The Swedish government has no plans to introduce a 6-hour working day. Our ambition is to reach the lowest unemployment rate in the EU by 2020 through more worked hours. In any case, it is the employers and trade unions who have ownership of the working day hours”,  
says Natalie Sial, Press Secretary, Ministry of Employment<sup>1</sup>.***

This answer probably surprises many as the myth of Sweden having introduced a 6-hour working day has spread around the world in many newspaper articles in the past year or two. The New Zealand Herald started what seems to be a campaign for a 6-hour day in July 2014 where trials in Sweden are cited as if a law had been passed. When the business paper *Fast Company* in October 2016 ran the story [“Why Sweden Is Shifting to a 6-Hour Workday”](#) - where the Stockholm based IT company *Filimundus* speaks of their introduction of a shorter working day - it was picked up by [CNN](#), the Guardian, the Australian [Sydney Morning Herald](#) and many more. But no steps towards legislation for a shorter working day has been introduced in Sweden, in fact nothing has changed since the 40-hour week was introduced in 1973. What has taken place are *trials* with 6-hour working days (with maintained salary) in several publicly funded health services in municipalities and regions, mainly where the Left party (Vänsterpartiet) has influence.

The legal 8-hour working day was introduced in 1919 - following campaigns to divide the day into 8 hours of work, 8 hours of free time and 8 hours of sleep - and has not changed, despite the 6-hour day lingering on the political agenda for the Social-democratic party since the 1960s, a party which has been in government for a large portion of this time. Swedish Social democratic women were already at their 1978 congress served a report named “What happened to the 6-hour working day”, so discussions are long overdue. However, today it is the Left party (Vänsterpartiet, former communist) and the Green party (Miljöpartiet) that campaign for the change. As smaller parties, perhaps they can better afford to be more ideological and utopian. However, none of the two parties has job sharing as the main purpose, instead it is wellbeing and work-life balance that is stressed. The aim of the Left party is to reduce working time gradually, first by decreasing the working week to 37.5 hours, then with a subsequent reform to 35 hours, to eventually reach 6 hours per day<sup>2</sup>. The Green party targets only a shorter work week<sup>3</sup>. From the Feminist party (Feministiskt initiativ) and the Left party there are hopes that a shorter working day would increase gender equality in the unpaid household work, but studies from France following the introduction of the 35-hour week have failed to detect any significant change in men’s

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<sup>1</sup> When asked in a personal email Mid December 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Vänsterpartiet web page, [www.vansterpartiet.se/vansterpress/sex-timmars-arbetsdag-i-en-nara-framtid](http://www.vansterpartiet.se/vansterpress/sex-timmars-arbetsdag-i-en-nara-framtid)).

<sup>3</sup> Miljöpartiet party programme, <https://www.mp.se/om/partiprogram/valfarden>.

contribution to household work<sup>4</sup>. It is not certain, however, that results would not be different in Sweden where gender equality is higher.

## 1. What is the Purpose?

Work critique is older than even socialism or liberalism; the idea that one should not live to work, but work to live. We are right to ask why socialist and social democratic parties as so keen to push for the *right to work*<sup>5</sup> when the opposite would seem more logical. The question is which problem the 6-hour day is hoping to solve? Is it to share/split posts, thus creating a larger number of job opportunities? Is it to improve work-life balance, to have more time to help children with homework and to be with the family (in Sweden also called the Life puzzle)? Is it to improve working conditions, leading to better efficiency and less absenteeism at work? Or all of the above?

Not that many jobs can be easily cut into 6 hour pieces - it works for factory workers, shop attendants, hair dressers etc., jobs where the customer relationship is short. And in the industrial sector, staff already often works shifts. Most white-collar jobs entail too many continuous relationships to be easily split with another person as you can behind a cash registrar where you can leave without any exchange of information between staff<sup>6</sup>. So talk of "job sharing" is largely not relevant, instead we should talk about hiring more staff for more identical posts.

Although the Social Democrats are not presently taking up the idea at the national level - this is mainly due to the costs it incurs - party organisations in some cities or regions such as Stockholm, Malmö and the regions of Skåne in the South and Dalarna in Central Sweden have been conducting trials. The most famous trial was that of *Svartedalens Äldrecentrum* (home for the elderly) in Gothenburg, a city of almost 1 million inhabitants. The cost to the city amounted to 9.8 million SEK (approx. 1 million EUR). The trial added 17 new jobs. This reduced the national costs for unemployment benefits with 4,7 million SEK<sup>7</sup>. However, a full cost/benefit analysis must also include expenses for more human resources staff, more lockers in staff rooms, etc etc, that come from having a larger number of employees for the same tasks. It also complicates matters that healthcare costs are on the local or regional budget whereas unemployment allowance is on the national.

## 2. Reduce Stress

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<sup>4</sup> INED study, [http://journees.uniteco.site.ined.fr/fichier/s\\_rubrique/20013/pailhesolazsouletie2014.fr.pdf](http://journees.uniteco.site.ined.fr/fichier/s_rubrique/20013/pailhesolazsouletie2014.fr.pdf), page 10).

<sup>5</sup> Paul Lafarge, The Right to be Lazy 1883, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lafargue/1883/lazy/>

<sup>6</sup> There should, however, be possibilities to learn hand over of more complex tasks from the hand overs made my hospital staff etc.

<sup>7</sup> Swedish radio, <https://sverigesradio.se/diverse/appdata/isidor/files/104/757fe9ed-702f-401a-b275-c3c45fcfae99.pdf>, summary in English page 10).

A Study of a 6-hour day trial by the Swedish Stress Research Institute showed decreased stress levels and better sleep among trialed staff. In the 18 months study 354 employees in 33 different public work places in health care, school and social services reduced their total working hours by 25%, while keeping a full salary. The rest of the participants, 226, had their usual schedules. Extra staff was hired to fulfil the tasks. The effects were positive on stress, sleep and sick leave, but were not that significant and the cost was deemed high. A government study showed the cost for the cities and region of Skåne, with 1,3 million inhabitants, of introducing a full 6-hour working day was 19 billion SEK (approx. 2 billion EUR). Of course, for a positive effect to be felt, the missing 25% work load is to be taken on by newly recruited staff to avoid a more stressful workday when the same amount of work is to be completed in 6 hours instead of 8. One can also wonder whether the positive effects are truly long-lasting or just a honey moon period<sup>8</sup>.

While in France the 6-hour working day is spoken about mainly to create jobs by sharing the overall workload, in Sweden the main arguments are for the public sector to improve working conditions, reducing sick leaves and for both public and private sector to attract new employees to activities such as care for the elderly that are currently struggling to hire; many people would love to work just 6 hours for same pay. Companies in the IT sector are already doing it to attract staff.

Particularly the French experience that the shift to a 35-hour week did not seem to increase hiring is often used as argument against the idea that a reduced work week/day leads to more jobs.

Other arguments are that the currently unemployed usually lack the education level to take these jobs even if they existed. And most specifically, the argument is that we already have a substantial shortage of teachers, nurses, mid wives, doctors and other skilled workers where a 6-hour working day would only make finding enough qualified personnel even more difficult.

### 3. Who Benefits from the Increase in Productivity?

With productivity having increased 20-fold since the 8-hour day was introduced, it certainly seems about time to reduce working hours, or the duration of the working week. Productivity has increased by 75 percent between 1976 and 1996. In the past 40 years, increased productivity has been feeding company profits rather than benefiting workers' salaries or shorter working hours<sup>9</sup>. But what stopped the debate in its tracks is demographics, with an ageing population all over Europe. This caused most governments to urge their citizens to work *more*, not less, and even longer into old age.

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<sup>8</sup> Dagens Nyheter, <http://www.dn.se/ekonomi/sextimmarsdag-pa-prov-gav-farre-sjukskrivna/>.

<sup>9</sup> Sociologist Roland Paulsen <http://www.etc.se/inrikes/att-skapa-mer-jobb-ar-en-absurd-tanke>. Also in the TV show Idévärlden 15 Jan 2017, <http://www.svtplay.se/video/11933730/idevarlden/idevarlden-sasong-1-avsnitt-1>.

One other reason for the disregard of the 6-hour day may be that many Swedish people (in particular women) already work part-time, but with reduced pay. There is a law to give parents the right to work 75% of their full-time job until the child's 8<sup>th</sup> birthday, and many (more often women) do. In fields where many women are employed, such as in health care, part-time contracts are more the norm than the exception, despite trade union and government warnings of the lower pensions that will follow from long-standing part-time work. Trade unions are now pushing hard for "the right to full time". Surprisingly, France has almost the same percentage of part-time employees as Sweden, 14% to 14.3% on a level close to the OECD average, where the Netherlands top the chart with 38,5% part-time employees<sup>10</sup>.

## 4. Chronic Overtime

But before we start discussions of reducing the working day to "share jobs" we must address the issue of chronic overtime. Swedes work overtime to the equivalent of 116 000 full-time posts, as per studies conducted in 2015 by the federation of trade unions for white collar workers, TCO.

A recent study from the trade union for office workers (Unionen) shows that Stockholmers work on average 6.6 hours overtime per week, and with this they are not even highest in the country (18,4%). Both in the private and public sector, workers and white collar alike, activities are running with scant staffing. On top of this, one third of all overtime hours worked in Stockholm was without extra pay as overtime for white collar workers are often traded away in contracts<sup>11</sup>.

One may wonder whether spending this much tax money to create more jobs and/or to reduce stress levels by sharing existing posts is logical when normal recruitment could simply be increased in schools, child care, health care and geriatric care where classes are too large and hospital wards understaffed. Normal staff increase would at least provide clarity in terms of value for money, as opposed to the uncertain prospect of employers actually choosing to hire more staff following shorter working days.

Studies show that employees spend on average 2 hours a day doing things other than working, and those in more qualified jobs can spend as much as 50% of their working hours

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<sup>10</sup> OECD statistics, 2013, <https://data.oecd.org/emp/part-time-employment-rate.htm>.

<sup>11</sup> Dagens Nyheter 19 Dec 2017, <http://www.dn.se/ekonomi/har-jobbar-de-mest-overtid/>.

dealing with private matters. Researchers call this “empty work”<sup>12</sup>. A possibility is also that employees on a 6-hour working day simply take fewer breaks and surf less on the web and remain as productive as before so that no new hires are needed. Is this a good thing or would it create *more* stress? Perhaps after a first honey moon employers would simply take the chance to fit same work load into 6 hours?

## Conclusion

The 6-hour working day debate in Sweden started with a view to improve work-life balance and gender equality. The focus, however, has shifted to reducing stress and sickness at work, and making the work place more attractive. The argument for sharing jobs was never that strong in Sweden, as many sectors constantly lack staff and work hours are in any case regulated in negotiations between employers and trade unions. Nothing hinders a company from offering shorter working days, and some now do. Trade union adherence is 67,7% in Sweden – compared to 7,7% in France<sup>13</sup>. This means that legal intervention is probably necessary to achieve change in France, but may not be in Sweden.

Arguments in favour of a universal basic income presuppose that robotisation will mean less workers needed, but is this true for the public sector? In the production of goods more and more can be done by robots (and already is), but in caring work, is it possible or even desirable? Are then shorter working days a better solution given that it maintains a work force even in less desirable jobs where it would be difficult to recruit if people benefited from a workless basic income? More complex cost/benefit analyses for the society as a whole are needed for both these ideas. But in the meantime, private companies in Sweden are slowly taking the lead to introducing the 6-hour working day even without governmental or trade union regulation.

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<sup>12</sup> Aftonbladet, <http://www.aftonbladet.se/wendela/jobbet/article20187056.ab>.

<sup>13</sup> OECD statistics 2013, [https://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=UN\\_DEN](https://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=UN_DEN).