

French Workers Fight to Maintain 35-Hour Work Week

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French workers are fighting to maintain their 35 hour work week. Adopted in February of 2000, as part of the platform of France's Socialist Party, it became effective in 2002. Now, despite no ill effects in productivity the *MEDEF*, or the "Movement of the Enterprises of France," which is an employer's union, is pressing for a return to the past.

Workers in France often work more than 35 hours. In fact the average is just under 40 hours, still seven hours less than the United States. The 35 hour mark is simply the point at which rules for paying overtime take effect. The argument for implementing a 35 hour week was that it would share work among more people and thus reduce unemployment.

For the first couple years this was the case. Unemployment declined 15%. Long term, this effect has faded. Politicians and employers now claim that it is time to amend this law to make it easier for each company to negotiate separately with the company union.

It's not clear what the rationalization is for this. Productivity is still among the highest in Europe. Eurostat lists France's productivity at 45.60 euros/hour in 2013. This compares to an EU average of 32.10 euros/hour. Germany, Europe's economic juggernaut, was 42.80 euros/hour.

In a 2015 article, [Bloomberg wrote](#) that the time has come to do away with a law that no longer serves a purpose. To quote;

There is probably no longer any need to keep the 35-hour week law on the books. It has helped lower-income women in France find more time for their families, it may have contributed to cutting unemployment at some point, and it may have shifted some of the work burden to people who were able to dispatch it more rationally. It has, however, failed to establish a universal social norm as strong as the five-day, 40-hour week.



French students and labour union workers attend a demonstration against the French labour law proposal in Paris, France, as part of a nationwide labor reform protest, March 9, 2016. The slogan reads “No thanks”.

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Apparently helping low-income women, cutting unemployment (at least temporarily) and shifting work to more efficient workers, just isn't worth it. There is no economic reasoning here for reverting to the past. One can only assume that employers believe they will find it more profitable, or at least easier, if workers gave up their 35 hour week.

The lesson here is that employers cannot adapt or accept change unless that change has a benefit to the business or the company executives. Move to another country for lower taxes, no problem; the cost is worth it. Give workers a break on work hours, never.

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