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

A spearhead of organized labor, the German metalworkers' union [*IG Metall*] fought for the reduction of the work week to forty hours. According to the union, this step would strengthen 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.

Starting July 1, 1966, the 40-hour work week will be a reality for the metalworking industry in the Federal Republic. All attempts by employers, by the Employers' Association for the Metalworking Industry [*Gesamtmetail*] as well as the Confederation of German Employers' Associations, to secure an additional delay in implementing the work-hour reduction agreed upon in wage contracts six years ago failed on account of *IG Metall's* unwavering stance.

The employers had tried to assert that a contractual reduction in working hours would lead to prohibitively large wage-cost increases 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 contractual or statutory weekly work-hours submitted by *Gesamtmetail* proves that the forty-hour work week is already a fact in the most important industrialized countries in the European economic sphere.

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 grown in every one of 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% over 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*. The employers could not even try to challenge these conclusions.

Shorter working hours are just as important for the employee as higher wages. Only through shorter working hours can the employee maintain his capacity for work in the long run. Modern

industry demands that the worker expend much more energy during work hours than previous methods of production. This greater energy expenditure must therefore be accompanied by more leisure time.

Over the past few years, early disability has been increasing at a frightening pace: 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 with an average age of 57 have to end their professional lives on account of disability. Early disability is not only a hard blow to the individual; it simultaneously reduces macroeconomic productivity and therefore contributes to higher cost burdens for firms, pension funds, and the federal budget. If nothing else, 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 reached this goal, in the face of intense 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" ["More Free Time – More Freedom. Starting July 1 the 40-Hour Work Week will be a Reality in the Metalworking Industry," *Metall. Zeitung der IG Metall*, No. 3 (1966), p. 8f.; reprinted in Christoph Kleßmann and Georg Wagner, eds., *Das gespaltene Land. Leben in Deutschland 1945-1990*. [*The Divided Country. Life in Germany 1945-1990*]. Munich, 1993, pp. 430-32.

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