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### **Can We Work Our Way to Sustainability?**

One of the most hotly debated issues in the recent French presidential elections was the viability of the French 35 hour work week in a competitive world economy. The winning conservative candidate, Nicolas Sarkozy, called the existing 35 hour work week an “absurdity.” The main economic motto of Sarkozy’s campaign was “work more, earn more.” He argued that support for the 35 hour work week was part of a dysfunctional philosophy that asserts that “work has no value,” that people “can do anything they feel like doing,” including simply being “lazy.”

Conservative columnists in the United State and Europe have chimed in asserting that France cannot possibly compete with a 35 hour work week in a globalized economy in which Indian and Chinese workers are willing to work a “35 hour day.”

All this may ring a bell for many Americans. We work longer hours than any other “rich” nation except Japan. Over the last several decades, as our incomes have grown in real terms, we have taken almost none of that increased income in the form of increased leisure time. Instead the average number of hours worked per family has increased, creating an increasingly serious time crunch for most families. Our commitment to long hours of work has led to studies that have probed the “overworked American”, probably more accurately labeled the “overworked American family”.

France’s new president, Sarkozy, admires the American commitment to work and sees that as a necessity if France is going to compete with not only the United States but with the burgeoning nations of China and India.

All this is presented as obvious economic wisdom that only leftist wishful thinking would dispute. But it is not clear that there is any economic logic to most of these assertions about the importance of hours of work in determining either well being or competitiveness.

From an economic point of view, families face two serious constraints on their well being: a limited number of hours to do all of the things would like to do and a limited number of dollars with which to purchase all of the things they would like to buy. Since most people must commit a big chunk of their time to work to obtain their dollar income, there is necessarily a conflict between having time available to engage in important non-market activities like taking care of your family and enjoying leisure time activities, and going out and earning money income.

Each of us must make a decision about how to balance the attractiveness of more money income against the attractiveness of spending more time with family and friends or more time engaged in “homemaking” or leisure activities. This is an economic decision no different than the decisions we have to make daily about how we spend our money except that it focuses on how we “spend” our time. But, apparently, we are being told that if we choose to spend more time with our families and in household activities and less earning money, we are being lazy and those reduced work hours damage our family’s well being and that of the national economy as a whole.

But how could that be true? As productivity and income rise, we tend to buy more of most things that are attractive. Why would we not take some of the benefits of higher productivity in the form of less time spent working for someone else and more time enjoying a variety of non-market activities?

The likely response from the bean counters would be that if we work less, our money income and the national gross domestic product will be lower than it otherwise would be and the rate of growth of our commercial economy will be slower. That is all true, but it is not a sign that we would in any sense be worse off. After all, we made the choice. To suggest otherwise is to ignore the broad range of the sources of our well being and focus only on the commercial economy and the purchase of things as the exclusive sources of our well being.

This is not a trivial issue or one that only involves our personal choices. Those pushing longer working hours as a way of boosting economic well being are equating commercial production and consumption with well being. But producing and consuming more puts a very heavy burden on the natural environment. If, no matter how rich our countries become, we stay on the treadmill of producing and consuming more and more and more, we almost certainly will make the planet an unlivable place. We are about to watch this on a grand scale as billions of citizens of India and China seek to produce and consume at the same level we do. Meanwhile, we have people like France's Nicolas Sarkozy insisting that the citizens of France have to increase their levels of work, production, and consumption so as to stay ahead of the hardworking Chinese and Indians! It is to be a race to see who can produce and consume more, a race that can only end in environmental, spiritual, and physical ruin.

That is why it is crucial to focus on the full range of activities, relationships, settings, and things that contribute to our well being. Money and commerce make important contributions to this, but so does time spent with family and friends, time spent playing in a variety of challenging ways, time spent developing our talents and

knowledge, time helping our communities and other community members, and time spent repairing the damage our past activities have done to the planet.

It should be clear that we cannot consume our way to happiness, that we cannot work our way to stable families and relationships, that paying strangers to provide the most intimate of care to our children, elders, and ourselves does not make any of us better off. It is time to slow down the consumption treadmill, not speed it up as Sarkozy urges, and focus on using our time where it matters most and does the least damage.