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All Work and No Play Makes...What?

The debate in France over the amount of vacation and paid holidays that French workers enjoy has dramatized the significant difference between the United States and the rest of the industrialized world in the number of hours we work each year. French law requires that workers get 31 days, over six weeks, of paid leave each year and some union contracts often add significantly more paid days off from work. The number of paid vacation days or holidays in France is not outrageously high compared to other European nations partly because the European Union requires all member nations to mandate at least 20 paid vacation days.

Of course, in the United States, we have no federal and usually no state laws requiring employers to provide paid vacation time to private sector workers. In addition, as unions in the private sector have grown weaker and weaker, the ability of workers to negotiate more paid leave has declined leaving many American workers with little or no paid leave. About a quarter of American private sector workers are in that situation. For part-time workers, about two-thirds have no paid leave at all.

As a result of these differences in paid leisure time, Americans now work more hours per year than workers in almost any other industrialized country. New Zealand is a close competitor with the US for the title of national workaholics. This is a curious development given that beginning in the 19th century there was an ongoing and ultimately successful effort by workers to reduce the work day and work week. By the middle of the 20th century the eight hour day and five day work week were the standard.

Workers went well beyond that and also successfully demanded that some of the benefits of rising labor productivity be paid to them in the form of paid vacation days and holidays, letting them take some of their pay not in the form of more dollars per hour but in the form of more family and leisure time. In addition, paid sick leave protected family budgets from periodic illness.

Europe and the United States were on more or less the same path until the early 1970s with both groups of workers putting in similar numbers of hours of work per year. But then our work paths rather dramatically diverged. American unions continued to lose strength as a result of changes in the industrial structure of our economy, repeated serious recessions, and outright hostility from state and federal governments. As Europeans continued to take a share of their increasing prosperity in the form of increased leisure and family time, the non-wage benefits available to American workers in the private sectors stagnated and began to decline along with the percentage of the private workforce that was represented by unions.

As a result of the long hours we work per year, American production per worker is considerably greater than that of European workers. That has led some conservative European leaders to argue that Europe is losing its competitive edge. But that is a rather strange way of looking at productivity. Productivity is supposed to measure how productive *a unit of labor effort* is. It is usually measured in terms of output per hour of work effort. American workers produce more because they work longer hours not because they are more productive in each of the hours they work. In fact the productivity of European workers is as high as or higher than American workers. Europeans simply enjoy more time away from the job.

As more and more American women spend more and more hours working outside of the home, the average annual work time for married couples has been growing steadily, creating a time crunch within most families. Sick children or a sick parent can cause considerable financial and time stresses within the family given the number of women who work less than full time and without paid sick or parental leave.

One would think that with all of the emphasis within the American political debate on family values and protecting the stability of families, there would be a strong movement within our nation to make participation in the workforce more compatible with raising children. But instead we appear to be sliding the opposite direction, being forced to sacrifice time with our families, even with our sick children, in order to keep our jobs or protect our paychecks. There have been scattered but weak efforts to pass a federal "Healthy Families Act" that would guarantee seven days of paid leave for all workers to deal with their own or a family member's illness. Some state governments have been moving more steadily in that direction.

But these efforts just deal with the most obvious conflict between parents' jobs and their ability to care for their children and themselves. The scarcity of time we actually have to raise our children due to lack of shared leisure time, holidays, vacations, etc remains.

Our definition of "prosperity" has taken a strange twist here. We successfully boost family income modestly by putting more and more hours in working outside of the home. To do so we hire others to care for our kids and add significantly to the stress in our lives and within our families. We count the additional money income we earn as demonstrating that we are better off. But we are simply working more hours, paying

others to do things we used to do for ourselves, sacrificing family time, leisure time, and, ultimately, our peace of mind and our health.

There are some obvious questions here. Are we really better off? Why did we collectively step onto this work treadmill? And, finally, is the substitution of consumption and things for time and quality of life sustainable in our increasingly environmentally constrained world?