

British employers have little to lose from EU's "Working Time Directive"

Liz Smith

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The European Union's (EU) 'Working Time Directive' supposedly limits the workweek to 48 hours. It came into force in Britain on October 1. Besides the directive on working hours, there are guarantees of 15 paid holidays, statutory rest breaks and new rights for night workers. The legislation potentially targets 4 million employees who work long hours.

The legislation originally came into force throughout Europe in November 1993, but unlike other EU countries it did not apply in Britain under an exemption negotiated by the previous Tory government. Consequently, British workers toil for the longest number of hours, an average 48.5-hour week. Even now, a long list of exemptions means that many, including transport workers, junior doctors, and others, are not covered. There are also special provisions for those working in the media, managers, caretakers and security guards.

The Confederation of British Industry (CBI), the main employers' organisation, has opposed the new rules because they may cost business its competitive advantage in Europe. John Monks, the Trades Union Congress (TUC) general secretary, said, 'Britain is the long-hours capital of Europe. These new rights should halt the trend towards ever longer hours.' The TUC warned that exemptions written into the rules--such as allowing individual 'opt-outs' from the 48-hours limit--could be exploited by unscrupulous employers. Again, Britain is the only country to allow such opt-outs. This will not be reviewed by the European Commission until 2003.

Two recent surveys highlight the working conditions facing millions in Britain. The Manufacturing Science and Finance union (MSF) found that workers at the British Standards Institution were at breaking point due to increased workloads. Some of its members worked

100 hours over seven days every week. The MSF is launching a legal appeal on behalf of these workers as a test case for the new legislation.

A survey carried out by a soft drinks manufacturer reported that the tradition of the hour-long lunch appears all but dead in the UK, particularly among women workers. Only 2.3 percent of the working population take an hour or more for lunch and a third of women eat no lunch at all. Increased workloads and tight deadlines were cited as the main cause for missing lunch. Psychiatrist Dr. Pam Spurr said the survey showed young women in the workplace are 'feeling the pressure to perform, regardless of the consequences to their emotional and physical well-being.'

A report published September 30 by the Economic and Social Research Council, 'Work Now. Pay Later?' illustrates the toll that longer hours take on workers and their families. 'Working long hours over three years can lead to an almost 20 per cent rise in the proportion of women with health problems.... Forty-two per cent of fathers working standard hours talk to their child most days, compared with only 20 per cent of fathers working over 48 hours.'

The British government stressed that the new legislation was drafted with as much flexibility as possible. Instead of addressing the plight of those who work long hours in Britain, the exemptions contained in the legislation ensure that employers have little to lose. It is also not clear whether the three weeks paid holidays the legislation guarantees include statutory 'Bank Holidays'. If this is the case, then only two additional weeks paid leave are obligatory under the directive. Moreover, except for cases of intimidation by employers forcing workers to sign away their rights, many will need little pressure to persuade them to forego shorter hours, given wage-rates so low that

overtime is essential for a family's income. Already, many workers in catering, transport and other sectors on 40- to 48-hour contracts work a 60-hour week and above, as this is the only way to make a living wage.



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