

# The Work-Week or the Work-Life?<sup>1</sup>

Suggestions Concerning a More Comprehensive Approach to Such Problems as the Shorter Work-Day and the Shorter Work-Week

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IN THREE separate conversations during the past six months, three different individuals—one a consulting engineer and two industrial executives—have made essentially the same observation to me *a propos* the shorter work-week and shorter work-day. "I am not certain," each said, "we shall not have to approach this problem as but one aspect of a larger problem which includes also technological unemployment, group insurance, old-age pensions, and so on."

None of these friends is of the class popularly identified as theorists; each is on the firing line of industry and successful in his activities. The coincidence of these observations suggested to me that here is a problem, or group of related problems, ordinarily left to social theorists, which is engaging the thought of responsible, practical executives; and stimulated me to become the instrument for laying before a group of students certain specific propositions, in declarative form and without numerous desirable qualifications, for discussion *en* symposium.

The propositions are as follows:

1. The standard length of the unit work period (day or week) should be governed primarily by the maximum amount of work, scientifically determined, that workers can do and thrive under, proper allowance being made for adult education, recreation, and other cultural factors;

2. A substantial portion of the larger social income which results from marked increase in technological efficiency should be handled after the manner of a credit to be drawn upon by workers after middle age, when physical capacity and productivity decrease as a result of age and of inflexibility in adjustment to new technological conditions.

<sup>1</sup>Propositions presented for discussion at a meeting of the Taylor Society, New York, December 7, 1928.

Put in a less formal way, and with use of analogy, these propositions together amount to the following: that just as a provident individual plans to work hard during the earlier part of life so that through income from savings he may enjoy relative independence and comfort during the latter part of life, each generation as a group should so organize the distribution of the social income that individuals collectively may enjoy similar benefits.

Or, put in still another simple manner, it means that instead of, at any moment of industrial evolution, converting increased social income immediately into a shorter work-week or shorter work-day, which emphasizes *immediate* leisure and spending, a substantial portion of increased social income should be converted into ultimate leisure, comfort and enjoyment, enhanced in value by the element of *security*.

Or, once again; it means that when, stimulated by great increase of technological efficiency and productivity, we are inclined to rush straight to the immediate benefits of the shorter work-day or shorter work-week, we should stop and consider the problems of old age unemployment, in part the result of the very improvement in technological methods which have yielded the increased income, and make harmonious and balanced provision for both at the same time.

These propositions relate to very practical and important problems of present industrial life. My three friends, the engineer and two industrial executives, are typical of American executives generally and are not accustomed to give much time to theoretical speculations. They are thinking about these problems today, in 1928, as having an important bearing on *present* provision for *future* policies and practices in those enterprises in which they have managerial or advisory responsibilities and interests.

On the one hand, they have witnessed during recent decades, as a result of significant changes in technological efficiency, a gradual shortening of the work-day and work-week, and more recently, a concomitant substantial increase in wage rates. They have noted also suggestions on the part of many that still shorter work periods and more leisure would stimulate consuming activities and demand, and therefore would stimulate business. They have of late been reading reports concerning a campaign for the shorter work-week announced by the New Orleans convention of the American Federation of Labor. These are signs that pressure is generating for prompt conversion of the income from greater technological efficiency into shorter work periods and more leisure.

But on the other hand, they have observed a parallel development in recent years of a sentiment or judgment in favor of unemployment insurance, old-age pensions, and other mechanisms for readjustment of the maladjusted, and not a few experiments in that direction, conceived in a form which makes them a charge upon industry.

It is their instinct for good managerial workmanship which leads them to appreciate that these are related problems, and to realize that their solutions must be worked out together; for they might, as do most business men, not consider them matters for particular concern, knowing that solutions of such collective problems come by small increments, and that they can adjust their business to the steps of solution as they develop, because any resultant change in the conditions of competition will affect all industry uniformly and should not affect them particularly.

But it happens that they, and an increasing number like them, have become accustomed not to wait for the compulsion of legislation or custom to force them into reluctant and tardy adjustment to new conditions. They have become accustomed to analyze tendencies, forecast the future and become leaders through voluntary anticipation of new conditions. Furthermore, the educational influence of the management movement has developed in them a tendency to study problems in their relationship, and to attempt their solution as related rather than isolated problems. Finally, they are among those who believe that there can be too much regulation of industry by law, a tendency which they believe is certain to increase through unrelated, illogical

steps if industry does not on its own initiative and with its own ingenuity establish by custom its own regulations and prescriptions, making those by government unnecessary.

Therefore, they in their thinking are raising the question why unemployment insurance, old-age pensions, and the shorter work periods should not be regarded and approached as only parts of one larger problem—the over-all problem of the complete adjustment of the individual to his industrial society, with the period between the beginning of livelihood activities and death as the major unit in terms of which the solution should be worked out, and the day or the week as only secondary units.

If we disregard the obstacles to change presented by social institutions—mental attitudes, inhibitions and specific industrial habits and mechanisms—the logic of the situation appears to be quite in favor of an affirmative answer to this query. The life-span is the natural unit in terms of which the individual's adjustment should be conceived; the shorter work period and old-age insurance are related problems; if technological increases of productivity are transformed immediately and completely into the benefits of less work and more leisure for the earlier part of a generation's work-life, then it is impossible to use the same resources for adequate relief of those who in old age have become maladjusted because of physical infirmity or obsolescence of skill. It is in the first half of a generation's life that it is fresh, strong, plastic, adaptable and highly productive; and in the second half that it is relatively weak, fatigued, inflexible, and non-adaptable to new technological processes.

It should be kept clearly in mind that the question raised is not whether we should be denied any immediate shortening of the work-day or work-week. The question is whether we should, on the one hand, with each marked increase of technological efficiency, *immediately* shorten the secondary work periods as much as possible, and uniformly for all age classes; or whether on the other hand, for instance, there should not be a graduated scale of shortening the secondary work periods so that the length of the work-day or work-week would decrease from a scientifically determined maximum for the younger group to zero for the old age group, income being provided for all during the entire life-span.