

Reasons and means for Job Sharing

by Alain Lipietz *

“To work less so that all can work, and live differently”. For more than twenty years, this idea has been the foundation of resistance to neo-liberalism. These few words say it all: a fight for oneself and for others, a fight to retain and change work, a fight to change life itself. In fact, from the early 70s, and thus well before the beginnings of the employment crisis, this idea was already the leitmotiv of ecologists. It must constitute the core of any genuine employment policy which challenges the effects of an “hourglass society”¹ - this product of “liberal productivism” which forces workers to produce ever more while receiving nothing back, neither consumer power, nor free time. And indeed in France, since 1992, it has become the strategy on everybody’s lips... but has yet to be seen in practice .

In any case, it is the subject of discussions, projections and studies. In France, no other economic policy (except perhaps the creation of the European Common Market in 1957) will have spurred so much public debate, surveys, controversies and experimentations, before its actual implementation. Even in Japan, formally so reluctant, the reduction of working hours is going ahead: from 2120 hours of work per year in 1987, it has dropped to 1972 hours in just 5 years. At this rate, Japan will have reached the French level of 1648 hours by 2004.

Let me just outline 4 ideas about this debate.

First idea: the reduction of working hours is a goal in itself.

Even in the context of full employment, I would be in favour of matching most of productivity gains with a reduction of working hours. Firstly, because the struggle for free time remains one the most profound - and ancient - aspirations of workers. Since 1891, the 1st of May commemorates the international struggle of factory workers for the eight hour day. In France, eight year old children obtained it in 1841; adults, in 1919. Since 1906, the Republic has reinstated Sundays as a day of rest. The Popular Front won a second day’s rest per week, 15 days of paid holidays, and it freed from work those under 14 years of age.

A recent survey of 7,000 metal workers of Paris Region shows that a reduction of working hours is first and foremost understood within this tradition (81%); it is also conceived as an improvement in the quality of life (72% of answers), and only then, as a instrument in the fight against unemployment (65%). These results are exactly confirmed by a survey of 11,000 chemistry workers, and by another survey involving 20% of Job Centre employees. These findings are reinforced by the popularity of formulae such as “4 days working week”. After the victories of public servants in december 1995, and of waged lorry drivers in 1996, a new wave of strikes swept France

for "Retirement at 55 years". Workers are asking for "blocks of free time"

This emphasis on "quality of life", manifest in workers' demands for more free time, directly echoes the ideal of autonomy and conviviality dear to ecologists. Beyond, it begins to articulate a call for sustainable development. We are now paying the price of the material growth which characterised the "30 Glorious years" of fordism: disfigured landscapes, polluted air and water, erosion of the ozone layer, and the worsening of the greenhouse effect. Given that the Third World requires a significant growth in its material production, only a reorientation of overdeveloped countries towards a model of development based on the "im-material" growth of free time, can guarantee our common future.

2nd idea: job sharing is the only policy capable of having a massive impact on unemployment

Today, we must recognise that no other policy other than job sharing can measure up to the actual level of unemployment: 3.3 million declared unemployed, more than 1.5 million on work experience and in youth training schemes, plus all those who have given up all hope of finding work: i.e. a problem affecting around 5 million people!

To say that the words "job sharing" implies rigidity of the "employment cake" is a complete nonsense. We must come to realise that French growth is more or less already determined: the international economic situation is largely beyond domestic control, productivity gains are predictable, and the Maastricht treaty has drastically reduced the room to manoeuvre in budgetary and monetary policy. French economic growth, coupled with increasing hourly productivity rates, tends to give a decreasing number of total available working hours; (in other words, the cake is getting smaller). This decreasing number of hours can only be distributed among a greater number of people if the rate of reduction in the effective mean duration of working hours is sufficient to counteract the possible reduction in the number of total workable hours. Any rate of reduction of working hours inferior to this limit will only result in slowing down the growth of unemployment. Moreover, none of these calculations take into account the growth of the active population ... which - luckily? - will soon reverse.

A study published in March 1993 by the famous Observatoire Français de Conjoncture Economique, assessing the three competing employment policies during the legislative elections (the Left proposing growth, the Right, the cutting of labour costs, and the ecologists proposing job sharing), showed that the impact of the first two policies would only be numbered in two or three hundred of thousands new jobs, whereas switching, in one go, to the 35 hour week, would provide 2 million new jobs. Crucially, however, this figure depends on the revenue sharing policy which would accompany a move to job sharing. This is of course the bone of contention in the debate!

Third Idea: There is money available, even if it isn't unlimited

That it is impossible to envisage job sharing without revenue redistribution brings us back, of course, to the whole logic of the hourglass society². The exclusion of some from both the labour market and society is a consequence of the increasing economic prosperity of others. It would therefore be totally unrealistic, economically, sociologically or politically, to try and separate the fight against unemployment from the fight for the reduction of inequalities.

In 1984, in my book *L'Audace ou L'Enlissement* (about the policy of the left-wing french government), I had emphasised that all ways out of the crisis of fordism must take account of this truth: there was no more hidden treasure, employers could no longer "pay". Twelve years later, a certain policy has been implemented to take us beyond the crisis, and it has worked. Its result? The hourglass society: we now have an excluded underclass, but now, at least, "capital" can pay. If there isn't really a "hidden treasure" at the top of the hour-glass, there are at least several kitties to be raided. To be sure, these do not all lie "with the bosses"; and indeed we have realised that the game has grown more complex than since the times of fordism. There is a kitty in financial revenues, another kitty in non-invested profits, yet another in the excessive swelling of high salaries, and even a forth kitty in the waste of employment governmental policy. I can only adhere, for once, to the irritated judgement of the great priest of the "pensée unique", Jean-Claude Trichet, Governor of the Banque de France: "The French economy is, one might say, in the starting blocks. The rate of household savings stands at around 14.3%. The rate of firms' self-financing exceeds 110%. The country's current account's surplus is the highest since the war and represents more than one point of the domestic product. There are thus power reserves at the level of the household, firms, and the economy as a whole."

Fourth idea: job sharing is not the panacea

Simply putting the figures side by side - in France : 2 millions jobs created, 3.3 millions of official unemployed, 5 millions effective unemployed - shows how the 35 hour week is not in itself the panacea. In any case, it's only a solution for the immediately "employable" (terrible word!) unemployed. Those deemed "unemployable", the discarded and forgotten, will require more subtle policies if we are to reach a situation of "full employment" or "full activity", i.e. where each can earn the means to live a decent life in society, at the same time as gaining the public recognition of his/her social utility. A number of complementary policies will need to be implemented with job sharing. Let us note however that this point defuses the argument of "bottlenecks", dear to Alfred Sauvy³: the first two millions of unemployed will hardly need any "levelling" training effort, and it is mere wishful thinking to believe they could all be recruited in less than two years - if simply because it would take two years to create two million jobs to which to recruit them.

Among complementary strategies, let us invoke:

- * Sustainable recovery at the EU level (which implies serious reform of Maastricht treaty)
 - * Choice for labour-intensive, nature-saving technologies (in energy, agriculture)
 - * Development of a subsidized "third sector" of social and ecological use-value.
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¹ See my books *Towards a New Economic Order*, Polity Pres, 1992, et *La Société en Sablier*, La Découverte, 1996.

² This is my main problem with theses like Rifkin's ones (in his *End of Work*), which implies that productivity tends to infinite, thus blurring the problems of revenues sharing.

³ This great economist argued that the sharp cut in labour-time in 1936 created shortages in skilled labour.