



# **The Shorter Working Week: a powerful tool to drastically reduce carbon emissions**

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*A briefing from Autonomy*



The climate crisis is one of the key issues threatening the future of humanity today. In response to this impending crisis, young people around the world have appropriated a classical tool of working class struggle, strikes, to fight for their future on a liveable planet.

The global “Fridays For Future” strikes, for instance, have been met with widespread support by initiatives such as “Scientists For Future” and “Parents For Future”.<sup>1</sup> Yet trade unions, the classical organisers of strikes, have remained fairly passive. This is a missed opportunity as the climate crisis coincides with a contemporary and ever-deepening crisis of work.

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## Working less can save the planet and our future

The ongoing climate strikes highlight the need for large-scale political and economic transformation. One idea that could contribute to these transformations comes from the union tradition and the labour movement: the reduction of working time.

Not only are working time reductions good for individual well-being, mental health and productivity, they are also a key policy in the transformation towards a more sustainable economy. Shortening the working week by just one day could drastically reduce greenhouse gas emissions stemming from commuting, and carbon-intensive consumption that comes with a work-centred society.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Other initiatives, such as “Youth Strike 4 Climate”, “Labour for a Green New Deal” and “Extinction Rebellion” in the UK are also successfully highlighting this issue.

<sup>2</sup> Anthropogenic climate change is of course just one of the ecological challenges facing humanity today (others include soil degradation, for example).

## Available Research

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Research in this area is nascent, but some important studies have been carried out. Jonas Nässén and Jörgen Larsson (2015) have found that a 1 percent decrease in working hours could be followed by a 0.8 percent decrease in emissions.

**1%  $\Rightarrow$  0.8%**

A 1% decrease in working hours could precipitate a decrease in emissions. (Nässén, J., Larsson, J. 2015)

Based on this assumption, and extrapolating for the sake of argument, a reduction of working time by just 25 percent could result in an accompanying reduction of 20 percent in greenhouse gas emissions.

**25%  $\Rightarrow$  20%**

A 25% reduction in working time could precipitate a reduction of 20% in greenhouse gas emissions. (Nässén, J., Larsson, J. 2015)

A similar conclusion was reached by a team around Kyle Knight and Juliet Schor. They found that a reduction in work hours by 25 percent could lead to a reduction in Ecological Footprint by 30.2 percent (Knight et al., 2012).

**25%  $\Rightarrow$  30.2%**

A 25% reduction in working hours could lead to a reduction in Ecological Footprint of 30.2% (Knight et al., 2012).

In this sense, a nationwide strike day could therefore be considered one of the most effective tools to not only, through its visibility, build up public pressure around the climate crisis, but actually contribute, by the very performance of the strike, to an immediate reduction in carbon emissions.

***A shorter work week can be considered 'a multiple dividend policy, contributing to enhanced quality of life and lower unemployment as well as emissions mitigation' (Fitzgerald et al., 2018).***

## **Joining Forces for a Transformative Agenda**

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Greta Thunberg, the initiator of #FridaysForFuture, has been nominated for the 2019 Nobel Peace Prize for her continued climate activism. She herself has recently voiced support for a strike in order to highlight the climate crisis.<sup>3</sup> It might be high time for both national as well as global trade union organisations to discuss whether they should follow her example and call for strikes to exert pressure in the interest of a rapid and just transition towards a more sustainable economy.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has made it clear that to limit global warming to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels will require 'rapid, far-reaching and unprecedented changes in all aspects of society' (IPCC, 2018). As long as governments fail time and time again to pass and meet ambitious regulation that can face up to this challenge, it might be up to civil society and the most powerful progressive economic actors, the unions, to protect the well-being and the natural basis of life of billions of people. This would constitute an ideal opportunity for trade unions to connect with one of the most pressing demands of young generations, and demonstrate their continuing value for society as a whole (beyond waged workers).

Trade unions in the UK are beginning to take up the issue of working time once again, primarily as a response to the prospect of new labour-saving technologies (e.g. TUC, 2018; CWU, 2018). Beyond the automation debate, #FridaysForFuture offers the opportunity to connect a multitude of issues around the ideas of decent work and a just transition to a broad, global climate movement; a shorter work week might well be the reward workers could reap from standing up for a transformation of an outdated, fossil fuel based economy. A Friday off work is a FridayForFuture.

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<sup>3</sup><https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/apr/22/greta-thunberg-backs-general-strike-climate-change-environment>



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*Read more about why the shorter working week would reap multiple dividends, at [autonomy.work/research](https://autonomy.work/research)*

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