

# History pushing toward four-day working week

By ROBIN MURRAY

**W**hat are the chances of a four-day work week by the end of the century?

Working time has historically been reduced, in Britain at least, when labour was strong and profits high, so that employers had something to lose. At a time of increasing

## on the record

ROBIN MURRAY

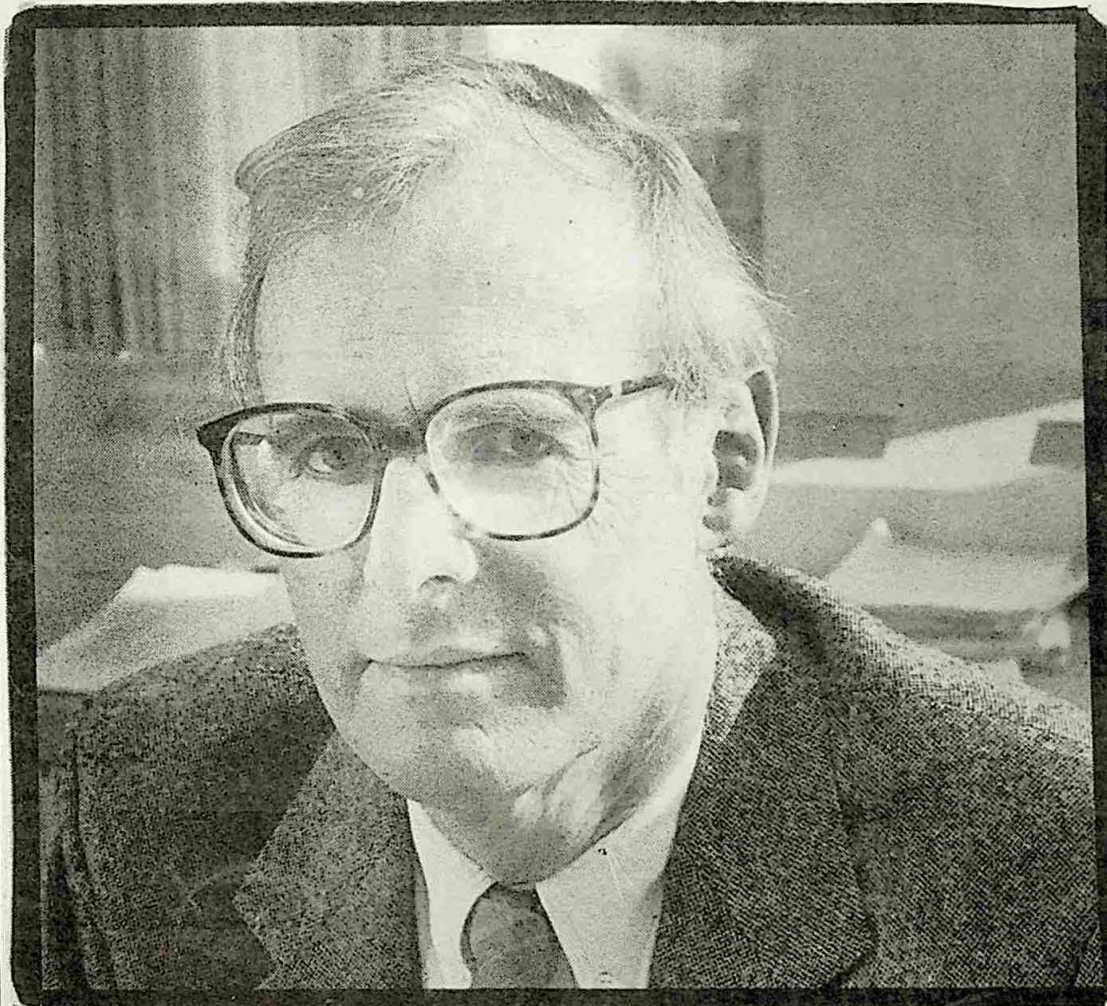
Robin Murray, an economist and expert on community economic development, spoke at Innis College, University of Toronto, on February 17.

globalization and tighter margins, this suggests that we can expect, if anything, pressure to work longer hours.

Yet I think history is on the side of a major reduction of hours through the redistribution of work.

To begin with, there are the strains of the system of redistribution through cash. Almost every country is faced with the tensions of the post-war welfare state. One factor has been the rise of unemployment and the impact that has on the budget. And no one knows what to do about it.

The second is the rise in taxes to cover welfare needs. Rising spending leads to rising taxes, and that



Robin Murray says redistributing work time takes pressure off social welfare.

means various forms of tax revolt. Globalization compounds the problem. Tax competition between

countries has lowered corporate tax rates in all major industrial countries, and tax avoidance through

sifting profits to offshore tax havens has further undercut national treasuries.

Rich individuals and mobile professionals have similarly undercut personal income-tax regimes. These are the factors that have put progressive taxes under strain and are squeezing the old system of public finance — of tax channeled into a central budget that is then redistributed through a complex administrative apparatus.

And so, what then? The redistribution of working time. It addresses both the employment problem and a major part of the social-welfare problem. And it does so by redefining redistribution as the right to earn.

That is why the Canadian Auto Workers' (CAW) negotiating of a third shift at Chrysler (and 900 new jobs) as a result of a cap on overtime was so important. The leadership won over the shop floor by arguing that it was providing jobs for their children. It was redistribution without help from the treasury.

## Setting incentives

Done in the right way, the shrinking of working time can take place with a measure of consensus. Regulation is not the answer, because jobs are so different. We no longer have standard working days, weeks, years or lifetimes. What is needed is decentralized collective bargaining that takes account of the difference between, say, a group of research chemists and a team of line workers.

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# Change in work time spawns leisure redefinition

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The state comes in through setting incentives. For employers, it is cheaper to have full-time and overtime workers. I asked a production manager at Campbell Soup the other day, "What about cutting working time and taking on more staff." He listed the things that were against it — the cost of recruitment, of training, of administration and on-the-job learning.

But he also complained about the cost of UI and other contributions, so that each worker cost the firm one third more than they were paid. But if his UI costs were pared back in line with his contribution to new "working time" jobs, and if some of the current public-training dollars were attached to a negotiated work-

sharing scheme, what then? "Well, that is another matter," he said. "That is interesting."

What is the incentive from the workers' end? One would be an adjustment in taxes — less for those who accept the shorter working week (or year) and more for those who don't. That is tax neutral. If you insist on more work, that's fine, but you have to pay for it.

## Time card

Another would be the issuing of a "time off" card to everyone agreeing to be part of a work-sharing agreement. These cards (known as town cards) are now widely used by municipalities in Britain. They al-

low you, during your time off, to use public facilities like swimming pools, buses, trains or theaters.

The point about these facilities is that they have high levels of undercapacity at certain times of the day or year. By using them off-peak, through a time-off card, you can provide real benefits at almost no environmental, social or economic cost.

Another factor pushing for reductions in working time is the environment. The connection is not a narrow one. Much depends on how you use your leisure time. Tourism, for example, is often environmentally damaging. What is at issue is what the French economist Andre Gorz calls "the mode of consumption."

In his Critique Of Economic Reason, Gorz suggests that the reason why people have taken the gains from productivity growth in income rather than in less working time is what he terms "compensatory consumption."

Mass production depended on mass consumption. Workers took more goods than "living time," and the system of production depended on that. That was the "Fordist" mode of consumption, and it is environmentally unsustainable.

## New mode

If we are to rise to the environmental challenge, we have to adopt a new mode of consumption, one that is less resource intensive and that depends, critically, on what happens in the unpaid part of our working day.

Take food. There is a Fordist food system — mass-produced Kraft dinners or McDonalds, for example. It also takes almost no time to prepare. A recent survey in Niagara found that almost half the households had lost the art of cooking as a result.

At the other end of the spectrum is organic production — more labor intensive, less environmentally damaging, processed and prepared in a different way. It requires more time at home and more skill.

We have to think in terms of systems of production and consumption. What is now possible, at current levels of productivity, is that a redistribution of working time opens the way for a new type of consumption that can, in turn, match a different form of production, one that allows a change in the nature of work and in relations outside work and that has a less damaging effect on the environment.

What goes for food applies equally to waste, to energy, to health, to education and to transport — to all those necessities of daily life. During the 20th century in North America, as in Europe, they have been produced and consumed in one way. We now have a chance — through working-time reductions and matching public policy changes — to switch over into a more human and environmentally sustainable direction.