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AN EVOLUTION OF THE ISSUE OF REDUCING WORK HOURS IN THE US LABOR MOVEMENT

Abstract:

A reduction of working hours has been historically at the center of the class conflict and the primary issue fought for by the US labor movement during its more glorious years. However, the US labor movement has made no systematic progress in reducing working hours since World War II. Moreover, as labor unions in Western Europe continue their campaigns to reduce working hours even further, the quest for shorter working hours has almost completely ceased from the agenda of the US labor movement. This is despite the ongoing concerns over the future structural unemployment due to the continuing technological progress. This begs a question of why the US labor unions have abandoned an effort to further reduce working hours without a reduction in pay. This paper argues that the post-World War II failure of the US labor movement to build a unified coalition on the political left and the following significant changes in the structural composition of the US labor movement, led to its failure to recognize and advance a further reduction in working hours as a significant socio-economic reform. Specifically, the paper analyzes how the labor unions efforts to reduce working hours were impacted by the anticommunist sentiments during the 1950s, the inability to build a unified coalition cutting across racial, class, and gender differences in the 1960s, and the significant shift to the public sector labor within the US labor movement since the 1970s.

Keywords:

US Labor Movement; Reducing Working Hours