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The French work-force is regulated differently than that of the United States. With regulated days for vacation as well as shorter work-hours, the French have not focused on making work their life. Due to economic stagnation in the 1970’s and 1980’s, after a large increase in immigration, there was an increase in unemployment. To combat the unemployment rate, France introduced the 35-hour work week in hope that jobs would be created as well as saved. The French government created many incentives for enterprises to quickly adapt the new legislation which in turn created an overall better quality of life for French citizens. In this research project I will examine the reasons for reduction in the work-week, the impact of this reduction on the economy, and its impact on its workers. I also ask the question: Could a change in work hours also help the American unemployment rate and increase the quality of life of American workers.

Work in France

A little over a year ago, I found myself on the streets of France. Having been there before, this was still a new experience for me. I had never been there by myself nor had I ever stayed more than a week. As part of my experience, I had to turn in paper work to my university as well as open up a bank account. However, I just seemed to always have the same problem. If I went to the offices at noon, no one was there and everything was closed, yet if I went in later, it was closed for the day. So I started to ask myself, when do the French work? There was never a time when a market or a restaurant was empty, and there were always people in the street no matter the time of day. This started to get my interested in how the French had so much free time on their hands, and when they actually worked. I finally asked a friend of mine when the French worked, to which she responded, “All the time!” which I had yet to actually see myself. Finally, I asked a professor-How importantly the French took their jobs as well as how long they stayed in a specific job. He pointed me towards different articles explaining a slight change in their work life from desk work to more customer service focused work and how it had driven many as far as committing suicide from all the pressure and stress (Tieman). I began to wonder how extreme some jobs were that they would drive their employees to commit suicide. Then, something more interesting happened. I started to notice fliers that were calling on a protest in response to the high unemployment rate. While the United States was dealing with a sort of recession and its own high unemployment rate, I felt that a protest would only put pressure on a government to do something. But my main question was how can a government create jobs when a market is not producing growth or even jobs themselves? Having known that France has always been known for its revolutions, I was still not sure what the people were protesting, or rather what outcome they were expecting. So finally I decided to start investigating, what makes French work different from American work and why does it seem like they have so much leisure time?

In order to better understand the current legislation in place of work-week, we must first understand the key features of the French economy. In the 1960’s, France encountered a problem in which their labor industry had a sudden growth and their working population was not able to fill all of the jobs. Immigration labor has always been seen as one of the most important aspects to the economic growth of Western Europe, particularly in the post-war years. As many powerful countries have had territories, France is a bit difficult to understand. Guadeloupe and Martinique, both Afro-Caribbean territories of France, have been neglected in the study of immigration. While we fully understand immigrants to be non-born citizens of a county which they move to with the intent to become permanent residents, this has not entirely been the case for Guadeloupe and Martinique. The reason behind this neglect is due to the fact that indeed these citizens of Guadeloupe and Martinique are seen as French citizens rather than immigrants; thus creating a sort of diversion from official data-gathering agencies of immigrants, as well as an exclusion from academic debate of immigrants. Since the Afro-Caribbean population was not seen as foreign immigration their origins allowed for them to join or be specifically recruited into the public work sector of France.

The Bureau for Migration from the Overseas Department helped create a sort of organized migration in the early 1960’s. Through the Bureau not only were the Afro-Caribbean not seen as immigrants but rather as a sort of internal migration within France itself. The Bureau helped create different agencies in which immigrants who were recruited to work in France would fill specific gaps in the labor force; mainly those that required little to no skill level regardless of the experience of the migrant. The large majority who filled the manual, unskilled, jobs were often men while women, who were not migrating as much, held jobs in the private service sector. Furthermore, immigrants were broken up into different categories. The first were those immigrants who arrived with support from the military, usually focused on becoming part of the armed forces, or even the police force. The second group migrated with the help of the Bureau who had set up their recruitment, and finally the last group was those arriving spontaneously. Those arriving spontaneously however were not seen entirely as spontaneous; many times many of the migrants had some sort of tie to the Bureau. Either having relatives who had gone through the Bureau or eventually joining the Bureau upon their arrival.

The arrival of the Afro-Caribbean migrants was at the beginning seen as a solution for three large issues. The first being the large demographic growth on the islands which in turned yielded high unemployment as well as political unrest, the second being the sudden shortage of labor in the public sector of France, and finally, the need for a flexible work-force. This way France had a feeling of helping its ex-colonies and no need for organized requirement to fill in the gaps of their labor shortage. There were two large waves of immigration, the first beginning in the early 1960’s until the 1970’s. During these twelve years, the large uncontrolled immigration was in response to the demand from public and private sectors. However, two years later, manufacturing jobs started to decline and the regulations of immigration became a bit stricter. The new strict regulations however did not apply directly to the Afro-Caribbean. The biggest reason became that women were now starting to become a high interest in the work force due to a continuation of high demand in the private sector. However two years later, manufacturing jobs started to decline and the regulations of immigration became stricter. The new strict regulations however did not apply directly to the Afro-Caribbean. The biggest reason was because women were not starting to become a high interest in the work-force due to a continuation of high demand in the private service sector.

While the French government began to think that this sort of organized recruitment would not cultivate a sort of resentment, they were quickly mistaken. Due to the recent Algerian war, the French government imposed an idea that many new immigrants did not accept. The large Afro-Caribbean population that had set in began to be seen as a non-stop continuation of cheap labor from Northern Africa, as well as a new form of slave trade.

“…Massive recruitment into the lower-grade posts (of the public service) alleviated the notorious shortage arising from a policy of low salaries. For the AGEG, General Association of Guadeloupean students (1979), fiercely opposed to emigration, government policy no less than ‘a new slave trade’” (Condon & Ogden, 1991, p. 441).

The feeling many of the Guadeloupean students felt was that many of the immigrants were being seen as a part of slave trade rather than individual immigrants, as well as being seen as a non-stop resource. The students felt like this form of migration would only feed the resentment as well as racism that would soon grow against the Afro-Caribbean migrants. This however did not stop the men, women, and young migrants who saw life in France as a better opportunity. The second wave of immigration however was not as strong or powerful. In the late 1970’s the economy started to decline and there was no longer such a high-demand for a strong work-force.

As noted above, women were a big portion in the labor market as well as in high demand. Many women worked in clerical relations positions and some even found private domestic work such as in service jobs for hotels and restaurants. However, none of these jobs were found directly between the migrants and the employer. Since many of the migrants went through the Bureau, The Bureau offered those with some schooling or skills the option of continuing through the Bureau for training which in a way would help them advance socially into French society. Through the Bureau, there grew a training institution, the Association for Adult Vocational Training (AFPA) which was not only limited to foreign immigrants but also opened to many of the French natives. However, many of the Afro-Caribbean migrants who were directly sent to the AFPA focused their training on labor-intensive training such as construction. Later, many of them became locksmiths and fitters, since a large majority of the population was focused on construction, soon other jobs became more desirable such as tiling, decoration, and electricians. Women on the other hand received a different sort of training. Many received training from the Ministries for Population, Health, and Social Services rather than the AFPA. These training were specially focused for women who had more qualifications or skills. Much of the training focused on children, home care, and auxiliary nursing. With the agency receiving such high level of immigrants, many women were often sent to low skilled office or service jobs regardless of their qualifications. Many women moved on after the Ministries of Population, Health, and Social services to become auxiliary nurses, ward orderlies, or even found a sort of domestic jobs that required less skill. Much of the public work sector however was desired for many of the migrants. The public sector offered more opportunity as well as advancement through their job, there was easier access to housing, and even more frequent holidays available to return back to their native countries. Moreover, the public sector seemed more welcoming as well as showed less discrimination and racism through recruitment and worker’s rights.

Once the issue of working rights and which sort of jobs migrants preferred to be trained in and work, many of the migrants encountered a bigger problem. While many had families settled in France, the often hoped to live close to those family members who usually lived in Paris or its surrounding suburbs. However, the Bureau did not allocate the migrants based off of where their families were located. Once a migrant arrived, they were usually quickly shipped off into smaller cities and towns where the gap in the work-force needed to be filled. Having arrived in their new town or city, the migrants were then placed in their perspective training facilities. After completing the training, many of the migrants hoped to then be located closer to relatives, but little to their dismay, they were more than often placed in the same town or city. The easiest solution many migrants sought out was to just quit the Bureau. Having already been emigrated to France and with France’s high demand of employment, migrants knew that they were in a safe position. However, this was not their main objective; many of the migrants wanted the same things. The most important was to have the opportunity to live in Paris or its surrounding suburbs to be close to relatives, a way towards the private and public sector, hope of employment, as well as job stability. The bigger picture however was the heavy influence by state policy to fill the vacant work position.

“It is apparent that the features of the Afro-Caribbean labor force defined…very heavily influenced by state policy. The role of the state is evident in two ways: First, the institutionalization of organized migration through the Bureau, recruiting labor for both the public and private sectors; and, secondly, the wider encouragement given to state administrations and other public and private sectors to exploit the pool of under-employed labor in the Caribbean” (Condon & Odgen, 1991, p.454).

While the state focused on the filling of the positions with the exploitation of the Afro-Caribbean work-force. There were many things they not account for. The biggest one was the steady decline in the 1980’s. With the growth of the economy in the 1960’s, the French government did not account for what would happen once the economy leveled out and soon stopped growing or demanding as many workers. However this happened a lot faster than the government would have liked. In the mid 1970’s Saudi Arabia initiated the global oil crisis. With the growing economy in the 1960’s and early 70’s, France saw a steady decline in the economy, nothing that seemed too shocking or had anyone too worried. Regardless, France also had largely added to their population, thus creating a steady incline in unemployment. With a large amount of uncontrolled immigration entering the country for at least a decade, the unexpected oil crisis in the mid-70’s, and the steady decline in economy resulting in a steading incline in unemployment, France came into the 1990’s with a large economic and social problem.

In the early 1970’s, the number of hours worked between Americans and Europeans were about the same. But now, on average Americans work about 25.1 hours per person of working age as well as 46.2 weeks per year, while the French only have about 18.0 hours per person and works 5.7 weeks less. While many people say there is a cultural difference between France and the United States on our idea of work, Alesina, Glaeser, and Sacerdote would beg to differ. Up until World War I, the United States actually had lower hours of work per employee than most European countries, including France. Therefore, claiming that there is a cultural difference on work cannot be a compelling argument.

“A more convince story is that as hours worked started to decline in Europe (perhaps of taxation), people’s utility from leisure increased and the social multiplier reinforced the decline, creating a desire for Europeans to vacation en masse, a culture of leisure, so to speak” (Alesine, Glaeser, & Sacerdote, 2005, p.3).

Many stereotypes that people have against the French labor market is that they do not enjoy working, or even that they never work and are always on vacation (Chrisafis). There are many different reasons why different countries evolved the way they do in their work regulations. Unions as well as labor regulations are usually in conjunction with work hours as well as tax rates. Apart from its slow economic decline in the 1970’s and 80’s French unions began looking at the bigger picture trying to persuade work sharing and even following suit with slogans such as “work-less, work-all”. Unions also demanded a raise in the minimum wage in order to keep incomes from falling. The slogan eventually echoed through many union marches all throughout Europe in many different languages.

So in the late 1970’s when France began to notice the effects of the large population surplus as well as the effects of the oil crisis. Therefore, in 1982, the French government decided it would be best to reduce the legal work week from 40 hours to 39 hours. Although a reduction of an hour did not seem like much, economists also did not believe this would bring about much change if any. Economic philosophy believes a labor productivity decline the longer time is worked. Therefore, ideally if workers worked less time, their productivity level would be higher since they would be using their time more effectively. Yet none of this seemed to help the rising unemployment rate. Different approaches started to be introduced in hopes to halt the unemployment rate. Many of these included the idea of volunteer work, part-time work, flexible work, and even proposing to lower the retirement age. Other initiatives included changing a five day work week to four days, short term sabbaticals, and even offering part-time jobs to college students.

Finally after nothing seemed to be shifting the unemployment rate, Lionel Jospin, a Socialist Prime Minister candidate, ran his campaign on an idea of a 35-hour work week that would be paid 39-hours. This did not seem to intrigue many people including Jean Gandois, the president of the Conseil National du Patronat Français (CNPF) (National Council of French Employers). In representing the French employers, Grandois knew that the rich were not going to be making any sacrifices; instead those who would be forced into making the sacrificed would be the employees. Gandois offered a counter argument in which the workers would be taking a ten percent reduction to their pay. Gandois’s counter argument had done more than enough damage to Jospin’s campaign. He then had to change his campaign idea to a 35-hour work week with a pay of 35-hours. This however was just a bump in the road for him. Jospin then promised to protect the workers being paid minimum wage as long as they stayed with their employers, very well knowing that this would be able to get him elected into office.

However, Jospin also did a good job of introducing the 35-hour work week and making it seem encouraging to everyone. He made it desirable to business noting if workers worked less, the overall productivity would be higher. While also nothing, less work meant more leisure time and more time for workers to consume thus helping the economy strive once again. Nonetheless, Jospin understood that work was a social defiance as well as an identity or status.

“Socially, it was considered that a society with high unemployment is not a healthy society since some are socially excluded, especially because individual identity is often derived from work-identity. So, there was a need to include the unemployed in the work-force” (Ashta, 2000, p. 3527).

Most important to note is that the 35-hour work week was not based off of lessening the gap between the rich and poor, but rather within the salaried workers and the active and inactive workers. While it was seen as a socialist agenda of sharing the jobs, Jospin was also looking at a way of decreasing the government’s debt in paying the unemployment benefits. Within his first term, Jospin focused on litigating and planning how the 35-hour work week would actually work. However, after his term ended, the French public was forced to re-elect him in order to know how this would actually work.

So finally, in October of 1997, Jospin was eager to announce that the 35-hour work week would be implemented for all large enterprises by 2000 and 2002 for all small enterprises. This however did not force any enterprises to change quickly no did it help the 3.5 million unemployment rate that still seemed to be rising and the violence that was resulting of it. Jospin then realized that incentives would help the first part of the law quickly be accepted. Jospin then offered FF 9,000 ($1896 USD) in employee aid be given to any enterprise which increased its number of employees by six percent as well as reduced the work week to 35 in 1998 alone. The first law offered incentives that required the enterprise to do two main things, reduce the work week to 35 and increase the number of employees. There were different level of incentives which offered higher pay offs, with one final requirement. All new jobs had to be created within a year of the work week reduction as well as having the new employees maintain their job for at least two years.

There were also incentives for declining industries. Those who saved jobs after the reduction of the work week were also eligible to receive the incentives. The most basic level a declining enterprise had to meet was, of course, reducing the maximum work week by at least 10 percent which in turn saved up to six percent of its existing employees. However, declining enterprises would only receive these incentives for three years while those enterprises who added jobs would continue to receive the incentives for five years. That was not the only downfall of the law; larger enterprises were favored because low-skilled, low-paying, jobs were easier to get people off of unemployment and into the labor market, which ultimately seemed to work.

“Since the 35-hour law was announced, unemployment has declined from 12.5 per cent to 11.1 percent by September 1999, due both to the renewed growth and the effect of the shorter hours. This…has disproved claims by employers and right-wing economists that the project would drive-up labor costs, scare away investments, and destroys jobs” (Hayden, 2000, p. 8).

Many employees as well as employers were happy with their new work-life. Employees had a better quality of life due to less hours of work and employers saw a lot more positive productivity as well as the incentives. Since the workers were given more free time, the unemployed had greater changed to be employed, and when workers went in to work they worked more diligently and efficiently because they had more time to relax.

The second law was then introduced in January of 2000. By 2000, according to the first law, all large enterprises were forced to adhere to the change of the work week while the smaller enterprises, those with fewer than 20 employees, still had two more years. However, the government continues to be lenient granting all large enterprises a year adaptive period in figuring out the 35-hour week, while managers and those working part-time were given special treatment to help work around their schedules. The law came down even on the allocation of time, time taken for lunch, and breaks were seen as effective work-time for some enterprises, while supplementary time was still allowed. The first four hours of supplementary time in a week were given a 25 percent bonus but rather than actual income added to a pay check, the bonus would be awarded as extra leave time. After the next four hours of supplementary time in the same week another 25 percent bonus is given and accredited to the income of the worker, while any further hours have a 50 percent bonus pay. However most enterprises have a maximum limit on how many supplementary hours can be allowed which used to be 130 hours during the 39-hour work week and now are limited to 70 total hours with the 35-hour work week. Not only are 35-hours allowed per week, but throughout the year, only 1,600 hours were allowed after accounting for holidays, leave, and the average 11 paid holidays.

With an enterprise reducing the work week they would be able to be clear of the social security charge for employees earning up to 1.8 times the minimum wage. Since managers were given special treatment, many were not forced to work within the 35-hour work week, due to the fact that many were self-organized work hours and were already being highly paid. Others whose work-time was premeditated were able to be placed in the 35-hour work week. Those working part-time were usually asked to work more or less depending on a certain time, but with this 35-hour work week those working part-time were able to establish a schedule with different hours throughout the different seasons. However this was not as simple as it may sound. Many workers who received their time off in the form of already schedule days off or half days were happy with the work-time reduction, but those who could not control their schedule would rather say that the work-time reduction did not improve their lives. Many would find themselves working on the weekend with short notice and not being paid overtime while other would wake up to poor weather and realize that they were not working that day.

While France decided to finally reduce its work week from a 30-hour work week to a 35-hour work week, there were still many reasons behind the difference in hours. The three main factors we would have to take into account explaining the difference would be participation in the labor market, number of vacation days, and finally numbers of hours worked in a normal week. “The United States has by far the longest number of week of work per year” (Alesina, Glaeser, and Sacredote, 2005, p.6). This may help account for why Americans typically work more hours than other countries. Throughout the research of Alesina, Glaeser, and Sacredote, we are able to see that the Unites States has fifteen fewer days than France while also noting that the Unites States has no minimum paid leave. The implication of

fewer days off and no regulated minimum paid leave would definitely account for why the Unites States has such high work hours compared to other European countries. Table 1.3 shows the difference between the Unites States and other European countries. Yet we continue to try and find the changes that put the Unites States and France on different tables. Since there was a large drop in the European work hours in the 1970’s, it was apparent that some change had happened that had not affected the United States. One reason that could explain the change was the large increase of income tax rates in Europe. Furthermore, Europeans today have worked much less than Americans due mainly to the policies of the union in 1970’s, 1980’s, and the beginning of the 1990’s.

France today is changing from the decade long 35-hour work week. Nicolas Sarkozy, France’s current President, campaigned with a new slogan to combat the 35-hour work week “work more to earn more”. Sarkozy in a way seems to be striving for individualism in order to combat the socialism in the 1970’s. While French citizens are extremely fond of the 35-hour work week, Sarkozy in 2008 was able to implement a new law allowing employers to require workers to spend more time at work. However, this does not change the 35-hour work week reference length. “This new law lets companies ignore the nominal 35-hour maximum and negotiate-or impose-longer hours for staffers” (Crumley, 2008). What this new law imposed was more control back to the employers and less freedom to the employee. However, Jeremy Rifkin has had a whole different idea of what is really happening with our jobs.

Throughout his article of *The End of Work*, Rifkin takes a new idea of how to control our job markets. While many people note that outsourcing is the main reason behind the disappearance of jobs, Rifkin challenges the idea that these jobs are never coming back. While we look at the American unemployment rate as well as the French, we can also notice the upheaval in other European countries. Riots, protests, and even demands for new governments are a way citizens are expressing their anger of unemployment. “Outsourcing counts of about 5 percent or less of the jobs that are disappearing. And the jobs are disappearing all over the world-in Europe, in Asia, and in South and North America, everywhere” (Rafkin, 2005). Yet the question still stands, if every country claims outsourcing is the reason for their unemployment, which country is the outsourcing going to? Rather there is a new answer, much of the work that we need man power for is being replaced by intelligent technology coming onto the Internet. The biggest thing to note is that traditional jobs as well as many professional jobs are being destroyed as part of technology.

Table 1.3: Breakdown of 52 Weeks into Weeks Worked, Holiday and Vacation Weeks, and Other Leave\*

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Annual Weeks Worked | Holidays and Vacation Weeks | Full-Week Absences Due to Non-holiday Reasons | Part-Week Absences Due to Non-holiday  Reasons | Absences Due to Sickness and Maternity |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Austria | 39.5 | 7.3 | 2.6 | 0.4 | 2.3 |
| Belgium | 40.3 | 7.1 | 2.2 | 0.5 | 2 |
| Denmark | 39.4 | 7.4 | 2.2 | 1 | 1.9 |
| Germany | 40.6 | 7.8 | 1.8 | 0.3 | 1.5 |
| Finland | 38.9 | 7.1 | 2.4 | 1.5 | 2.1 |
| France | 40.7 | 7 | 2 | 0.4 | 1.8 |
| Greece | 44.6 | 6.7 | 0.3 | 0.2 | 0.2 |
| Hungary | 43.9 | 6.3 | 0.9 | 0.1 | 0.8 |
| Ireland | 43.9 | 5.7 | 1.2 | 0.3 | 0.9 |
| Italy | 41.1 | 7.9 | 1.7 | 0.1 | 1.1 |
| Luxembourg | 41.9 | 7.5 | 1.3 | 0.1 | 1.1 |
| Netherlands | 39.6 | 7.6 | 2 | 0.8 | 2 |
| Norway | 37 | 6.5 | 4 | 1.1 | 3.5 |
| Poland | 43.5 | 6.2 | 1.2 | 0.3 | 0.9 |
| Portugal | 41.9 | 7.3 | 1.4 | 0.2 | 1.2 |
| Spain | 42.1 | 7 | 1.3 | 0.4 | 1.2 |
| Sweden | 36 | 6.9 | 3.8 | 1.7 | 3.7 |
| Switzerland | 42.6 | 6.1 | 1.5 | 0.7 | 1.1 |
| United Kingdom | 40.8 | 6.6 | 1.5 | 1.5 | 1.6 |
| United States | 46.2 | 3.9 | 0.94 |  | 0.96 |

Source: Reprinted from OECD Employment Outlook 2004. this entire table is taken directly from the OECD. Sickness and maternity leave estimates are adjusted for an estimated 50 percent underreporting rate. This is for full-time employees, and thus weeks worked differs slightly from table 1.

\*For US data we calculate weeks of vacation and illness for full time heads in the PSID. We calculate weeks of holiday using Federal and stock market holidays. We allow other non-holiday absences to be the residual (Alesina, Glaeser, and Sacredote, 2005, pg. 10).

There is no need for a cashier when you can do it yourself at a self-check out. Rifkin however goes on to note that the debate of the 35-hour week was one that created a wide-variety of results. With France’s productivity, the government could have let the enterprises work one person 70-hours or two people 35-hour.While it was neither extremely successful nor a complete failure, it was a quick resolution for a huge problem.

Overall, France’s 35-hour work week was a very important law that was implemented at a very important time. Although economists and sociologists do not always agree on many issues, a 35-hour work week which lowered the unemployment rate and helped everyone feel more accepted into the society was the right move. However, many endured pain after being given the opportunity of hope and some were just overall less satisfied with their new hours. In my mind, I think a 35-hour work week would be helpful and useful in lowering our own high unemployment rate as well as helping boost our economy in consumerism. While many people will not seem to accept the 35-hour work week, this would ultimately be a better solution for our country. Putting aside the constant battle between rags and riches as well as the idea of materialism, Americans working the 35-hour work week would finally be able to give back to the government rather than just the constant take. While many American families live in houses bigger than necessary and drive cars bigger than necessary, the French have learned (maybe through their culture or experience) to live with the necessities and not the luxuries. In the end, if Americans would be willing to make a few sacrifices, a 35-hour work week would be very beneficial to our economy, our society, and our power as a country as it was for France.

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