

Working time and 'time off'

Two sides of same coin

South African mineworkers have long waged struggles to shorten their working hours.

Paul Stewart argues that if management systems were more efficient and workers were given more control over the work process this could be achieved to the benefit of both parties.

The struggle over time spent at work was the beginning of labour's historic struggle for a decent life. In Britain this can be traced back nearly 700 years when the English king, Edward III, issued a 'statute of labourers' to control the length of the working day. Centuries later, the first trade unions in Britain were established to win a ten hour working day. The first celebration of May Day turned around the demand for an eight hour working day in Australia.

Two labour historians P Foner and DR Roediger in *Our Own Time: A History of American Labor and the Working Day* told that the struggle to reduce working hours in America resulted in the 'first industrial strike, the first citywide trade union councils, the first labor party, the first general strikes, the first organization uniting skilled and unskilled workers, the first strike by females and the first attempts at regional and national labor organisation.'

WORKING TIME IN SOUTH AFRICA

In South African labour history, the 1913 white miners' General Strike, for instance, was triggered by a working time issue. To take another

example, the longest strike action in mining in South Africa in 2007 was over working a continuous, 24/7 working time arrangement.

Yet despite these struggles, working time, or labour time to be more precise, does not receive the attention due and there is still very little research done on the issue in South Africa. Even more importantly, the demand in the Freedom Charter for a 40-hour working week seems almost to have been forgotten ('There shall be a forty-hour working week, a national minimum wage, paid annual leave, and sick leave for all workers, and maternity leave on full pay for all working mothers'.)

In the mining industry the struggle for reduced working hours has been a long and painful one. Just how difficult this struggle is can be appreciated when considering the following extraordinary fact. The liberal economist Francis Wilson, who was extremely sympathetic to the plight of mineworkers, told us 40 years ago that black mineworkers' wages did not improve in real terms from 1911 all the way through to 1969. Yet it has been more difficult to reduce working hours on the mines

than it has been to improve wages!

Mineworkers very largely still work the same hours as they did in 1911 when the Mines and Works Act was promulgated. Even then it took massive strikes to achieve the eight-hour shift 'bank-to-bank' (from surface back to surface) which was only achieved around 1918 - and then that was only because of a wartime shortage of labour!

For most of the past century mineworkers, particularly black mineworkers, have worked far longer than eight hours a day, six days a week.

The African Mine Workers Union (Amwu) in the 1940s led by JB Marks noted that black mineworkers were compelled to sign up to work on Sundays even though Sunday work had been banned by the Mines and Works Act.

In its submission to the Lansdowne (Native Wages) Commission in 1943, Amwu argued that the working day for black mineworkers remained longer than eight hours. A few years before, in 1938, for instance, a study showed that half of all mineworkers were underground by 5am and that all but 6% were underground by 6am. While the majority had completed

their work by 1pm or 2pm, more than half waited until 4pm to be hoisted to the surface ten or 11 hours later. This situation remained much the same 35 years later in 1973.

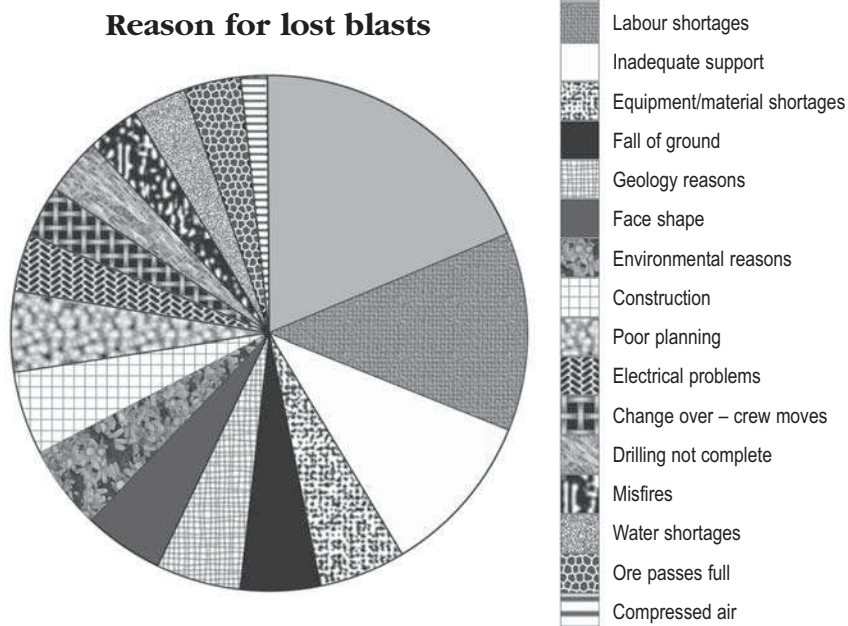
Given the compound system, Amwu argued that the miner was technically an employee for 24 hours of the day and suggested that working time be from the point at which the worker left his rural home until he returned. This never happened. But the point was made – time spent at work is time *not* spent at home.

In 1999 and 2000, I went to live in the hostels and went underground with workers in a number of gold mines. Travelling time underground had shortened, but still absorbed from one to more than two hours every shift, depending on the mine, its age, depth and where you worked. This was an eight-hour day ‘bank-to-bank’, and officially a 44-hour working week.

On platinum mines, 96 hours were averaged over two weeks, making it on average a 48-hour working week – as specified in the Mines and Works Act of 1911! The only significant change since then was getting two Saturdays off a month. This was won by organised white labour in 1978 after a long struggle which flowed from the government-appointed Franszen Commission.

Since 1911, whether it was the earliest trade unions fighting against Sunday work, the conservative white Mine Workers Union who waged a struggle over reduced working hours from the late 1940s though to the mid-1970s, the National Union of Mineworkers’ (NUM) struggle in the early 1990s, or the struggle of a cluster of unions in the early 2000s on a platinum mining shaft, working time has remained extraordinarily stable over the last hundred years.

The issues raised by organised



labour likewise remain remarkably similar. Sunday work was an issue over a hundred years ago and has again emerged as an issue. The arguments of unionists in the 1970s for the five-day working week echo those made in the 2000s. The arguments of the Chamber of Mines, who led the defence of working hours on behalf of the gold mines, are echoed by managements today.

Interestingly, the reason organised white mine labour did not win its demand for shorter working hours was that this would reduce the time black workers spent at work because there would be no supervisors. The value of the labour power of black workers in a very labour intensive industry could not be reduced simply because the creation of economic value depended heavily on the labour time of workers.

Today the historically white and majority black trade unions have come together to struggle for reduced working hours. But what form does this struggle now take?

WORK TIME STRUGGLES TODAY

Management in the mining industry insists that if working hours are reduced, productivity must rise.

Work, in other words, must become more intensive. Workers must work harder and produce more in the same amount of time. Both management studies as well as my recent academic ones show that workers have proved they can do this. Why have working hours then not been reduced?

There are no simple answers to this question. In some cases workers have injured themselves in doing so, increasing the accident frequency injury rate. More often than not, however, workers have faced the inefficiency of managerial systems.

Materials are not at the right place at the right time or are insufficient to do the job. Machinery breaks down. Electrical power is lost. There is a labour shortage. There are a host of work-related problems underground and often these are largely managerial responsibilities. (See *SALB 33.5* ‘Planisa! Gold miner’s underground practices’.) Often they relate to the geological challenge of mining the deepest mines in the world.

Take a look at the above pie chart, which lists the reasons for a ‘lost blast.’ A lost blast occurs when, for some or other reason, the rock



Early underground workers – mineworkers largely work the same hours as in 1911 when the Mines and Works Act was passed – a 48 hour week.

face is not blasted during an underground shift and so targets for hauling out the ore-bearing rock are not met. This in turn jeopardises workers getting their production bonuses on which so many mineworkers depend.

Research in the mining industry shows that even where workers, supported by their unions meaningfully engage with management to increase productivity and to win ‘time off’ from work, management tends to drag its feet. It does not keep its side of the bargain in making changes which enable greater productivity and the winning of shorter working hours.

Workers have been prepared to work a longer working day to get a weekend off. They have proved in at least two pilot projects which explore shorter hours linked to productivity improvements, that they can and will work harder and more efficiently in exchange for reduced working hours. The struggle workers ironically face is that managerial systems and forms of work organisation prevent them from doing this.

The struggle over shorter working hours has become the struggle over control over production itself. In order to improve productivity, management has to let go of a

measure of its control over the labour process.

Underground supervisors sometimes resist the efforts of task teams made up of unionists and leading workers who have gone all out to make productivity schemes work in order to win shorter hours. Management also has failed to implement critical changes to the production system, or has introduced them too late, upon which the success of a productivity project depends.

In brief, miners and mineworkers have been struggling to implement a five-day working week on the mines not through go-slows or strikes, but through improving productivity! Yet their efforts have not met with success.

Management, on the other hand, has been pressing to increase mineworkers’ working time by trying to implement continuous mining operations – 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year is the managerial ideal. This they believe would enable individual workers to work shorter hours and achieve the dream of a 40-hour week. This kind of continuous shift system, with variable work time arrangements has been implemented, but research shows that it is generally not sustainable.

Why is this the case? The answer is this.

When a continuous shift system is implemented, the social time of workers is out of tune with the life of the society around them. The individual worker’s weekend might be on Tuesday and Wednesday. This suits some people, but for most it means missing a soccer or rugby match over the weekend or being unable to attend a funeral or be with family.

For migrant workers, which many mineworkers still are, there is still not enough ‘time off’ to travel back home and they end up stuck in the hostel when their workmates are on shift. Workers have generally resisted continuous working time arrangements for these kinds of reasons – for essentially social reasons.

Shift work, virtually all research shows, in general disrupts social life more than it enhances it. Also a range of health issues affect shift workers as the circadian rhythm, the natural rhythm of the ‘body clock’, is disrupted. While most mineworkers are shift workers, the predominant shift system in mining, the Eleven Shift Fortnight with every second Saturday off, still coincides with the patterns and rhythms of society more broadly.

Irregular working hours, moreover, disrupts trade union organisation and creates yet another division between workers.

But to conclude this brief piece on a massive, important and hugely complicated topic. It is only when more enlightened forms of management permit workers to assume greater responsibility over the work itself, that productivity will increase safely and shorter working hours will improve the quality of workers’ (and managers’) social lives. Working time and ‘time off’ from work are, in other words, two sides of the same coin. LB

Paul Stewart teaches sociology at the University of the Witwatersrand and has been involved in the mining industry for 30 years.