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Workweek Woes

By JOHN DE GRAAF

SEATTLE Last week was the 70th anniversary of a momentous yet forgotten event in American history. On April 6, 1933, the Senate overwhelmingly passed a bill that would have made the standard work week 30 hours. Anything more would be overtime.

The bill passed by the Senate was an effort to reduce a national unemployment rate that stood at 25 percent. It had strong support from labor and religious leaders who argued that working people needed time for family, education, recreation and spirituality as much as they needed higher wages. But the bill failed in the House. The Fair Labor Standards Act, passed five years later, gave Americans a statutory 40-hour workweek.

Yet today, in an era when American productivity is several times what it was then, most Americans find it hard to get all their work done in 40 hours. Meanwhile, millions of Americans are without work, even as many others are working mandatory overtime or far longer than they would if they had a real choice in the matter.

According to the International Labor Organization, Americans now work 1,978 hours annually, a full 350 hours — nine weeks — more than Western Europeans. The average American actually worked 199 hours more in 2000 than he or she did in 1973, a period during which worker productivity per hour nearly doubled.

What happened? In effect, the United States as a society took all of its increases in labor productivity in the form of money and stuff instead of time. Of course, we didn't all get the money; the very poor earn even less in real terms than they did then, and the largest share of the increase went to the richest Americans.

The harmful effects of working more hours are being felt in many areas of society. Stress is a leading cause of heart disease and weakened immune systems. Consumption of fast foods and lack of time for exercise has led to an epidemic of obesity and diabetes. Many parents complain that they do not have enough time to spend with their children, much less become involved in their community. Worker productivity declines during the latter part of long work shifts.

By contrast, over the past 30 years, Europeans have made a different choice — to live simpler, more balanced lives and work fewer hours. The average Norwegian, for instance, works 29 percent less than the average American — 14 weeks per year — yet his average income is only 16 percent less. Western Europeans average five to six weeks of paid vacation a year; we average two.

Work and consumption are not necessarily bad. But producing and consuming can become the focus of a person's life — at the expense of other values.

Americans should reflect on those values. Later this year, on Oct. 24, will be the first Take Back Your Time Day, the goal of which is to encourage Americans to lead more balanced lives. The date falls nine weeks before the end of the year, nine weeks being how much more, on average, Americans work each year than Western Europeans. Perhaps this

day will help American workers realize that, in the end, there's no present like the time.

John de Graaf, co-author of "Affluenza: The All-Consuming Epidemic," is national coordinator of Take Back Your Time Day.

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