

# ACHIEVING A SHORTER WORKING WEEK ACROSS EUROPE

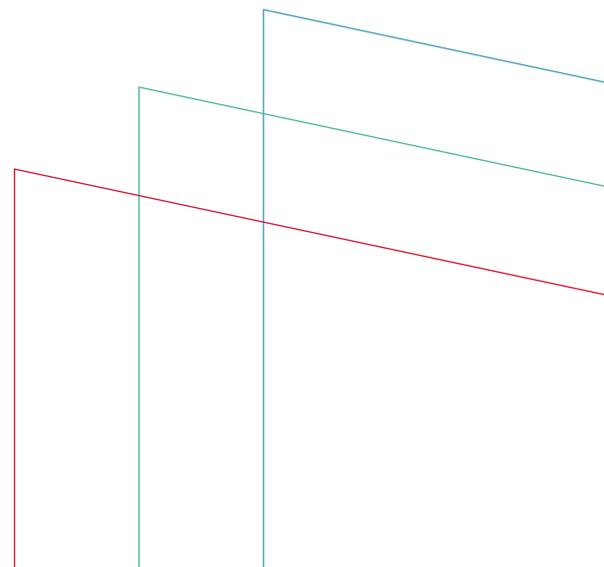
**Newsletter of the European Network  
for the Fair Sharing of Working Time**

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## WELCOME

The shorter working week has always been at the heart of the labour movement. The eight-hour movement extended beyond borders and ensured that today we enjoy things like the weekend and the eight-hour day. After decades in the political wilderness, the shorter working week is fast becoming one of the major political issues across Europe.

The Covid-19 crisis impacted our societies and economies unlike anything that has preceded it. It has exposed the vast inequalities which exist in our societies, and most clearly in the world of work. However, it has also meant that suddenly, working time and flexible working have taken on a new significance, and many of the changes to work which have happened are likely to be made permanent. At any rate, the pandemic and its aftermath have made it all the more urgent to move towards a shorter working week, and to ensure that we emerge from the crisis with a better world than the one we had going into it.

The European Network for the Fair Sharing of Working Time represents an attempt to coordinate the efforts of trade unions, political parties and civil society actors across Europe. Our newsletter captures the latest, most exciting developments in working-time reduction from across Europe.

The newsletter is produced by the New Economics Foundation (UK), and is coordinated by ATTAC (Germany – Group ArbeitFAIRTeilen) and Réseau Roosevelt (France). It is supported by Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung, Brussels Office and funded by the German Federal Foreign Office.

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## UNITED KINGDOM

### **The Scottish National Party pledge £10m fund for companies trialing a four-day week**

A fund of £10m has been pledged by the Scottish National Party for office-based businesses to try out a shorter working schedule, without cutting worker pay.

Speaking about the trial, a Scottish government spokesperson said: "The pandemic has served to intensify interest in and support for more flexible working practices, which could include a shift to a four-day working week. Reductions in the working week might help sustain more and better jobs, and enhance wellbeing. We are in the early stages of designing a £10m pilot that will help companies explore the benefits and costs of moving to a four-day working week. The pilot will allow us to develop a better understanding of the implications of a broader shift to a shorter working week across the economy."

### **Scottish businesses have switched to a four-day week**

The UPAC Group in Glasgow are moving to a four-day week with no decrease in salary, after a two-month trial which showed no drop in productivity but a decrease in stress levels. The business, which supplies packaging for the food and drink industry, will be increasing its staff levels to continue operating five days a week.

A spokesperson for The UPAC Group said: "The goal is to create the best possible working environment, inclusive of a work-life balance that makes the UPAC Group the employer of choice for anyone who wishes to enjoy their career/job.

"Trials have taken place over the last two months and have shown no evidence of any drop in productivity but a marked decrease in stress levels as the staff embrace the managements desire to quite simply, make their lives better."

The Michelin-star restaurant, 21212 in Edinburgh, has also introduced a four-day week for staff without decreasing their salaries. The chef and owner explains how the decision will help to "fuel the team's creative flare" and enable them to "produce dishes better than ever before." "This is a tough industry and we thrive on the energy and passion behind our chefs," he says. "We are about constant innovation and re-invention of dishes and the creativity needed for this is incredibly important.

## **Polling reveals that people in Scotland are overwhelmingly supportive of a four-day week**

New polling published in a report by the Institute for Public Policy Research Scotland (IPPR Scotland) in September revealed that:

- 88% of working-age people in Scotland would be willing to take part in shorter working time trial schemes set to be piloted by Scottish government
- Over 80% would support the introduction of a four-day working week with no loss of pay
- 80% believe a four-day week would have a positive effect on their wellbeing
- 65% believe that it would have a positive impact on Scotland's productivity

In addition, the report finds that a shorter working week without loss of pay could improve wellbeing and help to narrow gender divides, which would contribute toward realising Scotland's ambition to build a 'wellbeing economy'.

The report also calls on the Scottish Government to expand its four-day week pilot to include more sectors, including people working non-office-based jobs, and people in shift work, flexible work, part-time work, and working condensed. It argues that any successful transition post-Covid-19 must include all kinds of workplaces, and all types of work. The full time, nine-to-five office job is not how many people across Scotland work – and shorter working time trials need to reflect that reality.

## **Post-Brexit reforms are threat to EU labour laws including working time directive**

Worker protections enshrined in European Union (EU) law – including the 48-hour week – would be ripped up under plans being drawn up by the UK government as part of a post-Brexit overhaul of UK labour markets.

The move would potentially mark a clear divergence from EU labour market standards but the UK would only face retaliation from Brussels under the terms of its new post-Brexit trade treaty if the EU could demonstrate the changes had a material impact on competition.

The main areas of focus are on ending the 48-hour working week, tweaking the rules around rest breaks at work, and not including overtime pay when calculating some holiday pay entitlements, said people familiar with the plans. The government also wants to remove the requirement of businesses to log the detailed, daily reporting of

working hours, saving an estimated £1bn.

The government insisted that any reforms would be designed to help both companies and their employees – and put to a full consultation – saying it had no intention of lowering workers' rights.

But Ed Miliband, Labour's shadow business secretary, said the proposals were a "disgrace" at a time when so many people were worried about their jobs. "In the midst of the worst economic crisis in three centuries, ministers are preparing to tear up their promises to the British people and taking a sledgehammer to workers' rights," he said.

"Workers in the UK are the primary beneficiaries of the very positive judgments of the European courts," said an official at the Trades Union Congress (TUC), adding that any attempt to "whittle down and narrow" the interpretation of European law "is a concern because it amounts to a diminution of rights".

## **Politicians call on Welsh government to adopt a four-day working week pilot**

Plaid Cymru has called for a "radical new approach" to the way we work, which would increase workers' free time, while at the same time futureproof the Welsh economy.

Luke Fletcher MS, Plaid Cymru's economy spokesperson has said that radical thinking is needed for a "post-pandemic, pre-automation revolution and Wales could lead the way."

He says: "A four-day week would have four-fold benefits: it's good for well-being, it's good for the economy, it's good for the environment and it's good for our communities."

"Covid-19 has changed our work practices and shone a light on the inequalities in our society, not least that the burden of unpaid work falls most heavily on women."

"Freeing up an extra non-working day could help shift the balance, and also creates the opportunities for people to engage more in their local communities. Perhaps equally compelling is it would instantly reduce our carbon footprint, from one less day spent commuting to work."

"If we are to futureproof the Welsh economy, we need innovative and forward thinking policy solutions, and Plaid Cymru's proposal for a four-day week could see Wales lead the world in a cultural paradigm shift that could bring benefits to all."

## Growing support for the ‘right to disconnect’ in the UK

A new report from Autonomy, a UK think tank, has pointed to an “epidemic of hidden overtime” from working from home during Covid – one that particularly affects women.

A previous study carried out by the group, alongside Compass and the 4 Day Week Campaign, found that working from home during the pandemic had disproportionately impacted women’s mental health, and that women are 43% more likely to have increased their hours beyond a standard working week than men.

The report also included a proposal for draft legislation that would create a ‘right to disconnect’, based on French law. It states that employees do not have to take calls or read work-based emails during their time off.

In a survey carried out by workers’ union Prospect, 59% of all workers supported the introduction of a right to disconnect while 17% opposed. Furthermore, among new remote workers, 66% were in favour and 14% were against.

Angela Rayner, the deputy Labour leader who holds a shadow cabinet brief on the future of work, said: “Alongside the **right to flexible working**, there must be the right to disconnect. It is only fair that workers are able to establish healthy boundaries, switching off and disconnecting from work outside working hours.

## IRELAND

### 17 companies sign up to Ireland’s four-day week pilot programme

17 companies have signed up to Four Day Week Ireland’s pilot programme, with more businesses encouraged to join ahead of the start of the programme in 2022. That’s according to **Four Day Week Ireland**, who are today presenting to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Enterprise, Trade and Employment on the pilot programme.

The companies signed up so far range from companies offering recruitment services to bioceuticals manufacturers, and are located throughout Ireland.

The pilot programme was launched earlier this year by Four Day Week Ireland with the aim of trialing the effectiveness of a four-day week for Irish businesses. The pilot is part of an international collaboration with 4 Day Week Global, and will run on a coordinated,

parallel basis in a number of countries including Ireland, the US, the UK and New Zealand.

Under the pilot programme, employers will introduce a four-day week for their employees over a six-month period starting in February 2022. The pilot includes business supports to help organisations explore flexible working smoothly and successfully. The business supports include a training programme developed by companies who have already successfully implemented a four-day week: coaching, mentoring and advice from four-day week business leaders, networking and collaboration with other participant companies in Ireland and internationally, and access to world-class academic research and expert analysis.

## **Belfast City Council consider trialing a four-day week**

According to [BelfastLive](#), Sinn Fein put forward a motion for a trial of the four-day working week earlier this month. The DUP has also agreed to the study but did insist that there would need to be adjustments to the proposed model should it go ahead. The motion read as follows:

“Over the course of the **Covid-19** pandemic, businesses and workers have re-evaluated and re-assessed the issue of work-life balance and productivity.

“It has been almost 100 years since trades unions secured workers the right to a weekend and it is important that, as part of the economic recovery, we consider how we can modernise the working arrangements to the benefit of workers and employers.

“There are numerous examples from across the world where a four-day working week has been successfully trialed, leading to increases in positivity and an improved work-life balance.

## **Dublin City councillors back the four-day week**

Dublin City councillors have unanimously backed a motion calling for a four-day working week pilot programme for council workers.

The motion, tabled by Labour councillor Kevin Donoghue, calls on DCC chief executive Owen Keegan to work with trade unions on a four-day week trial programme. It was supported by all 63 councillors at this evening’s council meeting.

“The time has come for the four-day week to be introduced here and I would like to see Dublin City Council leading the way and taking this progressive step,” said Councillor Donoghue.

## BELGIUM

### **The Belgian government considers a four-day week through longer working days**

The Federal Government is discussing a proposal to shorten a full-time working week from five to four days. A proposal was tabled by the Liberal Party, aiming to make the working week more flexible: full-time employees would still work 38 or 40 hours, but spread over four days instead of five.

With the proposal, the government wants to encourage companies to introduce longer working days of 9.5 hours. In exchange, employees will get an extra day off. The Federal Government will discuss in which sectors the system could be introduced, and how to avoid making the working day too long.

“In principle, we think it is good towards the freedom of the employee, but of course it has to be a choice of the employee,” said chair of the Flemish Green Party, Meyrem Almaci.

This proposal is not in line with the principles of fair working time. A socialist trade union in Belgium has already spoken out against the idea, stressing that above all, the aim should be that full-time employees work fewer hours per week.

## ICELAND

### **World’s largest ever trial of a four-day working week is “overwhelming success”**

Over 1% of Iceland’s working population took place in a pilot programme which cut the working week to 35-36 hours with no reduction in overall pay.

Joint analysis by think tanks in Iceland and the UK found that the trials, which ran from 2015 to 2019 and involved more than 2,500 people, boosted productivity and wellbeing and are already leading to permanent changes.

Icelandic trade union federations, which collectively negotiate wages and conditions for most Icelandic employees, have already begun to negotiate reduced working hours as a result.

The researchers estimate that as a result of new agreements struck in 2019-2021 after

the trials ended, 86% of Iceland's entire working population now either have reduced hours or flexibility within their contracts to reduce hours.

The trials were launched by Reykjavik City Council and the Icelandic national government after pressure from trade unions and civil society groups. Workers covered by the experiment included a mix of nine-to-five employees and those on non-standard shift patterns – with workplaces including office, play-school, hospitas, and social services employees.

The joint analysis, carried out by the think tanks Autonomy in the UK and the Association for Sustainability and Democracy (Alda) in Iceland, found that the well-being of workers who took part improved dramatically across a range of indicators. Perceived stress and burnout, as well as health and work-life balance were significantly improved across practically all groups. And as a result, researchers say, productivity and service provision remained the same or improved across the majority of workplaces included in the trial.

## FRANCE

### **General Confederation of Labour reactivate their campaign for working time reduction**

When he became head of France's General Confederation of Labour (CGT) in 2016, Philippe Martinez made the reduction of the working week from 35 to 32 hours one of his campaign priorities. The CGT has now relaunched this campaign for reduced working time.

"The idea is that France cannot continue to have 3.7 million unemployed while many employees work too much, to the point of 800,000 overtime hours per year," explained Jean-Baptiste Talbot.

Martinez claims that if this proposal were implemented, it would create more than 2m jobs in the public and in the private sector. He explains that the law would not be applied everywhere in the same way and that the subject must be discussed with workers in each company who will have knowledge of which hourly rhythms will work best.

## SPAIN

### **Spain to pilot four-day week as response to pandemic**

A three-year pilot project will make Spain the first country in Europe to do a nationwide experiment with cutting back one workday a week. The project will use €50m (\$59m) from the EU's massive coronavirus recovery fund to compensate some 200 mid-size companies as they resize their workforce or reorganise production workflows to adapt to a 32-hour working week.

The funds will go to subsidising all of the employers' extra costs in the first year of the trial and then reduce the government's aid to 50% and 25% each consecutive year, according to a blueprint by the Más País, a small leftwing party that's behind the initiative.

The only condition is that the readjustment leads to a real net reduction of working hours while maintaining full-time contract salaries, explained Héctor Tejero, a lawmaker with Más País in the Madrid regional assembly.

"It's not using the European funds for Spaniards to work less, it's about seeing how we can improve productivity and competitiveness of our companies," said Tejero. At least half a dozen companies have already reached out expressing interest, according to Tejero.

Arguments in favor of the move also cite benefits for the overall economy. A mass shift to a three-day weekend would lead to more consumption, especially in entertainment and tourism, a backbone of the Spanish economy.

Maria Alvarez, a businesswoman and founder of the 4 Day Week Campaign in Spain, said the pilot represented "a sensible idea that should be in every government's toolbox coming out of this crisis".

"What this pilot reveals is that the four-day week has never been a moonshot. Quite the opposite," she said.

### **Major telecoms provider offers workforce a four-day week after union negotiation**

Telefonica will offer part of their workforce the opportunity to participate in a four-day week pilot programme, due to start in October and last three months, as part of wider negotiations with unions in the aftermath of the coronavirus pandemic.

The deal, signed with Spanish labour unions on Tuesday and valid until the end of 2022, includes the three-month trial which would let staff work four days a week on a voluntary and role-dependent basis, in exchange for a 15% pay cut.

“We’re going ahead with a flexible working model which proved feasible during the pandemic,” Emilio Gayo, president of Telefonica Spain, said in a statement. “This agreement shows our strong commitment to new ways of working.”

Telefonica says it is the first Spanish company to incorporate the 32-hour week into its business model.

“We still don’t know how many employees will be interested in the trial,” UGT union representative Diego Gallart told Reuters. “But a substantial portion of the workforce is keen for remote work days to be increased and maintained long-term.”

The telecoms operator will also grant employees two days of remote working a week, which they can accumulate and use flexibly if their supervisor agrees, and will set no limits on where the remote work must take place from.

## GERMANY

### **IG Metall negotiate wage increase as part of switch to four-day week**

Germany’s largest trade union, IG Metall, agreed a 2.3% wage increase, to be paid either in full or as part of a switch to a four-day week, in a key industrial region, setting the benchmark for 3.9 million metal and engineering workers nationwide.

The package is structured with the aim of allowing some workers to move to a four-day week without a significant loss of earnings. Employers and local works councils will consult on which option to take.

“This agreement offers answers to the pressing problems of our time: the acute consequences of the coronavirus pandemic and the structural challenges of our industries,” said the influential North Rhine-Westphalia branch of the union, covering Germany’s Ruhr Valley industrial heartland.

The union will make a proposal to the new German government to think about the four-day week as a future model of work.

## ITALY

### **Pope Francis calls for a reduction in working hours**

At the IV World Meeting of Popular Movements, Pope Francis has advocated for “a universal salary, so that each person in this world can access the most basic goods of life” and for “the reduction of the working day” as a measure for greater access to work for all.

He asked governments and politicians to “work for the common good”, take care not to “listen only to the economic elites” and “be servants of the peoples who cry out for land, shelter, work and a good life” and to the leaders religious that “we never use the name of God to foment wars or coups d’état”.

Among other “concrete measures”, he proposed “a serious analysis of the reduction of the working as a redistributive element of the workload among the population.”

## EUROPEAN UNION

### **Majority of European parliament vote for a ‘right to disconnect’**

In their legislative initiative that passed with 472 votes in favour, 126 against and 83 abstentions, MEPs called on the European Commission to propose a law that enables those who work digitally to disconnect outside their working hours. It should also establish minimum requirements for remote working and clarify working conditions, hours and rest periods.

The increase in digital resources being used for work purposes has resulted in an ‘always on’ culture, which has a negative impact on the work-life balance of employees, MEPs say. Although working from home has been instrumental in helping safeguard employment and business during the Covid-19 crisis, the combination of long working hours and higher demands also leads to more cases of anxiety, depression, burnout and other mental and physical health issues.

Since the outbreak of the pandemic, working from home has increased by almost 30%. This figure is expected to remain high or even increase. Research by **Eurofound** shows that people who work regularly from home are more than twice as likely to surpass the maximum of 48 working hours a week, compared to those working on their employer’s

premises. Almost 30% of those working from home report working in their free time every day or several times a week, compared to less than 5% of office workers.

## OUTSIDE EUROPE

### **Congressman Mark Takano puts forward 32-hour week bill to US congress**

Representative Mark Takano (D-Calif.) introduced a bill into the House which would reduce the standard work week to 32 hours.

According to Takano's press release about his proposed legislation, "A shorter workweek would benefit both employers and employees alike." He pointed out, "Pilot programs run by governments and businesses across the globe have shown promising results, as productivity climbed and workers reported better work-life balance, less need to take sick days, heightened morale and lower childcare expenses because they had more time with their family and children."

Takano's **bill** would amend the Fair Labor Standards Act to require overtime pay for non-exempt workers after they work 32 hours in a week, instead of the current 40-hour threshold. He said that under the bill, many hourly workers would end up working the same amount of hours while earning more for their labor.

Original co-sponsors include Rep. Rashida Tlaib (D-MI), Rep. Jan Schakowsky (D-IL), and Rep. Chuy Garcia (D-IL).

### **Kickstarter launch four-day week pilot**

The Brooklyn-based crowdfunding platform announced last week that starting in 2022, it will become the first company to join a set of pilot programs called 4 Day Week US. The programs, launched in part by Kickstarter executive Jon Leland, are a spinoff from 4 Day Week Global, a not-for-profit that promotes a shortened work schedule.

Kickstarter CEO Aziz Hasan **told Axios** that the pandemic inspired him to try a four-day workweek for its 90 employees. "What we've been all living through the last 18 months, you feel this compression on your professional life, your personal life," he said. A Kickstarter spokesperson says the company has not yet determined how it will implement the schedule. 4 Day Week usually advocates a 32-hour work week comprising four eight-hour days.

## **Japanese government encourages employers to introduce four-day week**

In June 2021, Japan's Council on Economic and Fiscal Policy promoted plans for an optional four-day workweek in its annual economic policy guideline.

The country's corporate culture is notoriously intense, and *karoshi*, a term meaning 'death from overwork', was coined in Japan in the 1970s due to the onerous work pressures employees face. But the coronavirus pandemic has forced significant shifts into how many companies operate, with many workers having to work from home due to lockdown restrictions.

The Japanese government, which in recent years has been trying to modernise the country's approach to work, wants to encourage a healthier work-life balance and cajole companies to move towards offering more flexible hours and remote working.

The recommendation that companies adopt an optional shorter work week is meant to support employees who want to further their education, take care of family members or simply to go out, spend money and even meet others, as Japan's population **ages and shrinks**.

Martin Schulz, chief policy economist at Japanese firm Fujitsu, told Deutsche Welle: "The government is really very keen for this change in attitude to take root at Japanese companies. During the pandemic, companies have shifted to new ways of operating and they are seeing a gradual increase in productivity."

## **Modi government introduces new labour rules around working time**

Media coverage has suggested that Indian prime minister Modi's new labour rules around working time in India include a four-day work week. However, the policy does not include a reduction in working time with no reduction in pay.

Instead, the limit on working hours will remain at 48 hours a week, but employers will have more flexibility regarding how these hours are spread out throughout the week. For example, an employee could work 12 hours a day for four days a week.

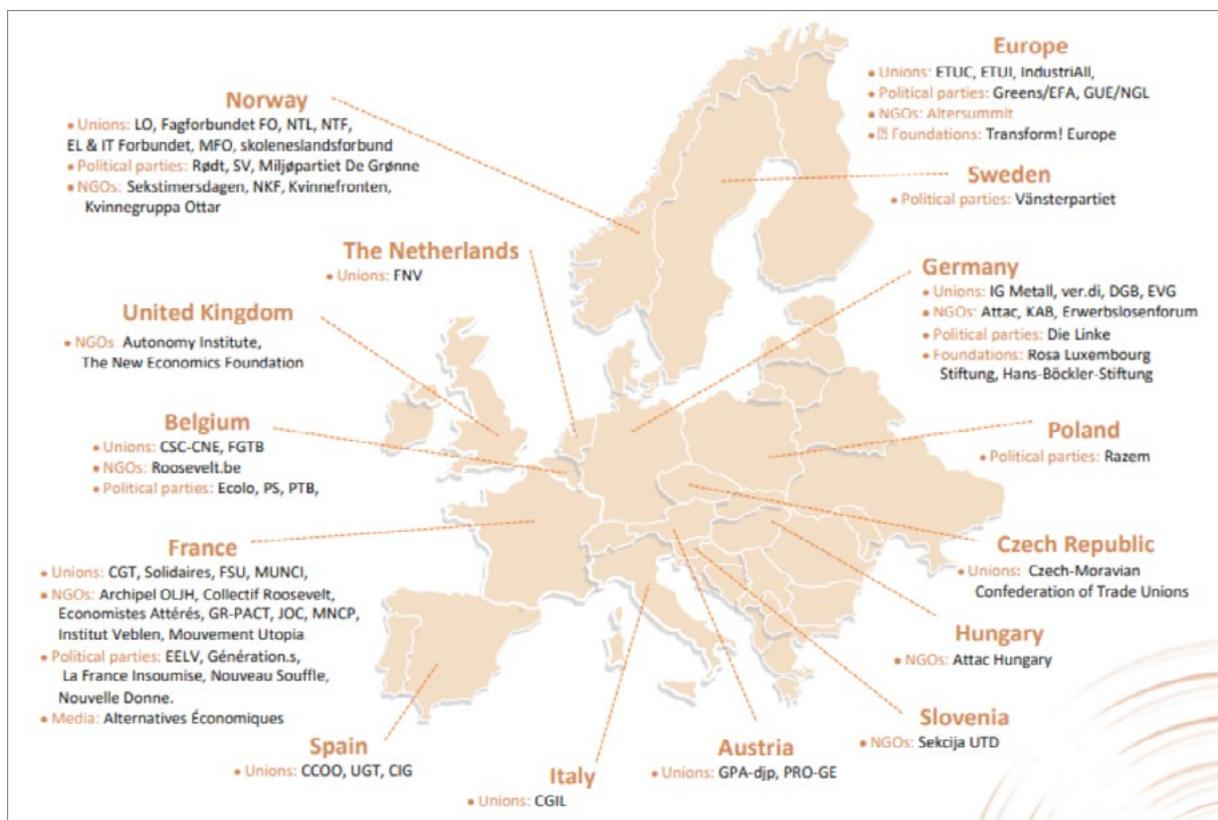
"If daily working hours are increased, you will have to give the workers similar holidays also. There will be five or four working days if duty hours are increased. It will now be mutually agreed to by the employees and employers as to what is appropriate for them," labour secretary Apurva Chandra said.

# ABOUT THE NETWORK

The shorter working week has always been at the heart of the labour movement. The eight-hour movement extended beyond borders and ensured that today we enjoy things like the weekend and the eight-hour day. After decades in the political wilderness, the shorter working week is fast becoming one of the major political issues across Europe. This network represents an attempt to coordinate the efforts of the trade unions, political parties, and civil society actors across Europe.

- The main objective of the network is to create a permanent and open forum between structured initiatives for the sharing of working time.
- This informal network is opened to representative of organisations, experts and activists.
- The activity of the network entirely relies on the voluntary contributions of the participating organisations.

## Members of the network



**If you would like your organisation to become a member of the network, or have information on shorter hours you would like to be included in the next newsletter, please contact:**

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