

Session 2 – Semestre 1 – Année 2024-2025

Langue : Anglais

Niveau : 5

Date : 21 juin 2025

Durée : 1h30

Read the text and answer the following questions using your own words.

A - **COMPREHENSION** (10 pts) (300 words +/- 10% altogether)

1 - (§§1 - 2) What were people's working lives like before and after Covid 19? What has Covid 19 shown?

2 - Has a reduction in working time already been dreamt about and implemented (= put into effect)? By whom? When? Where? Why?

3 - Today why should a shorter working week be considered?

How can it become reality?

B - **ESSAY** (10 pts) : answer **ONE** of the following questions in a clear and logical way (use **linkwords**) (300 words +/- 10%).

1 - "While we're [at work], our time is not our own" (§1). Do you agree? Why?

2 - "There are simply too few jobs for too many people" (§5). Do you think this is true today?

3 - When you have a job, will you ask for a four-day or a five-day week? What are **your** reasons for that?

The big idea: should we work less?

The Guardian, Sarah Jaffe, 11 Oct 2021

1 - For the last year and a half, most people have fallen into one of three categories: the unemployed, whose jobs disappeared during lockdown¹; the work from home brigade, who balanced family responsibilities or solo strain with a workday that extended even longer sans commute; and those who were still going to work but under hazardous, sometimes terrifying conditions, whether in healthcare or grocery stores or meatpacking plants. In so many of these cases, much of what made work enjoyable or at least tolerable was stripped away, and we were left with the unpleasant reality of what our jobs actually were: not a fun pastime, but something we have to do. As Amelia Horgan notes in her book *Lost in Work*, "We, almost always, need a job more than a job needs us. Our entrance into work is unfree, and while we're there, our time is not our own."

¹ Mass quarantine to control a disease

2 - Yet for all its misery, Covid-19 did show us that it was possible to radically change the way we live and work, and to do it quickly. And it's worth remembering that working life pre-pandemic wasn't exactly sunshine and rainbows for many people - a UK poll early in the pandemic found only 6% of respondents wanted to return to life as it had been before the virus. Work, as I noted in my book *Work Won't Love You Back*, has been getting worse for a while, with many people trapped in a rat race of zero-hours contracts, on-call shifts that never materialise, juggling jobs and gig work², or facing stagnant wages as the rent continues to rise. Yet we are expected to grin and bear it, providing service with a smile or demonstrating our commitment by treating our workplace as a "family". The world of work, writes Phil Jones in *Work Without the Worker*, "is stretching into a vast and desolate hinterland of informality, temping³, gigs and pseudowork, much of which - like workfare - is created simply for the sake of taming surplus populations".

3 - It's not surprising, then, that there's renewed interest in the idea of shorter working hours - importantly, without a loss in pay. In particular one idea that was widely criticised when it appeared in the Labour party's 2019 manifesto has suddenly gained in popularity in western countries: the four-day working week. US representative Mark Takano has introduced a four-day week bill in Congress, the Scottish National party has proposed a four-day week trial⁴, and Spain is launching a three-year pilot programme trialling a 32-hour work week with no loss in pay. (Working less is also a demand in China, where the new "lying flat" craze has young people saying no to always-on culture.) Pre-pandemic trials in Iceland revealed that shorter hours led to happier workers and that productivity stayed the same or even improved. After pressure from unions, 86% of Icelandic workers now either work shorter weeks or have the right to ask to do so.

4 - But much of the conversation around shorter hours, notes Kyle Lewis, co-director of the thinktank *Autonomy* and co-author of the forthcoming *Overtime: Why We Need a Shorter Working Week*, has focused on progressive companies driving the demand. The reality, he says, is that a change like this is political and will only be possible if multiple actors mobilise a range of strategies to make it reality.

5 - As Aidan Harper, co-author of *The Case for a Four-Day Week*, pointed out recently, most rapid reductions in working time have come in periods of crisis, as a way to distribute available work and reduce unemployment, most famously during the Great Depression. Now, as then, "there are simply too few jobs for too many people," Aaron Benanav writes in *Automation and the Future of Work*, but this hasn't resulted in widespread leisure time, rather in persistent underemployment, a global proletariat spending as much time hustling⁵ for work as it does actually working for pay. While

some degree of make-work jobs formed the backbone of Depression-fighting programmes, Benanav notes that the economist credited with that programme, John Maynard Keynes, actually argued that, long term, the work week would shrink drastically - perhaps down to 15 hours.

6 - This is, after all, hardly the first time that there has been a general crisis of work, and increasing demand from workers to do less of it. Precarity, Horgan points out, has long been a

2 short-term contract

3 working as a temporary worker

4 an experimental attempt, a test

5 acting quickly

characteristic of wage labour, particularly for those outside of the white male unionised workforce that dominated the US and Europe for much of the 20th century. These days, unions have declined in breadth and power, and much of our frustration with work is individualised, turned into personalised forms of slacking and little rebellions at what David Graeber called the “bullshitisation” of jobs. Getting people to, as Horgan puts it, turn “widespread frustration with individual jobs or individual bosses into frustration with the entire system of bosses and work” has been hard without a strong worker’s movement. And it will take just that to make a shorter week a reality, particularly one that does not mean wage cuts for already strapped⁶ working people. “The fight for a shorter working week,” Lewis notes, “will be just that: a fight. It will be won by building power in the workplace and across society at large.”

7 - Keynes was not, after all, the only economic theorist who fantasised about freedom from wage labour; Karl Marx famously wrote that “the realm of freedom actually begins only where labour which is determined by necessity and mundane considerations ceases”. The basic requirement for freedom, he wrote, was “the shortening of the working day”.

8 - Perhaps the most important reason to consider working less is that the looming climate catastrophe makes the Covid crisis look manageable by comparison. The way we work, produce and consume has set the planet on fire, but the good news is that a shorter work week, according to research from Autonomy and more recently by the environmental organisation Platform London, can be part of the solution. Platform, working with the 4 Day Week campaign, found that “shifting to a four-day working week without loss of pay could shrink the UK’s carbon footprint by 127m tonnes per year by⁷ 2025”. That’s more, the report notes, than the entire carbon footprint of Switzerland. Lots of work means lots of commuting and energy-intensive consumption of ready-made meals and door-to-door delivery.

9 - Looking at the world of precarious work on demand, Jones notes that short-term gigs don’t have to be miserable - they could, instead, be a pathway to freedom, where the necessary work can be broken down into small tasks widely distributed. Abundance, Benanav reminds us, “is a social relationship,” a decision we could collectively make as a society to share the essential work fairly and distribute the necessities of life fairly as well.

6 short of money, lacking money
7 not later than