



US workers suffer labour pains

Michael Ellison in New York
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The United States is closed today for all but the most important business - such as shopping - while it marks the official end of summer with a day of rest for the men and women who work the longest hours in the industrialised world.

Average Americans now spend so much time at work that they are putting in another week a year compared with 10 years ago, says a new study published to coincide with the Labour Day holiday weekend.

In 1990 Mr and Ms America worked 1,942 hours a year each; now they toil for 1,978 hours, says the report by the International Labour Organisation.

"The increase in the number of hours worked within the US runs counter to the trend in other industrialised nations where we are seeing declining hours worked," said Lawrence Jeff Johnson, the economist who headed the team that drew up Key Indicators of the Labour Market 2001-2002.

Each Australian, Canadian, Japanese and Mexican worker devotes about 100 hours a year - or 2.5 weeks - fewer to their job, it says. Britons and Brazilians work 250 fewer hours (roughly six weeks) and Germans do 500 fewer hours, or about 12 weeks.

Of countries categorised as developing or in transition, only South Koreans (500 more hours) and Czechs (an extra 100 hours) put in more time than Americans.

"I think it's a lot to do with the American psyche," said Mr Johnson, who lives in Switzerland. "Americans define themselves by their work. When you meet the average European it takes a while for them to tell you what they do for a living. They talk more about their families. Americans tell you immediately what they do."

Part of the apparent appetite for toil is explained by the increasingly blurred line between work and free time.

"I played golf recently for the first time in a year," said Mr Johnson, who describes himself as a workaholic. "My friend's phone rang three times with work calls. The line between time at work and time not at work is blurred. Years ago we used to clock on and clock off but we don't do that any more."

But mobile phones and computers are not unique to the US. Nor is ambition, though it might find its strongest expression there.

"America has labour flexibility and Americans have a tendency to move quickly from job to job," said Mr Johnson. "We want to progress, to move on to the next level. To do that they're putting in more hours."

Americans typically get vacations of only two or three weeks a year, though there are 10 public holidays. Many fall on Mondays, allowing for long weekends.

But long working weeks do not equate with wealth. "A job should keep you out of poverty, not keep you in it," said Holly Sklar, author of *Raise the Floor: Wages and Policies that Work for all of us*. "But as we celebrate Labour Day, hardworking Americans paid the minimum wage have to choose between eating or heating, healthcare or childcare."

"At \$5.15 [£3.54] an hour [the minimum wage], they earn just \$10,712 [£7,369] a year. That's a third less than in 1968, when the minimum wage was about \$8, adjusting for inflation."

"A couple with two kids would have to work a combined 3.3 full-time minimum-wage jobs to make ends meet."

Mr Johnson suggested that the US could learn much from Ireland, where the productivity of people with jobs had increased even though each employee now spent 1,520 hours a year working, down from 1,728 hours in 1990.

"The education and training is something to look at. Labour Day is a time for reflection for Americans, to see we're doing some things very well but we can learn from others."

"We're all striving for balance, we want to do it at a cost that's not too great to society. Nobody on their deathbed has ever said 'I wish I'd spent one more hour on that job'."

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