32-hour workweek reaches Senate

Sen. Bernie Sanders has introduced new legislation to reduce the standard workweek from 40 hours to 32.

Under Mr. Sanders' proposal, the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 would be amended to reduce the American workweek by eight hours: in many sectors, one full working day. The change would take place over four years by lowering the threshold at which workers would be eligible for overtime pay. Overtime pay would be required at time and a half for workdays longer than eight hours, and at double regular pay for workdays longer than 12 hours.

In a fact sheet shared to his website, Mr. Sanders argued that working Americans have not reaped the benefits of their increased productivity.

"Workers are now over 400 percent more productive than they were back then [in 1940] and continued technological advances are likely to increase the gap between worker productivity and worker gains," Mr. Sanders said. "While weekly wages for the average American worker are actually lower than they were 50 years ago after adjusting for inflation, CEOs are now making nearly 400 times more than what their employees earn."

He also referenced studies supporting the implementation of a four-day workweek, saying that the model improves worker satisfaction and reduces burnout, child care costs and carbon emissions without any negative impact on productivity. In one pilot, researchers — affiliated with Cambridge University, Boston College and the nonprofit 4 Day Week Global — followed 3,000 workers at more than 60 companies in the United Kingdom. More than 70% of workers reported higher satisfaction and less burnout, and participating businesses saw an average 35% increase in revenue.

In the U.S. and Canada, Boston College researchers and 4 Day Week Global observed similar results in a pilot of 41 companies. Reduced workweeks are already in place at certain school districts in Missouri and Texas, which report no statistically significant effect on academic achievement or building growth; though in Texas, staff attrition at participating schools has declined.

Mr. Sanders' bill is not the first to support a four-day workweek at the federal level. More than one year ago, Rep. Mark Takano of California introduced the Thirty-Two Hour Workweek Act to Congress with co-sponsors from Washington and Illinois. He has reintroduced it as a companion to Mr. Sanders' legislation.

The New York Times reported that Mr. Sanders spoke about the bill at a Senate hearing on March 14 — along with a number of critics. Liberty Vittert, PhD, a statistics professor at Washington University in St. Louis, argued that there is insufficient evidence to support a four-day workweek across all companies in all sectors. Louisiana Sen. Bill Cassidy said that the reduction in work hours could harm small businesses.

"It would threaten millions of small businesses operating on a razor-thin margin because they are unable to find enough workers," Mr. Cassidy said.

Read more about the four-day workweek and its impact on healthcare here.

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