The 35-hour workweek in France

The reduction of working time (known in France as réduction du temps de travail or RTT) is a contemporary theme of the industrial revolution and the economic growth that ensued from the 19th century on. It aims to improve employees' living conditions and can be achieved through the use of productivity gains generated by growth. During economic crises, it can even be a way to share employment. These two premises have given rise to reflection and legislation.

The Aubry Acts of 1998 and 2000 on the reduction of working time have four objectives: employment, performance, free time and decentralized negotiation. The Aubry Act 98-461 of 13 June 1998 set the statutory workweek at 35 hours starting 1 January 2000 for all companies with over 20 employees and 1 January 2002 for all other companies. It also introduced temporary incentives for companies who chose to start before this date negotiating a 10% reduction in working hours and keeping or increasing their staff by 6%. The second Aubry Act 2000-37 of 19 January 2000 confirmed the new statutory workweek and its annual equivalent (1,600 hours). For those earning the statutory minimum wage (SMIC), it introduced a monthly pay guarantee. For the companies who introduced the 35-hour week, the temporary incentive scheme was replaced by a reduction in social security contributions which varies according to salaries, and is no longer contingent on a minimum number of jobs being maintained or created.

Initial assessments agree that the legislation has had an overall positive effect on employment and reports that employees are quite satisfied with the changes the 35-hour workweek has brought about in their everyday life. However, from an economic perspective, in 2002 the government reported the first difficulties and limits of reduced working time implemented by the Aubry Acts: in two years, growth dried up and unemployment continued to rise over a year; moreover, in five years, the reduction of working time only created or maintained 300,000 jobs (due to cuts in social security contributions) when at the same time, growth created 1.4 million jobs. The Aubry Acts are considered to be too strict. In some sectors, employees have had a hard time accepting the way reduced working hours have been put into practice and wages have stagnated. In addition, workloads have increased and employees are increasingly required to be versatile.
Although the Fillon Act of 17 January 2003 did not challenge the principle of the 35-hour workweek, it did relax the terms and conditions of its implementation, particularly when it comes to overtime (the threshold at which overtime begins was raised to 180 hours a year). Cuts in social security contributions are no longer linked to reduced working time but to labour costs. The legislation aims to enable full employment and encourage fresh social dialogue. Since 2004, changes on a limited scale were adopted: these measures concern small businesses and allow them to apply the 35-hour week in a more flexible way. Act 2005 of 31 March 2005 on the organisation of working time is part of the same flexible approach giving a large role to collective bargaining. Act 2007-1223 of 21 August 2007 to benefit work, employment and purchasing power provides for the exemption of social security contributions for overtime.

On a wider scale, compared to other countries, when it comes to the evolution of working time and its regulations, France stands out as a country where the State plays a key role, as do legal standards, but according to statistics, it is in an average position in most indicators comparing working time.

For more information

**WEBSITES**
- Ministry of Labour, Labour Relations and Solidarity: Employment, work and vocational training page (in French only)
  http://www.travail.gouv.fr/
  See page on working time (in French only): http://www.travail.gouv.fr/sous-dossiers.php3?id_rubrique=156&id_mot=345

**REPORTS**

**PUBLICATIONS**
- Durée, réduction et aménagement du temps de travail / Ministry of Labour. – La Documentation française, 2003.