

Extreme working hours in Western Europe and North America: A new aspect of polarization

Anna S. Burger

burger_anna@ceu.phd.edu

Central European University, Budapest, Hungary

Abstract –

This paper analyses the trends and root causes of extreme working hours in sixteen Western European countries, Canada, and the United States between 1970 and 2010. Following earlier literature, extreme working hours, or extreme jobs, are conceptualized as workers' weekly working hours of 50 or more. Earlier literature has focused on the United States. It has been shown that the proliferation of extreme working hours in the United States had been incentivized by the gradual loosening of the US labor regulation. It has been pointed out that the existence of extreme working hours was an important obstacle in the continuation of women's labor market emancipation, and it was the harbinger of new inequalities. As European *average* working hours have declined over the past decades, scholars of working time have turned little attention to the higher end of European countries' working time distributions. The article takes a comprehensive macro view on the topic.

First, the article documents diverging patterns of extreme working hours in Western Europe. Whereas the Scandinavian and French ratios of extreme jobs remained very low, the Anglo-Saxon countries, along with most continental European countries, exhibit significantly higher ratios of extreme workers after the beginning of the 1990s than in the previous two decades. A more detailed analysis into the socio-economic background of extreme workers shows that extreme jobs remained to be dominated by high-skilled male employees. Second, the paper detects the development of two diverging trajectories: one with a strong and stable labor regulation along with a balanced working hour profile and one with gradual deregulation along with an increasing ratio of long work week. Finally, the article uses a series of OLS estimations to test five specific hypotheses on the role of the welfare state and of economic globalization in influencing outcomes in extreme working hour ratios. The results provide strong empirical evidence for the notion that patterns of extreme working hours are not inherent in post-industrial development: policy variables, such as the strength of the labor regulation and the extent to which the welfare state has been reformed in a family friendly way, appear as significant determinants of the ratio of extreme jobs, even after controlling for changes in the national and global market structures. The empirical analysis uses the author's extreme working hours standardized meta-database which had been compiled from two large micro data collections: the Luxembourg Income Study and the Multinational Time Use Study.

Keywords: extreme working hours, welfare state, labor regulation