Restructuring time: Implications of work-hours reductions for the working class

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ABSTRACT
This article examines the implications for working-class employees of reducing work hours, specifically when overtime is curtailed in hourly jobs. Much of the literature on work/life balance recommends a reduction in hours for professional employees. We find that the income from overtime hours solves a host of work/family problems for working-class employees, ranging from the basic need to ‘make ends meet’ to the more hidden strains of caring for extended families and dealing with divorce, illness, and addiction. Efforts to reduce hours will be met with resistance not relief. Our depiction of working-class concerns helps the work/family literature to move beyond a focus on professionals and to tackle tough trade-offs regarding livelihood and quality of life.

KEYWORDS
change • class • hours • resistance • time • work/family

Work/family research has identified both synergies and trade-offs between the realms of home and work (e.g. Friedman & Greenhaus, 2000). The synergies involve flexibility, variety, and adaptations that enrich both realms (e.g. Crosby, 1991). The trade-offs generally focus on the scarcity of time, and the recommended cure is often reduced hours. Reduced hours appeal to the salaried professional employees who have been the focus of most work/family research (e.g. Bond et al., 1998; Moen, 2003). Work/family