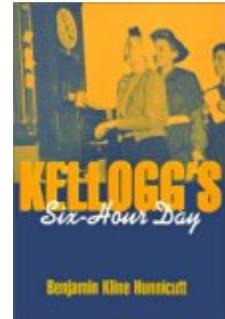


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Benjamin Kline Hunnicutt. *Kellogg's Six-Hour Day*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996. x + 261 pp. \$33.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-56639-448-2; \$69.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-56639-447-5.

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Between the Civil War and World War II the length of the American work week decreased dramatically. Since the end of World War II, the rate of decline has become positively glacial. The five-day work week with an eight-hour workday came to be seen as the norm over a half a century ago and it is still seen as the norm today. This development caught a lot of attentive observers by surprise—for example, John Maynard Keynes in 1930 predicted that by 2030 a fifteen hour work week would be sufficient for all but the most extreme workaholics. The stabilization of the work week at forty hours continues to defy easy explanation. Benjamin Hunnicutt knows that the explanation for this dramatic reversal is highly complex. In *Work Without End* (1988), he offered a strikingly new and controversial thesis that pinpointed the role of policy decisions during the New Deal. In *Kellogg's Six-Hour Day*, he examines the question from a fascinating new angle—that of a work force which eagerly adopted the six-hour workday during the Depression, but which reverted back to the eight-hour workday during the post-war period.

Kellogg's shift to the six-hour workday occurred on December 1, 1930. Hunnicutt calls the shift an "instant success" (p. 1) because it attracted the attention of the national media and Herbert Hoover's administration. The shift was the product of an unusual time and two unusual men. The first unusual man was Lewis J. Brown, the company's president. An English immigrant, he was greatly influenced by Lord William Leverhulme, the successful soap manufacturer from Lancaster, founder of "Liberation Capitalism," author of *The Six-Hour Day & Other Industrial Questions* (1919) and advocate of shorter hours as a sound business practice and liberating force in the life of workers. The second unusual man was W.K. Kellogg,

the company's owner. W.K. was the younger brother of John Harvey Kellogg, who had transformed the Battle Creek Sanitarium from a small Seventh-Day Adventist retreat into a world-famous institution. John Harvey Kellogg cultivated the image of an indefatigable superman. Poor W.K. "was caught in a rush. He had taken a job as factotum for John Harvey, who worked him nearly to death" (p. 40). After they discovered how to make flaked cereal, the brothers separated rancorously, slugging it out in court, and W.K. built his cereal empire. A psychiatrist friend characterized W.K. as "deeply unhappy and frustrated. ... Possibly by the time he gained success at middle age, the capacity for enjoyment of a rich life had atrophied" (p. 39). W.K. complained that he had "never learned to play," (p. 39) but in old age turned his attention to helping others overcome the situation in which he found himself. He donated considerable money to local recreational projects and encouraged his employees to use their spare time in "worthwhile" activities. The Great Depression gave these two men the necessary inducement to launch the six-hour experiment. As the local unemployment rate shot upward, they cut the workday to six hours, while eliminating breaks and terminating bonuses for unpopular shift times. Workers were given a 12.5 percent hourly raise, so standard daily pay only fell by about fifteen percent.

Workers were initially very receptive and willing to "share the work" with the unemployed. Hunnicutt has interviewed many employees who worked at Kellogg's during this period. Many of them reminisce about how they used their new "free" time: visiting friends over beer or coffee, participating in amateur sports, hunting and fishing, doing family things together—gardening, canning, school projects. In 1937, Kellogg's became union-

ized, W.K. Kellogg withdrew from an active role in the business, and a new management team arrived which was not committed to the 6-hour workday. As part of the contract negotiations, the union conducted a secret ballot election, in which two-thirds of workers registered their preference for the six-hour workday, with a few smaller departments opting to keep their eight-hour shifts. By 1941, when the union struck Kellogg's for the first time, a sizeable eight-hour faction had emerged. During World War II, the company switched to a forty-eight-hour work week, but promised to revert to six-hour shifts after the emergency ended. In mid-1946, employees reaffirmed their commitment to the short workday, with eighty-seven percent of women and seventy-one percent of men voting for six hours. Over the course of the next decade, however, the tide turned. By 1957 most departments had opted to switch to the eight-hour shift, so that only about one-quarter of the work force, mostly women, retained the six-hour shift. Finally, in 1985, the last department voted to adopt an 8-hour workday.

What happened between the end of World War II and the late 1950s that caused workers to change their minds about how much to work and how much to earn? Hunnicutt points to a new approach by Kellogg's management, part of a broader trend in management during this period. Managers became coaches rather than authoritarian drivers and tried to "sell" workers on the importance of doing their jobs and seeing work as the center of their lives. Management began to denigrate and "feminize" shorter hours. National union officials were very willing to trade shorter hours for offers of hourly wage increases. But most importantly many workers, especially male employees, seem to have changed their tastes. They became embarrassed by the short hours that they were working—shorter than the shifts worked by men at other local jobs. They changed their rhetoric, downing-playing the freedom that leisure gave, and asserting that they were "unable to afford" a six-hour shift, that longer hours were needed to "keep the wolf from the door," "feed the family," and "put bread on the table" (p. 140). Hunnicutt confronted some of his interviewees who made these assertions. "If the author dared to ask, 'You don't really mean that you would have starved to death if you kept on working six hours?' the typical response was defensive, as if the author had accused the speaker of lying rather than of making his point strongly" (p. 140). In the end, most of Hunnicutt's witnesses are incapable of telling us why they decided that eight-hour workdays were preferable to six-hour workdays. Moreover, hyperbole seems just as evident in the responses of

those favoring six hours and lamenting its demise. They exaggerate—saying that eight-hour advocates are willing to work themselves "to death" and claiming that workers on a six-hour shift produced as much as those on an eight-hour shift. It seems that the historical record is incapable of explaining this shift in tastes (if indeed there was a shift in tastes) because the actors have reinterpreted their own earlier decisions, exaggerating either the marginal costs or the marginal benefits, so that their choices can be more readily rationalized. Only a few workers profess that the choice was a close call.

Ultimately, most men during the 1950s needed little convincing that eight-hours and higher pay were preferable. Six-hour workdays wouldn't let them keep up with the Joneses and many men did not receive much enjoyment from their marginal leisure hours. "Like management, senior male workers were concerned about the loss of status and control. Several men told about the friction that resulted when the men spent too much time around the house: 'The wives didn't like the men underfoot all day.' 'The wife always found something for me to do if I hung around.' 'We got into a lot of fights.' Many of the men confessed that they were at loose ends when they were working six hours" (p. 142). In Hunnicutt's interpretation, it was a combination of outside pressures and the inability of men (but not women) to learn how to use their leisure time, that caused the reversion to eight-hours. An alternative interpretation emphasizes broader macroeconomic events. In the 1930s and again in 1946 when soldiers returned to take back their old jobs, workers were willing to accept shorter hours as a way of minimizing their odds of becoming unemployed and, more altruistically, "sharing" work with unfortunates. During the 1950s, the threat of unemployment evaporated and the moral condemnation for being a "work hog" no longer made sense. In addition, the rise of quasi-fixed employment costs (such as health insurance) induced management to push workers toward a longer workday.

Although, Hunnicutt's book is very thought provoking, it has some disconcerting features. In many places, the author is overly judgemental—painting six-hour advocates as enlightened heroes and eight-hour advocates as selfish or unenlightened. He fails to grapple with the issue of sample selection bias within his collection of interviews. He never discusses broader changes in female labor force participation during this period and the rise of part-time employment. Nevertheless, this is an important book to be recommended to anyone interested in the debate over the length of the work week.

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