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Contents

Abstract

Working time is a key dimension of work organisation and remains a contentious issue between employers and workers. Historically, in an effort to improve working conditions, trade unions have been at the forefront of the struggle for working time reduction (WTR); that is, the shortening of working hours without reduction in pay. However, after some remarkable achievements in the 19th and 20th centuries, in recent decades there has been little change in the length of the standard full-time working week in advanced economies. This working paper addresses this issue by analysing the process and outcomes of collectively bargained WTR in two large manufacturing firms in Italy. The first objective is to analyse the steps leading to the agreement – that is, the motivation, the premise, the evolution of the proposals, the resources needed and the challenges faced by workers and unions. The second objective is to examine the outcomes of WTR in terms of their impact on the quality of work and the lives of workers. The results inform the debate on the most effective and favourable ways of reducing working time by identifying good practice and the challenges ahead.

Introduction

Working time is a key dimension of work organisation and, since it has become a metric by which labour is bought and sold, it has continued to be contested terrain between employers and workers (Bosch 1999). When looking at the historical trend in working hours in developed economies, several major drops clearly stand out in the course of the 19th and 20th centuries. These shifts in the length of the full-time working week have mainly been associated with a reduction in the working day to eight hours and in the working week from six to five days (Lee et al. 2007; Skidelsky 2019). The resulting 40-hour working week, Monday to Friday, has persisted across advanced economies without much change since around the 1980s, as an important reference point in the organisation of work (De Spiegelaere and Piasna 2017).

Historically, working time reductions (WTR, i.e. the shortening of working hours without reduction in pay) have typically coincided with periods of union strength. Such reductions have frequently been the result of union activism and the efforts of workers to improve their working conditions. The collective organisation of workers via trade unions, coupled with low unemployment and strong economic growth, enabled them to secure significant reductions in working hours over the course of the 19th and 20th centuries (Spencer 2022a). The subsequent stagnation in WTR since the 1980s corresponds to the decline in union membership and the liberalisation of industrial relations, which have made it more challenging to negotiate working time. This period has also been marked by economic downturns and labour market deregulation which have led to an increase in part-time work, flexible employment and atypical contracts with no standard hours (Rubery et al. 2016; Piasna and Myant 2017).

Over the past decade, however, we have been witnessing a major revival of the academic debate on working time reduction (Coote and Franklin 2013; De Spiegelaere and Piasna 2017; Burchell et al. 2024). It is also back on the political agenda of trade unions – in the manufacturing sector, for instance, as a tool of managing the twin green and digital transition in a just and inclusive manner (IndustriAll 2023; Müller 2023). This revival is not surprising given rapid technological change and increasing automation, which have long been expected inevitably to reduce the need for human labour and to bring about a better future where workers spend much less time in paid work (Keynes 1931; Hermann 2015), even though recent research has pointed to the potential of technological change to hinder working time reduction and negatively affect the quality of working time (Piasna 2024).

There is also growing empirical evidence of a plenitude of benefits of WTR for workers, the society and the environment, as well as for employers and the economy (Schor 2005; Coote and Franklin 2013; De Spiegelaere and Piasna 2017). The economic underpinnings equally seem to be in place, with many authors arguing that there is no shortage of economic rewards to be shared, but that the contemporary capitalist system favours their disproportionate accumulation by capital owners rather than their distribution to workers in the form of wage increases and working time reductions (Spencer 2022b).

Against this background, the key question is who (or what) can drive effective working time reduction and in what form will it ensure the most favourable outcomes for the quality of working life (Bosch and Lehndorff 2001; Balderson et al. 2021). In the recent trials of a four-day week under the umbrella of the 4 Day Week Global campaign, which has dominated media attention, civil society organisations, employers and social campaigners are emerging as the main initiators and leaders of change (Schor et al. 2023). As these trials are based on voluntary opt-ins by employers, the business case for the shorter working week and the potential productivity gains are emphasised as key benefits, with the associated improvements in the quality of working life being seen as a productivity factor facilitating recruitment and retention (Delaney and Casey 2021; Goerlich and Vis 2024). In some countries, such as Germany and Italy, it is still trade unions that are the principal actors in promoting WTR, however. They adopt a bargaining-based approach by establishing working time regulation through company or sectoral collective agreements independent of state intervention (Goerlich and Vis 2024). Finally, there are countries where political actors are driving the promotion of WTR, with legislation being the main instrument used and where the social objectives, including environmental, employment and gender equality benefits, play a key role. Recent examples of this approach include Spain and Portugal (Gomes 2021). Historically France, with the 35-hour working week put forward in the Aubry laws, is an important illustration and, at the same time, a lesson in the practicalities of implementation that, in this case, ultimately led to an erosion of the legal provisions (De Spiegelaere and Piasna 2017).

This study analyses the process and outcomes of collective agreements on WTR in two large manufacturing companies in Italy. It contributes to the historical debate on working time and extends current knowledge on working time reduction in several important ways. To begin with, we identify working time as contested terrain, thus consisting of a process of negotiation and consultation between workers, trade unions and employers. In doing so, we not only present an alternative route towards achieving reduced hours, as opposed to the recently well-studied and mediatised trials based on employer-led initiatives and social campaigning, but also investigate workers' experiences with elaborating and then working to new, shorter schedules. This provides useful lessons for unions that are considering embarking on such negotiations, and sheds some light on the current state of the collective negotiation route, which has played the dominant role in general reductions in working time in the past.

Moreover, recent research on the effects of WTR on working conditions has mainly focused on smaller and knowledge-intensive service sector firms (Mullens and Glorieux 2023; Schor et al. 2023). We complement this evidence with an analysis of large manufacturing companies, with more complex structures of working time, where WTR needs to be integrated with shift systems and where workforces and functions are heterogeneous. The findings from the service sector studies have limited applicability to factory settings, which have their own sets of challenges such as those related to automation, digitalisation and greening, as well as with coordinating teamwork across large, interdependent workforces. Our analysis focuses on the automotive industry, which comprises a wide range of companies and organisations involved in the design, development and manufacture of motor vehicles and their components. It is one of the largest industries in the world in terms of revenue, ranging from 16 per cent in France to 40 per cent in Slovakia, and employs a large number of workers. The results of this study are therefore relevant to large parts of the labour market.

Case studies: methods and approach

This study is based on the analysis of collectively negotiated WTR in two companies in the automotive sector, located in the northern and central parts of Italy. Both companies are large in size, with workforces divided between blue collar production workers and white collar workers in R&D, clerical and managerial roles. Both companies are covered by the same national collective framework agreement providing some institutional basis for negotiations on reduced working time (see Appendix).

The first analysed company, which we call Partmaker,[1] produces car components. It has a long history of company-level collective bargaining on working time reduction, and various time regimes with reduced hours have been in operation in this company at different points. This allows for the analysis of the negotiation process within a longer time perspective, across a diversity of external conditions and economic circumstances, as well as of workers' experiences with reduced hours schedules. The second analysed company, which we call Carmaker, is a car producer. It has only recently embarked on a process of reducing working hours for its workers through company-level collective bargaining. In this case, we focus on the negotiation process itself, which proved to be long and challenging for both sides of the negotiating table. The analysis ends at the signature of the agreement and thus does not include workers' experiences with working to reduced schedules.

The fieldwork was carried out from November 2023 to June 2024. We collected documentary evidence on the collective agreements covering issues related to working time and concluded at company, regional and national levels.[2] We also carried out a series of semi-structured individual interviews with key actors, who were sampled to ensure a diversity of

1. We have chosen not to refer to the analysed companies by their real names. This is not the request of the companies, but a deliberate decision on our part. Apart from potential data protection and privacy issues, we did not want to shine an undue spotlight on these companies, exposing them to either praise or criticism and perhaps distracting attention from the wider application of the practices and processes that we aim to show and discuss in this study.
2. In Italy, the bargaining structure consists of national industry-level agreements and so-called 'second-level' bargaining, conducted at company or sometimes local level, whose role is to build on the provisions of sectoral agreements in specified areas or to deal with matters not covered at the higher bargaining level. Company agreements are renewed every three to four years.

functions and positions within the company as well as a fair demographic representation of the workforce. This qualitative approach is not aimed at capturing representative patterns in the data nor performance metrics, but rather at gaining a deep understanding of the details, dynamics and driving forces of WTR implementation. New respondents were thus contacted until saturation was reached; that is, the point in the data collection where no additional issues or insights were identified and the data began to repeat, making further collection redundant. In Partmaker, interviews were carried out with 11 informants: nine workers and two trade union representatives. In Carmaker, interviews were carried out with the key actors directly involved in the negotiation process, including five trade union representatives at both company and regional levels and one representative of management. A detailed list of the interviews is provided in the Appendix. The interviews were all conducted in Italian, the native language of the respondents and the interviewers, and then transcribed. All quotes from the interviews used in this paper have been translated by the authors (native and proficient speakers of the language of the interviews), and then cross-checked with a neural machine translation engine.

1. Case study 1: 'Work less to produce more' – WTR in a context of high internal flexibility

1.1 Setting the scene

Partmaker is an automotive components producer located in central Italy. The company has approximately 900 employees; the majority are blue collar production operators, while about a third are employed in the R&D department. Several dozen temporary workers, on agency or staff leasing contracts, are used for managing production peaks.

The company was founded in the late 1980s by a German technology conglomerate. It developed rapidly during the 1990s and early 2000s, growing from 200-300 to 1000 employees before the 2007/08 financial crisis, with a strong emphasis on R&D activities. Despite the diversification of its product portfolio and client base, the crisis hit the company hard, causing a drop in orders of more than 50 per cent during 2009, which was largely absorbed by cutting the temporary workforce. Production peaks have subsequently been mainly managed through internal flexibility allowed by a system of multiple shifts, collectively negotiated and continuously revised to improve plant competitiveness. The company has widely adopted digital and automation technologies related to 'Industry 4.0', which has enabled the gradual replacement of manual tasks in low value-added stages and reduced the need for human (especially blue collar) labour. At the same time, the introduction of Industry 4.0 technologies in the company has been coupled with an increased reliance on organisational procedures and techniques derived from the lean production paradigm, confirming the possibilities of integration between the two (Moro and Virgillito 2022).

More recent challenges have been linked to electromobility. As production was entirely geared to internal combustion engines, it was included in 2019 as part of an overall restructuring plan of the German group that owned it at the time. This envisaged as many as 750 redundancies (out of 900 total employees). An acquisition by another multinational holding avoided mass redundancies by reorienting production to non-EU markets and hydrogen engines.

Throughout its history, Partmaker has been characterised by a collaborative industrial relations model and cordial relationships between the social partners. The unionisation rate is higher than the industry average (almost 40% in total, around 50% for blue collar workers and 15% for white collar workers) and the largest union is Fiom-CGIL. Company collective bargaining is particularly developed, covering a wide range of issues. According to union representatives, this bargaining has made it possible to build a system of protections and conditions that substantially improves on those provided for in the metalworking national collective agreement, with better wages and working conditions than the industry average in the region.

1.2 Different shift regimes and their genesis

Shift regimes are fully integrated into the company's organisation of production, for both production and R&D operators. Within the same department, there may be teams working on different regimes, depending on production requirements for specific lines or machines. All regimes involving a reduction in working hours were adopted in Partmaker by collective agreements and by a collective use of annual paid leave (PAR), granted individually to all metalworkers under the national industry agreement (CCNL Metalmeccanici Industria, see Appendix).

In 2024, the following shift system operated in the company:

- **5 shifts per week (1 team)**

  This is the classic shift system, also called 'central' or 'daily' because it involves working during the central (standard) hours of the day. It provides for a five-day working week from Monday to Friday, from 8 am to 5 pm with a one-hour lunch break. On the Friday shift, there is a working time reduction (with no reduction in salary) of 1 hour and 40 minutes at departure, deducted from the 104 hours of entitlement to PAR.

- **10 shifts per week (2 teams)**

  This is a five-day working week from Monday morning to Friday evening with 10 shifts of 8 hours spread over two teams: morning shift 6 am-2 pm; and afternoon shift 2 pm-10 pm. On Fridays, there is a working time reduction of 1 hour and 40 minutes for both shifts, deducted from the 104 hours of PAR. In addition, night-time wage supplements of 20% are paid in the time slots 6-8:15 am and 8:15-10 pm. The two teams alternate between the morning and afternoon shifts each week.

- **15 shifts per week (3 teams)**

  This is a five-day working week from Monday morning to Saturday night with 15 shifts of 8 hours spread over three teams: morning shift 6 am-2 pm; afternoon shift 2 pm-10 pm; and night shift 10 pm-6 am the following day. This regime does not involve any working time reduction, and workers retain all their individual PAR. In addition, night-time wage supplements are paid: 20% in the time slots 6-8:15 am and 8:15-10 pm, and 55% from 10 pm to 6 am. The three teams alternate each week between morning, afternoon and night shifts.

- **18 shifts per week (4 teams)**

  Also called the ‘fourth shift’ by workers, this is a six-day working week from Sunday evening to Saturday evening, with 18 shifts of 8 hours spread over four teams: morning shift 6 am-2 pm; afternoon shift 2 pm-10 pm; and night shift 10 pm-6 am the following day. In addition, the company has the right to request, with at least seven days’ notice, three additional paid shifts per year to be worked on Sunday mornings within the second week of the schedule, as well as three additional paid shifts per year to be worked from Monday to Friday at peak production times. After deducting these additional shifts, this regime alternates a 40-hour and a 32-hour working week. The reduction in working hours is deducted from the 104 PAR hours per year recognised by the CCNL added to which, via a company agreement, are those working hours corresponding to public holidays that fall on Saturdays or Sundays.[3] If these hours are insufficient on a monthly basis to cover the 173 monthly working hours envisaged by the CCNL, the missing hours are considered paid through the shift allowance. The monthly shift allowance is 166 euros, while the company also pays night-time wage supplements, a 100% bonus on all Sunday work and a 55% bonus for the three additional midweek shifts if they are requested in the same period as the three additional Sunday services, or during a week already comprising 40 working hours.

- **21 shifts per week – continuous cycle (5 teams)**

  This shift regime, also known as the ‘fifth shift’ or ‘continuous cycle’, involves a seven-day working week, with 21 eight-hour shifts spread over five teams: morning shift 6 am-2 pm; afternoon shift 2 pm-10 pm; and night shift 10 pm-6 am the following day. It amounts to 33.6 hours per week averaged over 10 weeks (with different working hours), with six days worked in every ten. The reduction in working time is deducted from the 104 individual PAR hours per year plus the hours corresponding to public holidays falling on Saturdays or Sundays. In contrast to the 18-shift regime, however, if this amount of hours should prove insufficient on a monthly basis to cover the difference to 173 monthly working hours envisaged by the CCNL, the company itself contributes to the reduction by paying for the remaining hours not worked. In addition, workers are paid a monthly shift allowance of 250 euros and night-time wage supplements (of 47% in the time slot from 10 pm to 6 am; and of 17.5% in those from 6 to 8.15 am and from 8.15 to 10 pm).

Employees classified as blue collar can work on all these five shift regimes, each characterised by different working time arrangements and pay conditions, while white collar staff and managers work according to the first shift system.

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3. According to the CCNL, these holidays are normally paid in the monthly salary if they fall on a Sunday, while are not used if they fall on a Saturday.

Overall, the shift system operating in the company is highly complex (for an illustration of what weekly working time would look like in 18 and 21-shift regimes, see Appendix), with variability not only in the number of weekly working hours but also their distribution and rotation on a weekly or a monthly basis, as well as in the pay premiums. In general, workers refer to shifts with fewer teams as 'low' shifts and to those with more teams as 'high' ones and, as shown below, express a general preference for high shifts.

1.2.1 Bargaining on working time reduction schemes

A collective agreement is necessary for a company to adopt shift regimes outside the 'regular' shift scheme provided for by the CCNL, especially if it intends to use PARs for this purpose. This means that, if a company needs to make greater use of its plants by planning shifts even on public holidays or weekends, this requirement in itself opens up a space for collective bargaining. Union representatives, therefore, have the opportunity to use this institutional power recognised by the CCNL to obtain concessions from the employer in exchange for a willingness to adopt innovative shift regimes. This is what happened with the introduction of the 18 and 21-shift regimes. In both cases, company management presented the unitary trade union representative body (the RSU)[4] with the need to make greater use of the plants in order to respond more quickly to customer demand.

The RSU did not outright reject or accept the company's demands, but adopted a negotiating attitude looking for trade-offs. The RSU's counterproposal steadfastly maintained the notion of an exchange between availability for weekend work and the adoption of a shift system, on the one hand, with reduction in working hours and employment and pay increases on the other. In other words, workers trade greater working time flexibility (weekend work and variable shifts) and their PARs in exchange for WTR, pay increases (individual good) and employment increases (collective good); for the company, higher labour costs (due to both the employment and the salary effects of WTR) are largely compensated by greater plant utilisation.[5]

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4. RSU (Rappresentanza Sindacale Unitaria; unitary trade union representative body) is an employee representation body that exists in public and private workplaces and consists of a minimum of three people elected by all workers, both union members and non-members. The RSU represents all trade unions operating in the company and the company's entire workforce. Its main task is negotiating binding agreements with the employer. It can be considered as an equivalent of a works council.

5. WTR has the potential to increases employment in at least two ways: directly, by requiring new hires in order to fill all teams across the various shifts; and indirectly, by allowing the manufacture of new products to be allocated to the plant within the parent company group. In addition to the exchange of weekend work for WTR, it was important that the reduction in working hours took place for the same wages, and it was to this end that the intensive use of PARs to compensate for the hours not worked in the 18 (originally 17) and 21-shift regimes was aimed. The shift allowances and the night-time and Sunday supplements obtained by the RSU allowed, especially with regard to the 21-shift regime, a significant increase in wages without resorting to overtime.

> [The 18/21 shifts] how did they originate? They were born out of production needs, they are always born that way, aren't they? The [parent] company poses you a problem, says 'I have this production need [...] how do you [i.e. the branch] solve it?' [...] In those cases there, in my opinion rightly so, you have to think about greater utilisation of the plants. And how did we trade that? By saying: 'OK, we are available, but by reducing the [working] hours and hiring people'. That was the trade-off, wasn't it? You also work Saturdays and Sundays and holidays but to me, individually, you reduce my [working] hours, you make me work less, not more – because in the other case it would have been overtime: you reduce my [working] hours and at the same time you hire other people. That was the exchange that allowed that company to go from 250-300 employees to 1000 in 3-4 years. (Union_1)

This idea of looking for a trade-off, however, proved difficult both to the RSU and to the workers, and the negotiation of these agreements (and especially their difficult re-negotiation in 2010) generated discontent and tension. Notably, some older workers attached high value to the rest period on the weekend and opposed any proposals infringing on it. There was also distrust from the union vis-à-vis management as to whether these changes, announced by the company as only temporary and applicable to a small group of workers, would remain so: it is more difficult to retract or contain something that is already in place than to oppose its introduction. Confronted with such criticisms and doubts towards the nature of the company proposal, the RSU carried out information activities and a double referendum among workers (one among those immediately concerned and another among the entire workforce of the company) in order to achieve the widest possible consensus towards these changes.

> When they were first created, the 21 shifts, they were created only for a specific department. [...] So how did we deal with that – correctly so, I think – in retrospect? We followed two paths of trade union democracy: first, we went to explain directly to the workers concerned and we wanted to see if there was a majority who were willing. Because, you know, today it is perhaps easier, but to introduce Saturday and Sunday shifts in 2003 was not easy. [...] [T]hen, we made a second referendum [among the entire workforce]. (Union_1)

With regard to the 17/18-shift regime, the company's initial concept was for a weekly schedule of six working days of six hours each (the so-called 6x6). This was unacceptable to the trade union representatives because the plants were located outside urban areas and therefore adding an extra working day would mean a reduction in weekly working hours but an increase in commuting time. Consequently, the RSU drew up several alternative shift schemes which, once approved by management, were submitted to a referendum among workers so that they could choose the solution that best suited them. The 21-shift scheme, in contrast, was copied by the RSU from another company in the region.

Despite political support from the local union office, the negotiation of these agreements required a good deal of inventiveness and research by the RSU, which came about both by observing other solutions implemented at local level and by studying the (scarce) trade union publications on the subject.[6]

Negotiations on shift regimes have not only been lengthy but also subject to re-negotiation and, as a result, these have changed, sometimes significantly, over the years. The introduction of significant changes in 2010 occurred in the wake of the financial crisis and associated recession. At the time, union representatives adopted a pragmatic approach to collective bargaining, which has continued. In exchange for changes to the 15 and 18-shift regimes (in general, reducing scope of working time reduction and increasing internal flexibility), the RSU managed to wrest a commitment (thereafter maintained) to safeguard employment levels and to manage in a concerted way the surplus staff that might result from cyclical or structural contractions in activity and production volumes. Union representatives actively defended the 21-shift regime in its original form (which was more favourable for workers), despite repeated attempts and company requests to change it:

> They even tried once to do 20 shifts instead of 21, but with four teams. They took us to Germany to convince us, because there was a factory there that made products similar to ours with a 20-shift week with four teams. They took us there for a week because they wanted to convince us of the benefits of that system; by the time we were leaving we had convinced them [i.e. the local union members and representatives] that ours was better. (Union_1)

More significantly, union representatives became aware early on that the worsening of some shift regimes would have consequences for workers, especially due to the increased flexibility and changes in working hours. As a partial response to these problems, the RSU managed, in the 2010 agreement and thereafter, to defend and confirm a series of previous agreements that provided for paid leave for the care of children up to 12 years of age and family members with health problems or the possibility of taking paid leave for specialist medical examinations whenever necessary. By confirming these agreements, the RSU also wanted to address the problem of the individual unavailability of PARs for those workers who are most frequently subject to 18 or 21-shift regimes.

Overall, the 2010 agreement was a trade-off between greater flexibility and labour cost reduction on the one hand and safeguarding employment on the other. Although it reduced the scope of working time reductions in some shift regimes, on the whole it was not perceived by interviewees as undermining the principle of associating the increased utilisation of the plants with a

6. A publication cited in the interviews is a book co-authored by former Fiom-CGIL secretary and Minister of Labour Cesare Damiano: Damiano C., Fontana G. and Pessa P. (2001) I nuovi orari contrattuali dei metalmeccanici, Ediesse.

corresponding reduction in working time while maintaining adequate wage compensation.

1.3 Workers' experience of shift regimes and working time reduction

1.3.1 Shift regimes and organisation of production

A shared experience among interviewed workers was the high variability and unpredictability of the shift system. As production increases, so do the shifts, moving from fewer to more shifts and teams; as production decreases, the shifts are adjusted accordingly. Workers see this shift management mechanism as being driven by outside forces: market fluctuations and customer demand. The frequency and speed of changes to their shifts has increased in recent years, and this too has been blamed on the increased volatility of the automotive market, exacerbated by the financial and economic crisis, then the Covid-19 crisis and, more recently, military conflicts and geopolitical instability.

> The shifts are very much influenced by the market; in fact every year at set, recurring periods, this happens. There are dips in shifts, because demand from customers also drops, and there are others when it goes up, because there is a peak in demand. (Worker_5)

> [....] We [who work] in production [departments] change all the time. Now, the customer asks you for 100 pieces today, he might wake up tomorrow and ask you for 20, and I have to be able to change the production schedule in good time. [...] They tell you [that shifts vary] according to production needs. They tell you that in recent years, since the crisis of 2008, they used to be able to see even a year ahead, so they used to be able to organise even on an annual basis. Now, according to them, it's almost weekly, [...] almost daily. I mean they tell you what you see now, in a week can change. (Worker_2)

> And unfortunately in the last few years [...] you don't go with three months and six months anymore, but it's always a very fluctuating demand. So maybe Renault asks you for a million pieces by June, but maybe after 15 days that million pieces becomes either a million and a half or half a million. (Worker_3)

While the impact of fluctuating demand is undeniable, the mechanisms and decision-making processes leading to the actual organisation of shifts are not transparent to workers. Indeed, they seem to have little awareness of the way in which exogenous influences, such as market fluctuations and customer demand, are translated into the organisation's endogenous processes. Apart from the uncertain role of the department head – who in any case remains the managerial figure closest to the operators – in the management of shift schedules, interviewed workers always refer to an unspecified ‘they’ as defining production targets.

> They always tend to make you work as few shifts as possible, because even the night shift has a cost for them, because they pay us 55% more at night, so if you do two weeks at night you get a lot of money. It’s true that you sacrifice yourself, but let’s say it’s normal. If they have a lot of orders, [they’ll use] the fifth shift [i.e. 21 shifts per week] [and the plant] work[s] practically all the time, 7 days a week, 24 hours a day. But maybe as soon as there’s a drop, they’ll immediately drop you from the [fifth] shift, because it’s convenient for them. (Worker_7)

Despite this opacity of the decision-making processes, however, one element that workers are clear about is the willingness on the part of the company to reduce the use of high shift regimes as much as possible. This is one of the key limitations of the working time reduction schemes adopted in the company. Since shift regimes involving a reduction in average weekly working hours are those that allow for greater utilisation of plants, with higher shift allowances and wage compensation for weekend work, management has an incentive to resort to them as little as possible and instead to use ‘ordinary’ shift regimes that do not provide for reductions in working hours or wage incentives. The rationale behind collective agreements on the shift system in the company (but also the rationale behind the CCNL) is that the reduction of working hours should be used to ‘produce more’, and not to ‘produce less’ or even the same volume.

> The fifth shift is a cost for the company because it is incentivised [financially], as is the fourth [i.e. 18 shifts per week]. You work 18 days a month, sometimes even a bit less, which is why the company always tends not to do it. In fact, in the department where I was before, we had three teams and we needed a fourth team. But our supervisor was famous for being able always to make it on a shoestring; that is to say that he was able to do the number [of pieces] he needed with a few staff, maybe even selected ones. When there was the fourth or the fifth [shift], it was always short-lived. (Worker_6)

This logic, which underlies the bargaining exchange in company agreements, has enabled important organisational innovations in the short term that have actually improved working conditions. In the long run, however, it runs the risk of backfiring, at least in part, on the workers. This is so not only because, in periods of production contraction, the latter return to working ‘normal’ hours (and thus without reductions in working time), but also because, over time, technological and organisational innovations that improve productivity may reduce the company’s need to make greater use of its plants. This is the opinion of at least some of those interviewed who see a link between digitalisation and automation, with the associated productivity gains, and the reduced need of the company to resort to high shifts.

> It's logical, the work the machine does for you, a little robot, is at the expense of the number of people who can work. […] So, some impact on shifts, on employment, is inevitable; they do it on purpose to save on personnel. (Worker_6)

The working time reduction agreements in force in the company have indeed represented an incentive for new investment in technological innovation, by allowing for greater plant utilisation. But technological innovation, especially in the form of automation, can increase productivity while reducing the company's need to resort to more onerous working time regimes.

1.3.2 Internal flexibility and workforce allocation

The organisation of production in Partmaker is based on an extreme internal flexibility of the workforce, combined with temporary recourses to external flexibility, notably in the form of temporary workers to cope with production peaks. The latter is structural in the Italian automotive sector (Bisignano 2014; Bubbico 2014) but, in contrast, such extreme internal flexibility, in terms of the extent and the incisiveness of the phenomenon, is distinctive to Partmaker. Following fluctuations in production, its workers (both permanent and temporary) are subject to frequent changes not only in shift patterns but also in workstations, departments and even production sites.

> [When] I joined [as a temporary worker in 2007] I honestly always did either the central shift or the two shifts [i.e. morning or afternoon in the 10 shifts per week regime]. […] Then there was this crisis and I was not reconfirmed [as a temporary worker] […]. When I came back, in February 2016, they put me in another department and I always did three shifts [i.e. the 15 shifts per week regime] for a year. Then, on another production line, I went on five shifts [i.e. the 21 shifts per week regime] and I did that for a year, then it dropped to four [i.e. the 18 shifts per week regime], then went back to five; until 2-3 years ago when there was again a drop and they put us on three shifts but on other lines. […] Then from three shifts […] we went back to five. (Worker_4)
>
> As far as shifts are concerned, I've always done many types of shifts, but never the daily [shift]. I did two shifts […] for several years, when I was let's say a technician […]. Then when I left there, I started doing […] five shifts, three shifts. Now I've been doing four and five shifts for several years and I haven't done three shifts for a long time. (Worker_2)

Workers attribute responsibility for the composition of their teams to the heads of department (sometimes assisted by shift leaders) who are required to notify workers of any changes in the shift allocation one week in advance by posting a sheet with the new schedule in the changing rooms.[7] The interviews showed

7. If notice is given less than one week in advance, employees may refuse to comply.

that, apart from production requirements, which necessitate variations in shifts and transfers between different departments, workers' polyvalence and their skillsets are the determining criteria for the composition of the work teams, with some role for more personal or informal criteria.

The study reveals inequalities in terms of access to WTR at company level which are linked to the polyvalence and the skillsets of workers. On the one hand, the most polyvalent operators, who have worked on several workstations or departments, have the easiest access to WTR. They seem to be the most protected from the risk of working on low shifts because they can be moved around more easily according to production needs. On the other hand, the most skilled operators, assigned to functions, operations or machinery requiring special dexterity and experience, have more limited access to WTR. They are less likely to change workstation and department, and so are more exposed to the risk of working on lower shifts if the production volumes in their department fall. However, during periods of peak demand, the essential nature of their functions guarantees them the possibility of working continuously on higher shifts. Similarly, low-skilled and low-polyvalent operators also have relatively limited access to WTR. They are, in principle, subject to fewer workstation and department moves and are also more closely tied to the production volumes allocated to their department and are therefore more likely to work on low shifts.

Furthermore, the interviews revealed that workers have virtually no autonomy in choosing their shifts. They can only make individual requests to their supervisor that they be re-assigned to a different shift for personal reasons. In some cases, the workers reported that work teams may also informally express the need to increase shifts if, despite rising production volumes, shifts are being kept lower than necessary, thus leading to work intensification or organisational difficulties. It is at the discretion of the head of department to accept such requests, whether they are made individually or by the team, although the positive climate in the company generally helps to ensure that such requests are taken into account. If this is not the case, workers can turn to a trade union representative for support.

1.3.3 The effect of working time reduction schemes on the perception of fatigue and work-life balance

Finally, we investigated workers' experiences of reduced hours in terms of physical and mental fatigue and the ability to reconcile work and personal/family life. Their responses need to be considered in the light of the intrinsic link between WTR and the shift system in the company: shifts with shorter weekly hours are also more variable and extend relatively more into unsocial hours than shifts with longer hours. Furthermore, the qualitative nature of the study, with a limited number of interviews with predominantly male respondents (which partially reflects the gender composition of the workforce), precludes any quantification of the reported effects or any generalisation beyond their particular circumstances. Rather, we provide a map of the variety of advantages and disadvantages experienced by workers and highlight the trade-offs that emerged across the interviews.

To begin with, workers were quite clear in their preference for the five-team shift (the 'fifth shift'), thus the shift with the greatest reduction in working time. The reasons for this are the longer physical and mental recovery time, with more free time, and a pay premium that consists of night and weekend work bonuses and shift allowances. In particular, it allows for a better balance in the distribution of housework and childcare,[8] providing more time for hobbies or further education. The time gap between one shift and the next, as well as the reduced number of night shifts, gives workers more rest which not only benefits them individually but also increases their productivity to the benefit of the company. Salary recognition is also important, although not the main reason for preferring this type of shift.

> [The fifth shift] allowed me to be more concentrated at work, give more to the company and at the same time be more rested so I could also dedicate myself to my studies. […] The fifth shift first of all reduced the fatigue […], not only mental but also physical. It relieved me so much, it allowed me to do other things as well, to enrol at university, to graduate, to be more focused and more productive at work. […] Of course, [the wage premium] is an incentive, it is also an acknowledgement to those workers who sacrifice those days, which may be Sundays, may be Saturdays, but those 250 euros at the end of the month still go to pay the sacrifice that the worker makes […]. Let's say there is a pro and a con, as in all things. (Worker_1)

> It's not because of the 250 euros, honestly speaking, but I [prefer] the fifth shift all my life. Because it's restful […] and that does a lot on a physical level. […] What do I have to do on Saturday night anyway? I sleep early and go to work. Once I've done Saturday and Sunday nights, then I return [to work] on Thursday morning. (Worker_6)

> The fifth shift I can tell you that, compared to all the other shifts, [this] is the most restful because you work in the morning, then the next day in the afternoon, then you rest, then again morning, afternoon and two nights and then you have three days off. (Worker_4)

Among the disadvantages, weekend work and the fragmented time schedule are reported as problematic, especially by respondents with dependent children, as they regretted having to work on days when their children were off from school. There are similar grievances about the socially limiting aspect of shift work, thus having free time not coinciding with that in their social network. Furthermore, workers voice discontent with losing the

8. However, it should be noted that the majority of respondents are men. We would need to know the opinion of their partners to understand whether this redistribution is substantial or not.

possibility of using their PARs on an individual basis, as these days were used to 'pay' for the working time reduction. However, this loss is generally considered to be compensated for by the reduction in working hours and the advantages that come with that, as well as additional family and health-related paid leave (as mentioned earlier).

> The downside [of the fifth shift] is maybe that you run the risk that you might get a bit upset if you're young and your friends are going out [on weekends], or if you have a kid you can't be [with her/him] on the day that maybe she/he doesn't [have to] go to school. That is the only flaw, but then the kids grow up, it doesn't even become a flaw anymore, because you work Saturdays and Sundays in all jobs now, it's not like it used to be. [...] The other problem with the fifth shift is that it consumes your PARs [...] and I don't think it's right. [...] If you put me on five teams you find another way, you don't have to take my leave. (Worker_4)

> Then what gets me [with] this shift is that after a while I'm out of sync; I can't, after a while I've been doing it, 3-4-5 months I tell you; I can't decipher when the weekend is anymore. You lose the concept. In the end it's not that you get to Saturday and you switch off, you never switch off there [...]; after 3-4 months of doing it, you lose track of time, of days. It's not a good feeling, I'll be honest; it's something that [this shift] gives you and you're out of sync. But in terms of rest you can't say anything, it's a restful shift, you have a lot of free time, you have time to do many things. [...] And if I have a weekend with the kids and I work Saturday morning and Sunday afternoon? So on that side I always need help, fortunately my parents are there and they help me. (Worker_2)

These evaluations, however, should be interpreted in the context of the more general problematic nature of the organisation of working time in the industrial setting and in factories in particular. The shift system that is often a feature of such blue collar work involves night work and some degree of variability. Thus, while the 5-team shift regime with reduced working time is favoured by workers, as it allows for more adequate recuperation, it still requires night work. For this reason, at least some of the interviewees consider the single-team ('daily') shift regime to be the most suitable for protecting their health, to the extent that they planned, should they change company, to seek a job with less variable and unsocial hours, even at the cost of foregoing working time reduction.

> If I had to change [the job], I would go and look for something maybe less remunerative, but maybe doing a more linear schedule. So a classic daily [shift], which takes the whole day, but extends your life by a few years. (Worker_3)

> The fifth shift [...] allows you to recuperate a bit [...]; in short, let's say it's an adequate shift, for those who have to work shifts, that is. [But] in terms of regularity, of preservation of physical and mental health, certainly the daily [shift] is better. (Worker_5)

Night work is experienced as the main problem inherent in the organisation of working time in the company. Several respondents reported sleep disorders caused by it, or were worried about its impact on their health later in life. The widespread negative opinions about the 15-shift regime (3 teams) and the 18-shift regime (4 teams) should also be read in this light. Workers thus feel that the negotiated reduction in working hours is insufficient to compensate for the disadvantages of night work and, to some extent also, for the disruptive impact of shift rotation and irregularity.

> It's also physically stressful, when you do the nights, sleeping in the morning is not the same as sleeping at night. So, it is true that you will work a few hours less at the end of the month, but what do you feel? In fact, the fourth shift when there is a Sunday morning is heavy. It's a shift where you arrive at a certain point that you need to take a break, a little holiday every now and then. And don't even think about holidays, because these days here are not given to you by anyone, they're taken away from our PARs. (Worker_2)

> Coming off the afternoon, you go to bed late, because I don't get home until 10.30 pm, it's not that I then go to bed. This morning I got up at 6 am, but tonight then until 1 am I don't close my eyes, I wake up at 4.30 am; I sleep 3 and a half hours. This is my life. [...] Now personally I'm also experiencing disturbances, just talking with the doctor, the neurologist, [who diagnosed] shift worker syndrome. (Worker_3)

As long as the industrial mode of production with its working time organisation remains unchanged, working time reductions risk being merely a palliative to a working condition that is, in the long run, dangerous to workers' health.

> Shift work is a type of work that is still maintained in factories; it [will be] there as long as factories decide they have to produce in this way. [...] But you see well that the person cannot sustain it; that is, he/she may do it, but it will certainly affect him/her physically in some way. [...] But, in my opinion, it should also be the focus of the companies, because it is in their interest to create the best conditions for the worker [...] not only in the moment, but also over time. (Worker_5)

1.4 Summary and the road ahead

Partmaker represents a highly interesting case of negotiated working time reduction. Over the last three decades, collective bargaining has allowed the introduction of shift regimes that have considerably reduced average weekly working hours without reducing pay; sometimes even increasing it through supplements and shift allowances for work during unsocial hours. The negotiated WTR shows many signs of a trade-off between workers being flexible on time and reduced working hours, intended to benefit both the company and the workers. While it has enabled greater plant utilisation to cope with peaks in demand, it has also given more free time to workers, longer rest periods and significant wage increases.

One complexity in analysing the outcomes of WTR in Partmaker stems from the several rounds of renegotiation that shift regimes with reduced hours have undergone over the years. As these mostly coincided with periods of economic downturn and the threat of job cuts, the changes were usually unfavourable to workers. The evaluation of the WTR is thus unavoidably made by workers in comparison to those previous, more favourable arrangements.

Nevertheless, reduced working hours are in general seen as positive by workers. The WTR did not solve other problems, such as the unsocial and variable hours inherent in factory shift work, but it has made it easier to cope with such schedules by allowing longer rest periods. When asked about future prospects and challenges, workers and trade union representatives point to the recent change in ownership, possible future economic downturns and the 'green' transition as circumstances that could be linked to further reforms of the shift system. Maintaining the existing system therefore appears to be the medium-term union objective for WTR negotiations at company level, unless change there is supported by national legislation or higher tier collective bargaining. This highlights another important requirement for well-functioning WTR systems: namely, institutional support to ensure their continuity.

2. Case study 2: Introducing WTR to a new collective agreement – drivers and challenges

2.1 Setting the scene

The history of collective bargaining in Carmaker, and in particular of company-level negotiations, is long and deeply rooted in the tradition of participatory industrial relations that historically characterises the metalworking sector of Emilia-Romagna, where the company is located. It is one of the most productive Italian regions, situated in the north-eastern part of the country.

The region of Emilia-Romagna, and the province of Bologna in particular, has been characterised by the presence of strong labour movements, closely linked to intellectuals and student activism in the 1970s, and by the emergence of influential political and trade union actors such as Claudio Sabattini. Former secretary of the metalworkers' union, Fiom-CGIL, in Bologna in 1970 and then a member of the national secretariat in 1977, Sabattini theorised a model of workers' participation that sought to connect participation and conflict. Without neglecting the inevitably conflictive relationship between workers and employers, Sabattini always stressed the need, as a trade unionist, to enter the debate and have a say on all issues related to work organisation and workers' rights, including finding cooperative and participatory practices (Baldissarra and Pepe 2000; Cetrulo and Moro 2022).

The acquisition of Carmaker by GermanAuto[9] in 1998 allowed a further shift in the realm of industrial relations due to the progressive implementation of some of the features of the German codetermination model. The trade unions at Carmaker do not have the same rights as their German colleagues; in particular, they do not have a seat on the board of directors. However, in the last 20 years we can clearly observe a more sustained promotion of various mechanisms of participation, partly following the model of industrial relations adopted by the GermanAuto group. This encompasses the exercise of information and consultation rights and also, in part, through the strengthening of specific institutions already present in the region, such as the joint technical committees. These committees, the number of which has increased over time at Carmaker, are made up of an equal number of trade unionists and managers or heads of department. They meet regularly

9. A fictional name given to a German automotive concern, the owner of many well-known vehicle brands.

(with a different frequency depending on the nature of the committee) to discuss and find operational solutions to problems and challenges relating, for instance, to the organisation of work, time and methods, training and workers' skills, and health and safety.

Another important characteristic of Carmaker is the very high level of unionisation in the company, with more than 95 per cent of blue collar workers being members of Fiom-CGIL in addition to a small number belonging to Fim-UIL, the second trade union present in the company. The rate of unionisation among white collar workers is much lower, at 10 per cent among clerical workers, despite recent efforts by the unions to recruit these workers, not least in view of their increasing share in the total workforce.

Over the years, company-level bargaining has played an important role in raising wages in Carmaker above the level set by CCNL Metalmeccanici Industria. Indeed, the minimum gross wage in Carmaker is, according to the RSU, 40 per cent higher than the pay scales defined by the national collective agreement for the sector. This is due to the presence of several structural elements that have been negotiated over time within the framework of company agreements (related, for instance, to acquired competences, tenure and functional flexibility), together with more canonical tools such as the production bonus.

It is worth noting that, in the last 20 years, the length and scope of company agreements have increased, showing a certain evolution in the model of collective bargaining. In fact, in addition to the more traditional topics usually discussed in company negotiations (such as production bonuses and working time), Carmaker has started to discuss broader issues such as work-life balance, limits on the use of temporary workers, specific measures for outsourced workers and training provisions. In January 2024, a new collective agreement was signed in Carmaker, replacing the one from 2019.

2.2 How working time reduction became the focus of the renewal of the company agreement

In drawing up their proposals for the new company agreement, the trade unionists based their internal discussions on an analysis of the company's economic situation. Carmaker had recorded very good results in terms of production volumes and profit margins over the previous two years, results that were particularly positive and remarkable in comparison with other companies in the GermanAuto group and the sector as a whole. The trade unions were therefore aware of the possibility of making strong demands in the context of positive returns and the prospects of an imminent expansion of production.

In this new round of negotiations, the trade unions departed from their customary focus on wage increases, instead formulating demands for the redistribution of gains partly in wages and partly as more free time for workers. The focus of attention on working time stemmed from several reasons, related both to internal and external factors.

First, the Covid-19 pandemic and associated containment measures played an important role. The unions observed how the health emergency and the initial uncertainty about sanitary measures caused a general increase in stress among workers, who started to feel the urgency of dedicating more free time to their family and relatives. Work-life balance thus gained significantly in importance among workers.

Secondly, during the pandemic, in Carmaker as in many other companies, a certain divide began to emerge between workers who were able to work from home – mainly white collar workers not directly involved in the production process, such as clerks and managers – and the rest (not only blue collar workers, but all those more directly involved in production) who instead had always to work on the company premises. This divide was perceptible, giving rise to some tensions and grievances. It thus prompted the union to address this situation and stimulated a more general reflection within the company on the implementation of possible innovations in work organisation that could benefit the entire workforce. The company confirmed its awareness of the potential fissures between different groups in the workforce and the consequent need to introduce new practices that could restore some form of homogeneity and balance. Working time reduction was an ideal candidate.

It should also be noted that, from the company's point of view, working time bargaining was seen as a tool to strengthen its innovative model of social wellbeing and to increase the company's attractiveness in a context of growth and structural transformation. The transition to electromobility and the need to attract new skills from the labour market seem to have played a positive role in favouring the discussion on WTR.

> Therefore […] we have immediately found an opportunity in having a cutting-edge model that is also absolutely in line with the social innovation model that the company has always wanted to have and achieve over time, and has achieved in many respects. (Manager)

Another important reason for introducing this issue into the bargaining process was the unions' willingness to look upon their collective agreement as a pioneer. They were aware that focusing mainly on wage increases risked widening the wage gap with other similar companies in the region, creating potential tensions with their employees. Placing the reduction of working time at the centre of the new negotiations round therefore implied the possibility of advancing the political discussion on more progressive issues, thereby paving the way for other companies to take their own bargaining in new directions.

> Almost always when we do second-level bargaining, we try to understand what may be a topic of the moment, a direction for advancement, even a

> historical one, or at least in terms of rights that we try to take forward. […] In a situation where the salary was already at the point of advance that characterises the company in the area, at this point here we found ourselves in the position of having to make a choice: in short, say well, beyond the salary where can we go? What is the point of advancement that we can make that is really significant, though not something you write down, but that can really lead to change? Of course, the point on which we have settled is time. (Union_1)

> So why was this approach taken? […] First of all because it is a necessity for the trade union to try to pave the way on this front, given that in any case there are already important experiences at European level and even if with different studies and methods, but we need to find our own way. And then why? Because I believe that […], they are perhaps realising that, even if it will be on an experimental basis, it will also become a business necessity. (Union_3)

Trade unions in Carmaker were indeed aware that, given the characteristics of their own company, both in terms of industrial relations and profitability, it was worth trying to achieve the goal of reducing working time in the context of hiring additional workers given the expansion of production; and that a good outcome here could be a useful example for other companies and act as a push factor. In this sense, the negotiation was seen as highly meaningful not only within the company but also regionally and even nationally, with unions at different levels generally converging on the importance of the proposal. Moreover, the regional union was able to emphasise its role in stimulating the WTR debate within the company, and the close interaction between company negotiations and the development of a wider political agenda in the region.

> But then, you know when I realised the issue was a strongly political, I mean a highly political issue, it's clear that you want to move toward this reduction. Why? Because we are leading the way. (Union_3)

> It was a proposal that arose from union demand, I would almost say more from the outside [regional] union than from the internal RSU, but shared from the beginning by the majority part of the company RSU. But it is a proposal that has to be framed, in my opinion, in the specific history of the metalworkers union model of Bologna. (Union_5)

2.3 The bargaining process: between technical and political issues

During the bargaining process, the company had started to expand production, with planned recruitment, the imminent launch of a new car model and an increase in production capacity. In this context, the idea of reducing working hours was initially met with scepticism by management as it ran counter to the concept of growth and expansion, characterised by more, not less, labour demand.

> The path was not easy. [...] The problem is that the company, when they first heard us say that, I mean, they said 'they're crazy', also because they have, thank God, numbers where you have to go, where you have to produce, and they couldn't understand how we could reconcile work [time reduction] and productivity together. (Union_2)

However, the demands were not dismissed outright and there was a remarkable openness on the part of management to discuss the ambitious WTR proposal. This can be interpreted both as the result of a well-functioning system of industrial relations, but also as a result of the company's orientation towards a process of continuous improvement which could encompass a rethinking of working time. This view was confirmed in interviews with both management and trade unions.

> That is, we have in this system [of industrial relations] a good thing, right? That basically it always leads you to think about why the other party is making a proposal or a request instead of immediately formulating a judgment, because it is clear that in itself the request, taken in isolation, appeared antithetical to the state of the company which is in a period of growth. (Manager)

> We have made a policy of small steps, but of advancing towards the model of, let's say, increased participation. And this too is an element that facilitates negotiation. Because when you are in a factory where the RSU and management already talk to each other, and they talk to each other in a manner that is not only consistent but also aimed at implementation without too much second guessing, trying to understand what the other wants to communicate to you, that's when you can find a healthy compromise, without prejudice. (Union_3)

The company made it clear from the outset, however, that the viability of the proposal depended on ensuring no productivity losses. Such a scenario was considered as the only feasible and sustainable one, given the firm's production and competitiveness objectives. For this reason, the company interpreted the WTR proposal not as a reduction in the use of the existing labour force that would be compensated by new hires, but as an element of a broader strategy of work reorganisation accompanied by recruitment driven by the planned expansion of production. While unions did not oppose the productivity objective, they nonetheless continued to stress that a real reduction in working hours would inevitably mean an increase in the size of the workforce.

> So when it was said, look we want to do this kind of operation, yes, there was a shudder for a moment, but there was no outright 'no'. There was a 'let's talk about it, let's figure out how we can go about it so that there is a win-win'; specifically, the company was asking us not to lower productivity, to at least keep it at the same level. (Union_3)

> [T]he premise on which the company opened up the possibility of negotiations was: we are willing but, given the growth phase of the company and the need to maintain competitiveness [...] we need to maintain the productivity of the site. [...] So we don't like to call it reduction of working hours because reduction of working hours calls for 'less work for the same pay', and the company hires because it has to; but instead no, the company hires because it would have hired anyway, we need to grow, we need to use the facilities differently. So in this framework we did work together to accomplish in a virtuous way the transformation of the company. (Manager)

> And therein lies the focal point [of the bargaining] where we have always said: the working time reduction had to give a minus, because the hourly reduction must be a minus. When we talk about minus/plus we are talking about people, therefore I reduce the hours with the same number of people, or I reduce the hours by adding people. (Union_1)

It was clear to both sides that, despite openness and a willingness to negotiate, an agreement would not be straightforward or easy to reach. A special working group was therefore set up to work out different possible scenarios for achieving the objectives. The group was made up of five trade unionists and five hierarchical figures, covering the roles of responsibility for and the coordination of the different production areas of the company. The composition of the group was therefore 'technical' in the sense that there were no political figures from either the union or the company. In a sense, this presumed 'removal' of the more political dimension of negotiations seems to have favoured a smoother functioning of the group, even if the final decision was taken at the (political) negotiating table. In this context, the position of the trade unions more directly involved in the working group was particularly complex, as their political role could not so easily be separated from their technical input.

> They [employer] had to stick to it, technically, and put the best on the table technically, according to their way of seeing; we, even though we were technical there, inside we were still thinking about the political question: what impact can it have outside? And so perhaps the difficulty was more ours, in the sense that they are technical: 1 plus 1 makes 2. Full stop. For us, can 1 plus 1 hurt us? Does it bring us advantages? (Union_4)

The process of negotiation was complex and required expertise and detailed knowledge of the company, its processes and work organisation across all departments and workstations. This explains the rather long duration of the negotiations, of over a year. Throughout, union members of the working group stayed in close contact with the RSU, providing it with regular updates and receiving ongoing support. To find a compromise on the two specific goals – reducing working time while maintaining productivity – different possible scenarios were elaborated from a technical perspective by the working group. Once the working group had reached agreement on these, the proposal was then presented to all actors involved in the bargaining process for an additional round of revision and modifications based on more political criteria.

According to interviewees, the competence of the union representatives, together with their prior experience of bargaining and their accurate knowledge of previous working time-related provisions defined within company collective agreements, were pivotal in orienting the discussion and obtaining the desired results. This is consistent with previous research that shows the importance of a high degree of competence among trade unionists in managing the bargaining process on intricate issues (Russo et al. 2019). The working group also strived to codify the ongoing technical work as much as possible so that the complex know-how was not lost but could be used in future negotiations also by other teams.

> To keep up with the executives and discuss matters with them you must be prepared and you have to study, otherwise you struggle to be at their pace. A manager holds a position because he is prepared in that matter, finance deals with finance, a lawyer deals with law and so on. We need to have a broader knowledge. It is clear that our advantage, on the one hand, is that we have already been doing this for some years. We have the knowledge of all the past agreements which is something that often the last ones who arrive on the executive side, of course they can't know […]. I have struggled because I had to study a lot and I will still have to study a lot, but whoever comes after us in the next elections will struggle even more because the agreements will increase, right? And then, as I always say, one thing about agreements is to live them, to write them, and to prepare them; but another thing is to read them. This is very different, because in some things there is an interpretation and, what I always say, we must be careful to write down even the details, because people change, what remains is what is written. (Union_4)

Another element that helped in the negotiation was certainly the strength of the unions in the company and the ability to mobilise workers when necessary. As reported by the unions, a short strike of four hours was called to put pressure on the negotiation process, especially on the wage increase aspect, and it proved effective, leading to concessions from the employer.

> So we went on strike. Already after the first day of the strike, the company agreed to concede on the performance bonus. […] Then participation won over argument, without the need to call for other strikes. (Union_4)

2.4 The content of the negotiated agreement: a variety of WTR forms and a broad scope

From the very beginning, the proposal of working time reduction presented by the trade unions was intended to apply to all workers, not just blue collar workers in production. This decision introduced further elements of complexity because of the considerable heterogeneity of the company's departments in terms of production process, working time, machinery constraints and workforce composition. This diversity was reflected in the outcome of the negotiation, with the working time reduction and compensation mechanisms elaborated in different ways according to the areas of application.

For workers in production, the following working time reduction models were negotiated:

1. Central shift workers: alternating one 5-day week and one 4-day week (with a Friday off), with a total reduction of 22 days per year. The working days remained at 8 hours.
2. Two shift workers: alternating one 5-day week and one 4-day week (with a Friday off), with a total reduction of 22 days per year. The working days, however, changed from 7 hours to 7 hours and 15 minutes.
3. Three shift workers: alternating one 5-day week and two 4-day weeks (with a Friday off), with a total reduction of 31 days per year. The working days, however, changed from 7 hours to 7 hours and 15 minutes.
4. Productive units with high capacity: a slightly different regime, with the day of leave not always falling on a Friday but on the basis of a sliding rest period during the week that varies on an individual basis, with always one day worked out of three.[10]

Outside the production sphere, the working time reduction was based on different mechanisms, some of which were already in operation before the WTR agreement (i.e. the allowance ('forfait') regime and the use of paid annual leave, PAR) and that were further developed under the new agreement. Moreover, compared to their colleagues in production, white collar workers were granted greater autonomy in exercising their rights to WTR, such as in scheduling their working hours and days off (given certain constraints related to respect for planned holidays). The negotiated reorganisation of working time for clerical workers outside production is indeed composed of different elements aimed at ensuring not only a reduction in working time, but also greater flexibility and stable access to remote work. First, for every working day (of at least four hours) spent in the firm, the worker is granted a 'time credit' of 30 minutes that, if cumulated for instance over eight working days, can be used to work only a half-day. These half days or days off can be taken on a quarterly basis (with a maximum of three days per three-month period) upon reaching at least 8/16/24 hours of allowance. Such a reduction can also be applied during days spent working remotely, access to which is granted for 12 days per month. Moreover, working time flexibility was expanded to meet workers' family needs through the extension of the morning entry slot from 7:30 to 10:00 and of the evening departure slot from 16:30 to 19:00.

10. The specific regime of high-capacity units was motivated by the type of production in these departments. Additionally, an allowance of 50 euros has been granted to these workers because of the inconvenience associated with the sliding shift.

The working time reduction agreement moves around two poles: on the one hand ensuring a real and fair reduction in working time for all departments, accounting at the same time for their specificities; on the other, identifying effective compensation mechanisms able to reduce any productivity loss as far as possible. This implies that some trade-offs were introduced. The main mechanisms identified by the technical working group concern the length of physiological breaks (which were slightly decreased); the enlargement of working teams (under the supervision of one team leader) from 10 to 12 workers; the provision of 20 hours max of off the job training; the partial contribution of workers to WTR through using a share of their PAR; and a review of the application criteria related to the so-called ergonomic allowance factor. [11]

The mechanisms identified by the working group in the agreement therefore relate not only to working time (e.g. breaks, paid annual leave, work calendars) but also to other areas of work organisation (e.g. team size), training and ergonomic conditions. In this respect, changes in the ergonomic factor are perceived by workers and trade unions as particularly important and problematic, as they risk increasing productivity and intensifying the work. However, according to the trade unionists, this provision must be read together with the company's commitment to reduce ergonomic risks as much as possible, which is already under close scrutiny thanks to the work of the joint health and safety committee.

The new collective agreement also introduces other important novelties for the company's employees concerning employment growth, with the hiring of 500 permanent workers in the next three years, alongside significant increases in wages and annual performance bonuses and additional provisions on individual rights.

Particularly relevant is also the establishment of a new joint technical committee to work specifically on the company's procurement contracts for cleaning, catering and logistics services to improve working conditions and enhance industrial relations. This committee is particularly relevant for the unions as it represents an important field of struggle for advancing workers' rights in outsourced services, with the intention of uniting a fragmented workforce. Some important steps have already been made here in the past.

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11. The definition of ergonomic factors follows the ERGO-UAS methodology, adopted in general in car manufacturing plants in Italy. The ergonomic factor sets the limits of acceptability for fatigue distribution related to a given workstation. This means that workplace design takes into account both the biomechanical effort required of a worker to perform the task as well as the time needed to execute that task as a share of total working time, with lower values generally corresponding to lower ergonomic risks. In the new WTR agreement, the time allowance only applies to workstations with an ergonomic factor of at least 9 per cent. At the same time, the company committed to reduce by at least 15 per cent every year the number of workstations with an ergonomic factor higher than 6 per cent, guaranteeing that their incidence in the total amount of workstations does not exceed 20 per cent, as well as progressively to improve overall ergonomic working conditions by increasing to 50 per cent the share of workstations with an ergonomic factor of 3.5 per cent or lower.

For instance, outsourced logistics workers located on the company premises have been supported by the unions in the negotiations aimed at covering them with their firm-level collective agreement.

2.5 Workers' involvement, information and consultation

Once the draft of the new collective agreement had been signed by the parties, the RSU submitted the text to workers, asking for approval through a secret ballot (with an astounding 96 per cent voting in favour of the negotiated agreement). However, workers were actively involved from the outset, even before the negotiation had formally begun. One of the tools used for consultation was a survey in which workers were asked to identify the most important issues to be addressed in the new agreement.

During the negotiation, and given the complexity of the WTR proposal, simultaneous meetings were organised for each department separately to allow a more targeted explanation of the specific working time arrangements for each one, together with an overall presentation of the proposal. This was seen by the unions as particularly important given the differences in the form and extent of the negotiated working time reduction, which varied by department and by shift type. The aim was also to create a more familiar environment to encourage workers to intervene directly, to ask for clarification and to express any doubts they might have. This approach was evaluated positively by the unions after the closure of the negotiation. They noted greater support and enthusiasm among workers who regularly communicated with the RSU about the ongoing negotiation and the content of the agreement.

The HR department carried out its own communication activities to present the new collective agreement to workers, especially regarding the use of remote (smart) working and WTR. This has gone beyond internal communications, in line with management's expectation that the benefits of reduced working time will also materialise in terms of recruitment and general positive publicity for the company.

> Another reason to say that it has been taken very well is because we have also recorded, of course, an increased attractiveness of the company in the market. […] We are hiring and since information has spread that an agreement had been signed, obviously, the first thing that candidates ask during an interview is 'Do you work four days?' […] It is an element of strong attractiveness, also because in the metalworking sector we are to my knowledge the first automotive company to do such a thing, even in production. (Manager)

As explained in the text of the collective agreement, the process that will bring about the implementation of the working time reduction is an extended one, and the new regime will only be put in place, on an experimental basis, in 2025, thus around one year after the signature of the agreement. Indeed, all social actors are aware of the complexity of this next step and share the need to set an efficient system in place.

Conclusions

Working time reduction has been traditionally conceived as a vision with two interrelated goals: first, to reduce the number of working hours; and second, to enhance the enjoyment and meaning derived from work (see discussion in Spencer 2022a). Accordingly, a reduction in the quantity of work (in terms of length of hours) has been presumed to be accompanied by an improvement in its quality, with the intention that this process would contribute to social progress in meeting the needs of workers. This vision has been subject to challenge throughout history, with instances of working time reduction resulting in the quality of work being compromised, either deliberately or unintentionally. This encompasses augmented work intensity to cope with workloads that have not been adequately adjusted to the shortened schedule, or to meet the productivity-enhancing premise of WTR when this is a management-led initiative (Delaney and Casey 2021), as well as increased monitoring and control.

Past experiences have provided numerous valuable insights, yet there is still a paucity of knowledge regarding the path towards and the structure of WTR that offers the most favourable outcomes for workers. This study contributes to this debate by examining collectively negotiated and agreed forms of working time reduction in two large manufacturing companies in Italy. The first objective of the study was to analyse the steps leading to the agreement – thus its motivation, premise, evolution of the proposed solutions, resources needed and the challenges faced by workers and unions in the process. This knowledge can be useful in undertaking any future negotiations on working time. The second objective was to investigate the outcomes of the negotiated solutions for workers in terms of the quality of working life, thus providing guidance on the desired direction and form of any future initiatives towards a shorter working week.

In terms of the process of bargaining on working time reduction, the analysis revealed that it requires not only perseverance from the unions, as the negotiations usually took a long time to conclude, but above all a very specific know-how on the part of the negotiating team. This includes detailed knowledge of how work is organised in all departments of the company, a good understanding of previous negotiations on similar issues and an awareness of the solutions adopted in other companies to serve as a point of reference. Far from resulting in a ‘one size fits all’, detailed proposals of working time reduction have to deal with the increasing fragmentation of working time within a company, different schedules among categories of workers and the emerging divide between workers that can work remotely from home and those who cannot (Cetrulo et al. 2020, 2022), resulting in inequalities in the way employees can autonomously define their schedule (Fana et al. 2022). In this sense, bargaining on working time reduction alone is not possible, as any sustainable and equitable change in working time requires a more comprehensive negotiation on work organisation, time shifts and allocation of tasks. The collection and subsequent sharing between trade unions of good practice and experience in negotiating working time reductions is therefore crucial, and any effort to promote and facilitate this is a valuable element of capacity building. The analysis also highlights the importance of keeping a detailed written record of all elements of the agreement, including the process and outcomes, so that future negotiating teams have access to this knowledge.

Moreover, WTR is a politically important issue for unions to include in collective agreements because it opens up new avenues and areas for improving working conditions, and these early efforts are crucial in paving the way for future negotiations. However, as WTR negotiations are not yet a well-trodden path in many workplaces, company-level bargaining on this issue benefits from political and logistical support from sectoral, regional or national structures. In the cases analysed, the national framework agreement for the metalworking sector, with its provisions on working time reduction, proved instrumental while company agreements made it possible to implement its provisions systematically and in a way that stimulated the reorganisation of work in the company. Thus, the individual right to request an ad hoc day off (PAR) was turned into a structural reduction in working time, increasing the reliability of workers' access to shorter working hours and reducing the potential negative consequences in terms of the intensification of work or maladapted workloads. In addition, at least in the second analysed case, company bargaining was effective in retaining the positive provisions related to WTR without having to trade it for increased flexibility, as framed in the national collective agreement.

In terms of workers' evaluation of WTR, the results of the first case study indicate an extremely positive perception among workers and a preference for the reduced hours. However, the conditions under which it was introduced, along with the particular model of organising reduced hours in the setting of a factory shift system, played a crucial role in the extent to which the benefits of reduced hours could be fully realised.

An important contribution of this study is that it allows an exploration of the outcomes of working time reduction that departs from the template of a 4-day week, the latter well-studied in company trials around the world (e.g. Schor et al. 2023). In our case studies, not all workers were covered by WTR at the same time, solutions differed within the same company and the reduction did not have a consistent form, such as a four-day week with Fridays off. This provides some evidence for the debate on the desired form of WTR, with the four-day week usually being contrasted with other more flexible and less standardised solutions such as reducing daily working time while maintaining a five-day week, or providing additional holidays to be taken throughout the year. The results show that, in such a non-standardised form, the reduction in working time has not created a new norm of a shorter working week – at the level of either the firm, community or society. The additional rest periods were of different lengths and varied not only over the days of the week but also over the times of the day, as they could fall on either morning, afternoon or night shifts. This has a disruptive effect on workers' ability to plan their free time and, above all, to synchronise it with their family and social contacts. It has its advantages, however, as having free time while others are at work allows attendance in respect of administrative or health-related matters that would otherwise require taking leave days. This is one argument in favour of reducing working time in a way that does not lead to an overlapping of free time at societal level.

In the analysed cases of negotiated WTR, the trap of trading reductions for some elements of work quality has not been entirely avoided. WTR was, at least to some extent, introduced as a trade-off to facilitate the retention of some poor quality features of work organisation, for example a highly variable and flexible schedule and ergonomic risks. The first case study also reveals a pervasive feeling of a trade-off among workers and trade unions who feel that shorter hours have been achieved, among other things, at the expense of more variable and more unsocial hours of work. Shorter hours also mean less individual control over working time for some workers, who have very little say in choosing what shifts they work and who can only request post hoc changes on the grounds of personal or health reasons. Control over working hours should thus be explicitly included in any bargaining on reducing working time and, given its great importance for the quality of work and health (Albrecht et al. 2017; Piasna 2018), care should be taken to establish safeguards in this respect.

Employers' openness to WTR is often premised on productivity enhancements, thus representing a profit-oriented motivation that took the form of 'working less to produce more' in one of the analysed companies, and this rationale shows its limits. For instance, it encourages companies to view shifts with reduced hours as a burdensome labour cost, to use them only when absolutely necessary from a production point of view and to revert to longer shifts once the emergency has passed. This is an obstacle to the sustainable and reliable implementation of WTR from a workers' perspective. The productivity underpinnings of WTR agreements also risk failing to place adequate constraints on the flexible use of labour, either by giving workers more control over their working time or by limiting the changes introduced by management.

Despite valid criticisms raised in the literature about an exclusionary nature of WTR as currently conceived and trialled, due to its applicability mainly to full-time standard workers (Burchell et al. 2024), this study reveals an important and effective role of WTR in closing gaps and reducing inequality between diverse groups of workforces in the same company. This is notably the case at Carmaker, where WTR was negotiated as an inclusive solution, closing gaps between white and blue collar workers in their access to working time flexibility.

Finally, workers in the analysed companies feel that their voices were heard, both by the unions and by the employer, the latter through the mediation of their union representatives. Involvement in negotiating working time reductions, through information and consultation and direct voting on new agreements, appears to contribute to a more positive overall assessment of the organisation of work in a company. There is also a positive relationship between workers' perception that their overall working conditions, including pay, are above the regional or sectoral average, with substantial parts of these gains attributed to the unions, and their ability to negotiate favourable salary compensation in exchange for less favourable management practices related to working time such as low individual control or high variability in working hours.

We therefore conclude with the postulate that a move towards shorter working hours must be about transforming work itself (Bosch and Lehndorff 2001; Spencer 2022a). This includes through the democratisation of workplaces, thereby enabling workers to play an active role in pushing this agenda forward and ensuring that workers' rights and quality of working life are at the heart of the struggle to reduce working hours.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 Annual paid leave in the national collective agreement for the metalworking industry in Italy

The national collective agreement for the metalworking industry (Contratto Collettivo Nazionale di Lavoro (CCNL), Metalmeccanici Industria) is the most important and significant agreement in the metalworking industry in Italy. In the area of working time, it provides that workers in workplaces where this agreement applies are entitled to 13 paid leave days (permessi annui retribuiti, PAR) of eight hours, totalling 104 hours each year. Seventy-two of these 104 hours are recognised as working time reduction (riduzione orario di lavoro; ROL), and the remaining 32 are in lieu of abolished holidays. These leave days are recognised for full-time (40 hours per week) workers, regardless of the type of contract (open-ended, fixed-term or apprenticeship), and are calculated on a pro rata basis for part-time workers.

PARs are accrued by the worker on a monthly basis (8.67 hours per month for full-time workers). The worker may take these leave days individually in groups of four or eight hours each (i.e. a half day or a full day's work), by requesting them from the employer with 10 days' notice. The employer may refuse to grant leave if certain percentages of absence in the shift are exceeded or in the case of production situations of an unpostponable nature. Employees who have not taken all such leave days may ask for them to be paid in their salary after a period of 24 months.

The CCNL also provides that, subject to joint examination between company management and the unitary trade union representative body (Rappresentanza Sindacale Unitaria; RSU), a quota of PARs (up to a maximum of five days, i.e. 40 hours) may be used collectively, for departments or groups of workers. Where there are innovations in the division of working time whose purpose is to obtain greater plant utilisation of a structural type and not for temporary reasons, the CCNL also establishes that company management and the RSU may jointly decide to use the PAR hours in order to plan a new arrangement of shifts, taking into account technical and plant requirements. This would be achieved through the establishment of additional shifts compared to the 'traditional' pattern of 15 shifts per week.

Appendix 2 List of interviews

Case study 1: Partmaker

Interview ID	Function	Gender	Interview mode/place
Worker_1	Components department engineer	M	Union premises
Worker_2	Maintenance technician	M	Respondent dwelling
Worker_3	Production control operator	M	Respondent dwelling
Worker_4	Line operator	F	Phone
Worker_5	Line operator	M	Bar in his hometown
Worker_6	Material handling operator	M	Respondent dwelling
Worker_7	R&D specialist	M	Respondent dwelling
Worker_8	Line operator	M	Bar in his hometown
Worker_9	Production control operator	F	Phone
Union_1	Former Fiom-CGIL trade union rep	M	Union premises
Union_2	Former Fiom-CGIL trade union rep	M	Union premises

Case study 2: Carmaker

Interview ID	Function	Firm department/other	Interview mode/place
Union_1	Member of the RSU	Production	Virtual meeting
Union_2	Member of the RSU	Production	Virtual meeting
Union_3	Member of the RSU	Production	Virtual meeting
Union_4	Member of the RSU	Production	Virtual meeting
Union_5	Trade unionist	Trade union regional organisation (external to the firm)	Virtual meeting
Manager	Manager	Human resources – industrial relations	Virtual meeting

Appendix 3 Additional information on selected shift systems in case study 1: Partmaker

- **18 shifts per week (4 teams)**

The 18-shift system was introduced in 1998 to respond to the company's production requirements that called for greater utilisation of the plants. The company judged that an investment in new machinery (e.g. doubling an assembly line) would be disproportionate to the required production volumes, and opted for internal flexibility instead. The original agreement had provided for a shift system that was more advantageous for workers, with 17 shifts (limiting the Sunday night shift to four times per year) with no additional Sunday morning or midweek shifts on an annual basis.

This agreement was changed to its current form in 2010. Over a four-week cycle, the shifts are planned as follows:

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
Week 1 (40 hours)	Morning	Morning	Night	Night	Night	*Rest*	*Rest*
Week 2 (32/40 hours)	Afternoon	*Rest*	Morning	Morning	Morning	*Rest*	*Rest* (Morning)
Week 3 (40 hours)	*Rest*	Afternoon	Afternoon	Afternoon	*Rest*	Morning	Night
Week 4 (32 hours)	Night	Night	*Rest*	*Rest*	Afternoon	Afternoon	*Rest*

- **21 shifts per week – continuous cycle (5 teams)**

The 21-shift regime was introduced in 2005 and initially concerned only a single production line of a specific product the demand for which could not be satisfied with the shifts then in force. The company, while planning to set up the new shift regime on a structural, not temporary, basis – in accordance with the CCNL – had in fact planned to use it only in situations of production urgency or to manage emergency phases, judging it too costly in terms of labour costs.

However, according to the union officials interviewed, the use of this scheme has become increasingly widespread over time to the point that there have been several phases in the company's recent history in which the majority of workers have been subject to it. Despite several requests from the company to change it in order to reduce labour costs, this scheme has so far remained in its original form. Over a cycle of ten weeks, the shifts are planned as follows:

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
Week 1 (48 hours)	Morning	Afternoon	*Rest*	Morning	Afternoon	Night	Night
Week 2 (24 hours)	*Rest*	*Rest*	*Rest*	Morning	Afternoon	*Rest*	Morning
Week 3 (32 hours)	Afternoon	Night	Night	*Rest*	*Rest*	*Rest*	Morning
Week 4 (40 hours)	Afternoon	*Rest*	Morning	Afternoon	Night	Night	*Rest*
Week 5 (32 hours)	*Rest*	*Rest*	Morning	Afternoon	*Rest*	Morning	Afternoon
Week 6 (32 hours)	Night	Night	*Rest*	*Rest*	*Rest*	Morning	Afternoon
Week 7 (32 hours)	*Rest*	Morning	Afternoon	Night	Night	*Rest*	*Rest*
Week 8 (40 hours)	*Rest*	Morning	Afternoon	*Rest*	Morning	Afternoon	Night
Week 9 (24 hours)	Night	*Rest*	*Rest*	*Rest*	Morning	Afternoon	*Rest*
Week 10 (32 hours)	Morning	Afternoon	Night	Night	*Rest*	*Rest*	*Rest*

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