Marx and the Right to Shorter Working Hours under AI

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Abstract

Artificial intelligence renews a political question: who should benefit when less labour can produce society's goods and services? This article argues that productivity gains should support shorter working hours, secure employment and protected living standards through enforceable collective institutions. Drawing on Marx's analysis of the working day and freedom, it develops a distributive argument connecting technological change to control over time. An accounting framework clarifies when employment preservation and shorter hours are compatible, while distinguishing feasibility from firms' incentives. Selected empirical studies and bargaining agreements illuminate different mechanisms without establishing an economy-wide causal effect. The article proposes coordinated working-time standards, bargaining rights, income protection and redistribution across sectors. It also addresses demand, care, work intensity and unequal access to technological gains. Its central claim is that reducing necessary toil requires changing the authority to allocate productivity gains, making free time a social entitlement rather than a discretionary reward for efficiency.

Keywords: artificial intelligence; Marx; working time; employment security; collective bargaining; distributive justice

1 Introduction

Marx's enduring importance lies partly in his insistence that the length of the working day is a question of human freedom and social power. He did not invent the eight-hour day, and concern about excessive labour was never his alone. The Australian eight-hour movement achieved an important victory in Melbourne in 1856, before Marx explicitly supported an eight-hour legal limit in his instructions to delegates of the International Working Men's Association in 1866 (Marx 1866; National Museum of Australia 2024). His contribution was to place struggles over working time within an explanation of capitalist production: technical capacities and workers' opportunities to live freely develop through different, often conflicting, social processes.

Artificial intelligence gives this distinction renewed urgency. Tools that accelerate writing, customer support and other activities raise the prospect of producing useful output with less human labour. Yet a reduction in the labour required for a task leaves open what happens to workers. Employers may reduce staffing, expand output, introduce further tasks or demand greater intensity. They may also shorten hours while retaining their workforce. Technology changes

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the available possibilities; ownership, bargaining power and public institutions influence which possibilities become ordinary working life.

This article defends a broad political claim. Society should direct productivity advances towards secure employment, shorter actual working hours and more freely usable time, while protecting workers' living standards. For people already subjected to excessive schedules, the immediate obligation is to end overwork. As productive capacities develop, a shorter normal working week should extend this protection. The objective includes opportunities for friendship, care, cultural life and democratic participation, as well as material security. Maintaining purchasing power and enabling time-intensive consumption may support economic activity, but those effects are additional arguments rather than the measure of whether workers deserve freedom.

The relevant intellectual conversation is already well established. Spencer (2025) argues that debates about AI should address the lightening of work, including its duration, rather than focus exclusively on creating employment. Spencer (2026) places contemporary working-time ambitions in a longer history of political economy and challenges confidence in spontaneous technological or business-led reform. Weeks (2011) connects demands for shorter hours to a feminist critique of the organisation and valuation of work. This article builds on these arguments. It does not claim that connecting Marx, automation and leisure is itself a new discovery.

Its contribution is to specify how employment protection and freedom from excessive work can form a common institutional objective. It connects three questions usually discussed at different levels: what productivity makes technically possible; what workers can claim as a matter of justice; and what collective powers can implement that claim across an unequal economy. The resulting argument places obligations on employers and public institutions, while confronting the costs and conflicts that implementation creates. A firm's preference for greater profit does not settle the social allocation of time, but a political commitment to free time must still explain how production, investment and essential services will be sustained.

The method is a normative political-economic argument supported by an illustrative accounting framework, selected empirical studies and documentary examples of collective bargaining. The evidence is selected to examine distinct mechanisms, including task productivity, adjustment in hours, well-being and institutional control. It is neither a systematic review nor an original causal evaluation. Keeping these evidential roles separate allows an ambitious social programme to be defended without presenting its hoped-for consequences as established facts. The question is how to make technological labour saving serve a general reduction of burdens, rather than treating either unemployment or unending work expansion as its unavoidable destination.

2 Marx and the political organisation of working time

In Capital, the working day is contested because the purchase of labour-power does not establish an uncontested limit to its use. Workers seek conditions compatible with health and life; capital

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seeks to extract surplus labour. Marx's account therefore gives collective struggle and legal restriction a constitutive role in determining normal hours. His discussion of machinery also distinguishes technical labour saving from its capitalist employment, which can extend working time or intensify labour (Marx 1887 [1867], chapters 10 and 15). These arguments make technological optimism inadequate as a theory of emancipation.

Care is required when transferring Marx's categories to AI. Necessary labour time in the analysis of value concerns the labour required to reproduce the value of labour-power. It is not simply the minutes that an employee needs to complete a document. Relative surplus-value involves changes in the relation between necessary and surplus labour, including productivity developments affecting workers' means of subsistence (Marx 1887 [1867], chapter 12). A faster chatbot-assisted task does not, by itself, measure any of these magnitudes. The argument here uses Marx to analyse social relations and purposes; it does not estimate surplus-value from contemporary task-speed experiments.

The distinction matters because a managerial measure of productivity can conceal several different processes. A firm may obtain more completed cases per recorded hour because software improves the workflow, because workers skip breaks, because difficult cases are transferred elsewhere, or because quality standards deteriorate. Treating these as interchangeable would mistake a redistribution of burdens for a reduction in necessary effort. An emancipatory assessment must ask whether the same useful service is produced with less total labour and acceptable quality, including labour performed outside the firm's formal boundaries.

Marx's account of freedom also reaches beyond compensation for difficult work. In the Grundrisse, the development of productive powers opens the possibility of disposable time and the fuller development of individuals (Marx 1973 [1857–1858], Notebook VII). In Capital, Volume III, he connects freedom to associated producers' collective regulation of material necessity and to reducing the working day (Marx 1959 [1894], chapter 48). This perspective gives time a place in judging economic development that cannot be captured by output or wages alone. A society may become richer in commodities while leaving workers little authority over the conduct of their lives.

The implication for AI is that the relevant social gain is not exhausted by doing more work with fewer employees. If the same necessities can be provided with less aggregate effort, distributing that reduction across workers can expand freedom without casting a smaller group into insecurity. Unemployment and leisure may both appear statistically as time outside paid employment, but their social content differs. Time dominated by income loss, compulsory job search and fear is not equivalent to time that a person can use with security and control.

This reading does not require attributing a complete contemporary policy programme to Marx. He did not write about generative models, platform labour or present-day social insurance. The programme developed below is a contemporary argument informed by his account of conflict over production and time. Its starting point is that the capacity to save labour becomes

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emancipatory only when people can collectively determine the purposes for which that capacity is used.

3 Why workers have a claim on productivity gains

A technological possibility does not generate an obligation without a moral argument. The claim defended here rests on equal standing, the social character of production and protection against domination. Workers should have a meaningful opportunity to conduct lives beyond the demands of earning a livelihood. Productive advances that could ease those demands create a reason to revise existing distributions of time, especially where overwork coexists with insecurity. This principle does not depend on demonstrating that every person would choose the same balance between additional income and additional leisure.

The social character of production strengthens that claim. An operational AI system depends on much more than an owner's purchase of software. It functions within accumulated knowledge, education, infrastructure and the practical coordination of workers. Individual firms bear costs and undertake investments, but those contributions do not establish an unlimited moral entitlement to every benefit. Equally, the fact that a particular employee did not personally invent a model does not eliminate that employee's claim to safer, shorter and more secure working life. The proposed entitlement concerns participation in a socially productive order, rather than a reward calculated from individual authorship of an invention.

This claim has two levels. Within an organisation, workers should have enforceable rights over decisions that translate verified labour savings into staffing, hours and workloads. Across society, people should share in rising productive capacities even when their own occupation cannot be readily automated. Without the second level, freedom becomes a privilege of employment in a productive firm. Care workers, cleaners and others whose activities depend on sustained human attention could remain overworked while technologically favoured groups gain leisure. An inclusive programme therefore requires both workplace bargaining and redistribution beyond the workplace.

Free time also deserves consideration as a resource of justice. Rose (2016) treats access to such time as a distributive concern, including for caregivers. The argument here adds a workplace power requirement: time must be sufficiently predictable and protected from employer recall to be usable. An afternoon nominally free but subject to constant instructions is different from an afternoon one can confidently spend with friends. A weekly total does not capture these differences. Duration, predictability and control must therefore enter the definition of a meaningful reduction in working time.

Income protection is indispensable to that definition. Reducing hours by cutting earnings can force people into a second job or reduce their access to housing, food and social participation. The proposal is a reduction in normal actual hours with protection of regular earnings and living standards, not compulsory part-time impoverishment. Where workers depend on excessive overtime to reach an adequate income, simply removing overtime payments is insufficient.

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Raising ordinary pay, reforming insecure contracts and providing income support must be part of the transition. The distribution of its costs is a political choice that should not be imposed on the least secure workers.

Employment security and shorter hours are consequently complementary commitments. Security gives people the material basis to use time freely, while shorter hours prevents employment protection from becoming a demand that everyone remain maximally occupied. The commitment should protect access to decent livelihoods and socially useful work as production changes. It need not preserve every obsolete task or make wasteful output compulsory. Where a job disappears, paid redeployment, training and public employment responsibilities should maintain continuity of security. Removing a task should not remove the worker's claim on society's productive resources.

An objection is that these entitlements limit employers' contractual freedom. They do. Working-time law already constrains the terms on which labour can be purchased. The justification is that individual consent under substantial dependence does not settle the acceptable limits of control over another person's life. Extending collective authority over AI-related restructuring follows this logic. It makes the allocation of technological gains subject to a public standard of freedom and security, rather than leaving the standard to the party with the strongest ability to refuse an agreement.

4 The economic compatibility of shorter hours and employment

A simple accounting relation clarifies the technical issue. Let Q denote a given quantity of quality-adjusted output, a average output per actual labour hour, N the number of workers and h average actual hours per worker over the same period. By definition,

$$Q = aNh.$$

This is an accounting identity, not a production function or a causal model. It assumes that output and total labour input can be meaningfully compared. For heterogeneous services, appropriate measures would need to be constructed separately rather than added as if a hospital consultation and a software update were identical products.

Between two periods, the identity implies

$$\frac{N_1}{N_0} = \frac{Q_1/Q_0}{(a_1/a_0)(h_1/h_0)}.$$

If output is unchanged and productivity rises by a proportion g, employment can remain unchanged when $h_1/h_0 = 1/(1+g)$. A 20 per cent increase in productivity therefore permits a 16.7 per cent reduction in hours for the same output and workforce. It does not imply a 20 per cent reduction in hours. One hundred people initially working forty hours could, under these

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illustrative assumptions, produce the same output at approximately thirty-three and one-third hours each.

The same relation permits another allocation: retaining forty-hour schedules while reducing employment to approximately eighty-three and one-third full-time equivalents. The fractional number expresses aggregate labour requirements, not a literal staffing plan. Both allocations are compatible with the assumed productivity change. Choosing between them requires an objective beyond the technology itself. If output also grows, the available hours reduction is smaller unless productivity grows faster. With output growth q and employment unchanged, the hours ratio becomes $(1+q)/(1+g)$. Employment growth, shorter hours and output growth can coexist when productivity and demand develop appropriately.

The identity does not establish that any firm can introduce an arbitrary shorter week immediately. Average productivity can change with working time, workforce composition and quality requirements. Minimum staffing, opening hours, coordination and indivisible skills can prevent a proportional adjustment. A caring relationship cannot always be made shorter while preserving the same service. These are reasons to organise staffing and investment across workplaces and sectors. They do not establish that society must allocate technological labour saving to unemployment wherever the arithmetic permits another arrangement.

Pay is a separate distributive variable. Suppose employment and weekly earnings remain unchanged when hours fall from forty to thirty-three and one-third. The hourly wage rises by 20 per cent, but the weekly wage bill remains constant. With unchanged output, direct wage cost per unit also remains constant. The employer has forgone the labour-cost saving available through dismissals; the employer has not automatically incurred a higher weekly wage bill than before adoption. This distinction prevents forgone profit from being silently treated as proof that employment preservation is technically impossible.

Total costs may nevertheless rise. AI acquisition, maintenance, computing, training and verification must be financed. Retaining workers also preserves fixed employment costs that redundancies might remove. A viable transition must identify whether investment is funded by retained profits, other efficiency gains, public support or changes in prices and distribution. The accounting example establishes a possible allocation of labour, not a costless investment or guaranteed firm solvency. It also shows why society may need to share transition costs when the desired social return takes the form of workers' time rather than a larger private cash surplus.

Three observable implications follow. First, a reported hours reduction without lower actual hours indicates incomplete implementation. Second, an apparent productivity improvement sustained by hidden labour or deteriorating service quality provides no adequate basis for claiming liberation from work. Third, where comparable output is sustained with fewer actual hours and secure earnings, the allocation demonstrates that labour saving need not take the form of job loss. These implications are useful evaluation standards. They do not require assuming a fixed quantity of work across the economy, and they leave demand, investment and organisational change open to empirical investigation.

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5 What existing evidence establishes

Research on generative AI establishes meaningful gains in particular settings. Noy and Zhang (2023) found that access to ChatGPT reduced completion time in professional writing tasks by approximately 40 per cent while improving assessed output quality. Brynjolfsson et al (2025) studied an AI assistant used by 5,172 customer-support agents and reported an average 15 per cent increase in issues resolved per hour. These findings demonstrate technical possibilities within the tasks and organisations studied. They do not show that an equivalent fraction of every worker's week can be removed or that economy-wide productivity has already risen by those amounts.

Evidence from wider labour-market adjustment reinforces that distinction. Humlum and Vestergaard's (2026) March revision links surveys of chatbot adoption in Denmark to administrative employment records. Despite reported benefits and substantial task reorganisation, it finds no detectable average changes in recorded hours or earnings attributable to adoption over the period studied, with estimates ruling out effects larger than 2 per cent. The administrative outcomes extend through December 2024. This is evidence about an early period and a particular institutional setting. It neither demonstrates that future gains will be small nor establishes that employers universally appropriate large realised gains. It shows why task efficiency and workers' time must be measured separately.

Studies of automation beyond generative AI provide another warning against technological determinism. Zou et al (2025), using Chinese microdata, report that industrial robot application is associated with increased working hours in their analysis. Industrial robots are not interchangeable with language models, and their result cannot simply be transferred to AI-assisted office work. Its relevance is that greater automation and longer hours can coexist. The direction of adjustment needs explanation through work organisation and institutions rather than an assumption that labour-saving machinery necessarily creates leisure.

Evidence on shorter hours addresses a different link. Fan et al (2025) examine a four-day-week intervention involving 141 organisations across six countries and report improvements in workers' well-being. The study supports taking the health and experiential consequences of work-time reduction seriously. Participating organisations were not randomly drawn from all employers, however, and the intervention involved organisational preparation. These results do not establish universal self-financing, economy-wide employment creation or an AI-specific mechanism. They indicate a feasible improvement in some participating workplaces while leaving the conditions for wider provision to be investigated.

Research on public working-time policies also resists an automatic employment conclusion. Kawaguchi et al (2017) find that reductions in standard hours in Japan did not generate the anticipated increase in employment in the setting they study. Giupponi and Landais (2023) find that short-time work can preserve employment during a downturn, while the gains are less durable where firms face persistent adverse shocks. Neither result settles the case for a lasting

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social right to shorter hours. Together they show that distributing available work and preserving livelihoods require attention to wages, financing, demand and the durability of the underlying activity.

The evidential structure is therefore deliberately plural. AI studies identify some labour-saving opportunities; working-time studies examine consequences of changing schedules; labour-market studies reveal adjustment; and bargaining documents show that authority over technology or time can be institutionally contested. These sources address separate parts of the proposed programme. They do not constitute a completed test of the programme as a whole. This separation strengthens the argument by locating the unresolved empirical questions rather than disguising them inside an ethical conclusion.

6 Free time, consumption and social reproduction

The case for shorter hours includes a plausible economic mechanism. Households need both resources and time to participate in many activities. A person may have enough money for a class, a visit or a meal with friends but lack a predictable period in which to enjoy it. Becker's (1965) analysis of time allocation offers one formal account of the joint role of time and purchased goods, although the political argument here does not reduce freedom to household consumption choices. Research by Lee et al (2012) also examines how reductions in work time translate into changes in the allocation of time outside work.

Protecting earnings while reducing overwork may therefore enable demand for activities that were previously constrained by time. Preserving employment also avoids concentrating the costs of adjustment on households that lose wage income. These mechanisms support workers' participation in markets and social life. They help explain why an employer's immediate payroll saving cannot be assumed to represent a gain for the economy as a whole. Wage income is a cost to a particular firm and a source of demand for other producers.

The net macroeconomic result remains conditional. Some additional free time will support unpaid activity rather than purchases. Households may save more, substitute home production for market services or buy imports. Lower profits could affect investment, while relative prices and public expenditure could change. Onaran and Galanis (2012) analyse how changes in the wage share affect demand through different national and international channels. Their framework cautions against treating the distribution of income as irrelevant to growth, without supplying an estimate of the consequences of this article's AI programme. A positive consumption response is a mechanism to investigate, not a result that follows from the accounting identity.

This distinction protects the central commitment. Workers should not have to justify shorter hours by becoming more effective consumers. Time spent resting, sustaining friendships or participating in public affairs can be valuable even if it generates little market revenue. A policy that increases freely usable time and security may improve life without increasing measured output. Conversely, additional consumption does not compensate for a reform that intensifies

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work or transfers unpaid burdens to less powerful people. The economic case supports the political objective without becoming its sole foundation.

Social reproduction makes this particularly clear. Less paid work can provide more time for care, but that outcome is not automatically equitable. If women absorb additional unpaid responsibilities while men gain discretionary leisure, identical reductions in contractual hours can produce unequal freedom. Weeks's (2011) feminist critique of work helps situate shorter-hours demands within the organisation of paid and unpaid activity. Public childcare, care services and more equal household responsibilities are consequently part of the programme. They also enable workers in care-intensive occupations to benefit, rather than making those workers supply everyone else's leisure through heavier workloads.

The quality of shared time matters as well. Socialising requires some coordination of schedules; predictable rest periods can have greater value than fragmented hours allocated at an employer's convenience. A shorter working week should therefore be accompanied by advance notice and protection against routine after-hours demands. Public transport, libraries, recreation and accessible cultural institutions can widen the opportunities that free time actually provides. The aspiration is a society in which productive development expands ordinary people's ability to live together, rather than one in which additional leisure is available mainly as an expensive private purchase.

7 Institutions capable of distributing technological gains

7.1 Working time as an enforceable social standard

The first institutional requirement is a binding floor of protection against excessive work, followed by a coordinated path towards shorter normal hours. These are public standards, not rewards reserved for employers willing to volunteer. The ILO's Forty-Hour Week Convention of 1935 already linked reduced working time to maintaining living standards and sharing the benefits of technical progress (International Labour Organization 1935). That historical instrument is not proof that all countries presently implement its provisions. It demonstrates that treating productivity and unemployment as collective working-time questions has a longstanding institutional basis.

China illustrates why existing protection and future reduction must be considered together. The term 996 describes schedules commonly understood as 9 a.m. to 9 p.m., six days a week; 007 expresses the expectation of effectively continuous availability. Neither should be treated as a universal description of Chinese employment. The Labour Law specifies eight daily hours and an average weekly ceiling of forty-four hours, while the State Council's standard-hours regulation specifies forty weekly hours. Special working-time arrangements and overtime provisions require separate treatment. In 2021, official labour-dispute examples explicitly rejected a 996 arrangement as unlawful (Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security and Supreme Peo-

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ple's Court 2021; Standing Committee of the National People's Congress 2018; State Council 1995).

For workers facing such schedules, waiting for a further productivity breakthrough is unnecessary: compliance with applicable limits is already due. Beyond enforcement, legislation should establish a progressively shorter normal week, with sectoral schedules for achieving it and protection of regular pay. The pace can respond to staffing and investment needs without making the entitlement depend on each employer's goodwill. Workers with disabilities, part-time workers and those facing irregular schedules must be included through appropriate protections, rather than treating the conventional full-time employee as the only relevant beneficiary.

7.2 Collective authority over technology and restructuring

Workers need power before technological deployment fixes the terms of adjustment. The proposed rights include timely information on expected staffing and workload changes, access to relevant performance evidence, paid representation, and binding negotiation over the allocation of realised gains. Where technology reduces required labour, the governing obligation should be to retain employment and distribute the reduction through shorter hours with protected pay. A claim that this is infeasible should face independent scrutiny, with employers required to distinguish genuine financial or operational constraints from the opportunity to earn more through dismissals. These are proposed institutional powers; their existence should not be presumed under current law in every jurisdiction.

This gives the transition a definite order. Existing working-time rights must be enforced without waiting for AI gains. Labour-saving restructuring must then be governed by employment and income protection, supported by sectoral or public financing where needed. If a particular activity genuinely becomes unviable, funded redeployment and public responsibilities must sustain access to decent work instead of abandoning the affected workforce. Independent review should make these obligations enforceable. The purpose is to relocate responsibility for adjustment from individual workers to the institutions controlling production, while requiring those institutions to account for the use of technological gains.

Collective bargaining can already affect the terms on which AI is used. The Writers Guild of America's 2023 agreement restricted compulsory use of AI by writers, required disclosure of AI-generated material supplied to them and protected specified credit-related rights. It did not establish a general shorter working week, and its provisions should be understood as a historical agreement rather than a statement of all current terms (Writers Guild of America 2023). Its relevance is that technological deployment was made subject to negotiated rules. Doellgast et al (2025) similarly document international cases of social dialogue and identify constraints on employer exit, collective voice and inclusive solidarity as conditions supporting worker influence.

Working-time bargaining offers a complementary example. In 2024, Deutsche Bahn and the GDL union agreed a phased reduction of reference hours, including a thirty-five-hour reference

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week by 2029 for covered train personnel in shift work, without proportional pay reductions. An option model permits choices of longer hours for higher pay; coverage and arrangements differ across worker groups. The settlement followed collective conflict rather than a unilateral gift from management (Deutsche Bahn 2025; GDL 2024). This was not an AI intervention and proves no AI-related employment effect. Together with the writers' agreement, it illustrates different institutional capacities that a broader programme would need to combine.

7.3 Sharing costs and gains across sectors

Workplace bargaining alone cannot deliver a general entitlement. The gains from AI may accrue to technology suppliers or owners of scarce assets, while essential service employers face limited scope to reduce direct human attention. National and sectoral institutions should therefore coordinate redistribution. Proposed instruments include progressive taxation of profits and rents, pooled transition funds, public investment in labour-saving support systems and expanded funding for essential services. The precise financing mix must reflect local fiscal capacity and incidence. The principle is that society-wide gains should help fund society-wide freedom from excessive work.

Public assistance should purchase identifiable social outcomes. Firms receiving transition support should accept obligations on earnings, actual hours, employment continuity and contractor treatment, with repayment or other remedies for non-compliance. Funds should support a defined adjustment rather than indefinitely protect unproductive owners. Where private ownership persistently obstructs socially necessary provision, public or cooperative ownership should remain available institutional alternatives. The argument is not that every firm can finance identical reductions internally. It is that differences in private profitability should not permanently determine whose time counts as eligible for liberation.

Income security must also extend across employment transitions. Paid training, redeployment agreements, portable benefits and adequately funded unemployment protection can prevent technological restructuring from forcing workers to accept any conditions offered. Public employment in socially needed activities can provide an additional guarantee where suitable work is not otherwise available. Cash support is valuable, but it does not by itself give those still employed control over workloads or preserve access to meaningful work. A comprehensive settlement therefore joins income institutions to the organisation and democratic governance of production.

7.4 Preventing displacement of burdens

Actual hours must be measured independently of contractual labels. Unpaid messaging, mandatory preparation and work performed at home can undo a nominal reduction. Piece rates and performance targets can similarly convert a shorter schedule into greater exhaustion. Agreements should specify workload standards, paid breaks, staffing requirements and limits on intrusive monitoring, with worker access to enforcement. Digital records may help identify violations but should not become a justification for collecting unnecessary personal information. Confi-

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dential worker reporting and independent inspection remain essential where recorded schedules diverge from lived experience.

Protection must follow production across organisational boundaries. An employer should not claim success by reducing employees' hours while shifting tasks to insecure contractors, outsourced providers or workers abroad under worse conditions. Procurement requirements, joint responsibilities where appropriate, and bargaining arrangements that include dependent contractors can reduce these incentives. International coordination on labour standards and taxation can also limit competition based on evasion. No single national policy eliminates global inequality, but that difficulty strengthens the case for wider solidarity rather than for concentrating the benefits among already protected insiders.

7.5 The political force behind implementation

These institutions require an organised social force capable of imposing and sustaining them. Employers may accept shorter hours where benefits align with their interests, but voluntary acceptance cannot secure a general right, especially where owners gain more from layoffs or intensified work. The necessary coalition includes workers' organisations, representatives of precarious and unemployed people, care advocates and political institutions committed to enforceable reform. Public argument, collective bargaining, democratic mobilisation and credible industrial pressure can change the distribution of decision-making power. Their purpose is to make refusal costly and compliance durable, not merely to persuade sympathetic managers.

State action is equally subject to political conflict. Regulators may lack resources, governments may prioritise investment regardless of working conditions, and representation can exclude those most exposed to insecurity. The programme therefore requires public accountability, transparent allocation of support and meaningful worker influence over enforcement. Shorter hours can themselves enlarge the time available for collective participation, although that feedback is not automatic. The institutional ambition is a lasting shift in authority over production and its proceeds, with room for changes in ownership where necessary, rather than a collection of isolated workplace experiments.

8 Objections and the terms of a credible transition

The first objection invokes the lump-of-labour fallacy: work is not a fixed quantity, and technology may create new tasks and new demand. This is correct as a criticism of a mechanical forecast. Acemoglu and Restrepo (2019) distinguish displacement from the creation of new tasks that can reinstate labour demand. The programme here does not assume a permanently fixed stock of work. It asks how societies should allocate the effort required under changing conditions. New tasks may be valuable, but their existence does not establish an obligation to absorb every productive advance into a permanently undiminished working week.

A second objection concerns investment and competitiveness. If firms cannot retain any benefit from innovation, they may invest less; if a country raises costs while competitors do not,

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production may relocate. These possibilities require financing arrangements, coordinated standards and policies addressing market power and mobile profits. They also require recognising the difference between necessary investment returns and a claim to all gains. The proposal allows investment to be funded and useful production to expand while changing the priority given to workers' time. Its implementation should assess actual costs and relocation pressures rather than equating every reduction in owners' preferred returns with economic collapse.

A third objection is that employment guarantees could lock workers into declining firms. Permanent support for every incumbent enterprise would indeed be a poor interpretation of security. The obligation should be organised around people and social needs: continuity of income, access to paid transitions, and provision of decent work. Public support can move with workers when an activity is no longer useful. This preserves the commitment against technologically induced abandonment without requiring that obsolete products continue to be manufactured or that workers remain in jobs they wish to leave.

A fourth objection concerns preferences and inequality. Some workers would choose more earnings, while others urgently need shorter schedules. A lower normal-hours standard can coexist with meaningful choice within safe limits, provided workers are not forced to sell back all their gains to meet basic needs. Part-time workers should receive equitable improvements in pay or paid time according to transparent rules, and those seeking more hours should retain access to adequate employment. Decisions about implementation need representation across these groups. Otherwise a reform nominally about freedom can reproduce the preferences of the most secure full-time employees.

Finally, a programme this broad cannot be validated by one successful trial. Evaluation must examine actual hours, earnings, employment transitions, intensity, service quality, unpaid care and outsourced labour over time. Comparisons should distinguish AI adoption from the institutional agreement that distributes its effects. Where credible designs are possible, phased implementation can support causal research; administrative records should be combined with worker and household evidence. Evaluation can revise financing, staffing and enforcement when outcomes disappoint. Its role is to improve the means of realising secure free time, while making failures visible, rather than allowing aggregate productivity to stand in for workers' experience.

9 Conclusion

AI makes a familiar contradiction harder to ignore: a society can acquire the capacity to perform necessary activities with less labour while continuing to organise working life around insecurity and exhaustion. Marx remains relevant because he places conflict over the purposes and control of production at the centre of that problem. His contribution to the struggle over working time supports a demanding standard for contemporary development: productivity should expand people's command over their lives.

The argument defended here joins employment security, protected living standards and shorter actual hours. These objectives can be economically compatible, but their joint achieve-

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ment is not an automatic effect of technology. It requires collective authority over restructuring, binding working-time standards, income institutions and redistribution across firms and sectors. It also requires attending to care, work intensity and global inequalities so that some people's leisure is not purchased through others' exhaustion.

The political conclusion is therefore substantial. Workers' access to free time should become an enforceable social claim on productive development. Where private incentives obstruct that claim, institutions must have the power to change the allocation of gains and, when needed, the organisation of ownership itself. The promise of AI should be judged by whether people can remain secure while spending less of their lives under compulsory demands for work. Making that promise real is a project of collective transformation, not a benefit that society can safely wait for capital owners to provide.

Statements and declarations

Data availability. This article develops a theoretical and policy argument using published sources. No original empirical dataset was generated or analysed. Sources are identified in the reference list.

Research ethics. This article does not report research involving human participants or identifiable personal data.

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