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Time is Now to Take Back Your Time

by Ralph Nader

A small conference was held on January 6th in Washington, DC about a big concern for tens of millions of American workers - the loss of free time due to the omnivorous demands of their workplace obligations. The gathering, which met to press for public policies which will give workers a better work/life balance, was organized by John de Graaf and Gretchen Burger. They direct a group called Take Back Your Time ([degrj@kcts.org](mailto:degrj@kcts.org)).

De Graaf has just edited an action book called "Take Back Your Time: Fighting Overwork and Time Poverty in America." Thirty national leaders in this little publicized movement contributed chapters describing the many harmful results to families, health, safety, civic and community life, environment and just plain yearnings for living a higher quality of life.

"Where did the time go?" "I just don't have the time." "When will I ever be able to relax?" How many times have you heard these exclamations or their variations? In this superage of labor-saving technology, pushbutton communications, and all those things that are supposed to save you time, just the opposite is happening to most people - they're desperate for working to live rather than living to work through ever longer congested commutes.

This "Time to Care" conference got down to business with workshops on a series of ways our society can start to tackle what de Graaf calls "time poverty." They've come up with a list of measures that they want to become labor laws, which have been in the statute books for a long time in other western countries.

Their recommendations embarrass our corporate dominated economy when it is compared with the economies of far smaller and less wealthy nations. First up is Paid Family Leave "when workers have a child or other family member" in need.

Currently, there is a federal law that allows up to 12 weeks of unpaid Family Leave. All other industrial nations except Australia presently have a national paid family leave policy for all workers. Not the United States.

Second proposal is Paid Sick Leave. About half of American workers receive no paid sick leave, unlike workers in every other industrial country.

Third proposal is Paid Vacation Time. Every other industrial country mandates at least ten days a year for all workers. No federal or state law in the U.S. requires any paid vacations.

Senator Edward Kennedy (D-MA) is the lead legislator in Congress championing these and other measures by the "Time to Care" movement. Of course a living wage will reduce the pressure to hold one and a half or two jobs to stave off bankruptcy or debt slavery. A living wage allows time for a living family with time for children and community activities.

A few weeks ago, members of Congress once again gave themselves their automatic annual salary increase while sitting on the long frozen federal minimum wage of \$5.15 an hour. Even the CEO of WalMart urges a minimum wage increase. Yet the Democratic Party still resists making this issue a front and center national initiative in Congress.

It is remarkable how modest is the awareness of millions of American workers that companies like WalMart and other giant multinationals have to treat their workers much better in western Europe and Japan than they do for workers in the land of their corporate birth and profitable success. Why? Because that is the law in those countries.

The labor unions need to make these comparisons much more prominent in their publicity and organizing drives.

One hundred and Sixty Three countries offer some form of paid family leave, including paid childbirth or maternity leave. There is no national law in the U.S. to provide for such priorities.

The polls show all kinds of stress, anxiety, pain and mental breakdowns that come from these workplace pressures. Imagine the world's richest country allowing this collision between facing family crises and earning a modest living to avert some other future family crises.

Standing in the way of minimum justice for workers are the big corporate lobbies, their trade associations in Washington, DC and their political slush funds for the politicians. Changes have to begin with the indignation of the millions of deprived workers who have contributed to the doubling of labor productivity since 1969 but are receiving less by way of inflation-adjusted returns.

Start with your Congress for a few minutes a week. That will certainly be time well spent. It's already happening - Visit [www.timeday.org](http://www.timeday.org) for starting a Take Back Your Time committee in your town.