

Why fight for a shorter workweek? One argument is the need to make more jobs available. Shortening the workweek is a way to combat unemployment because it can force employers to hire more people to get their work done.

Unemployment has become more and more of a problem since the late 1960s. Each recession has been worse than the one before it. Between the end of World War II and the early 1970s, the official unemployment rate had never surpassed 6%. But in the 1980-82 depression, the unemployment rate in the U.S. climbed up to nearly 11%.

The unemployment that remains after the economy has "recovered" from economic recession has also become higher and higher: 3.5% in 1969, 5% in 1973, 5.6% in 1979, and 7% in August, 1985.

The official unemployment rate is, however, notorious for understating the real extent of unemployment. It includes only the "active job seekers" tallied by the government. In addition to the 8.1 million listed as jobless as of Aug. 1985, there are hundreds of thousands of additional unemployed or under-employed people not included in calculating the unemployment rate.

For example, the government head-counters define part-time workers as either "voluntary" or "involuntary." "Involuntary" refers to somebody who needs a full-time job but who has taken a part-time job as a temporary stop-gap. Since they're still looking for work, they are, in truth, still unemployed. Of the 18 million part-time workers in the U.S., one-third are officially listed as "involuntary." Yet involuntary part-timers aren't

counted in the calculation of the official unemployment rate.

★ Automation — Who will benefit from it?

Robot welding in auto plants, computerized typesetting in publishing, computer-controlled cranes in steel mills, "long-wall" techniques in coal mining, and many other forms of automation have been eliminating jobs by the thousands. Automation has lately been moving into office work, which has been a main area of new employment in the years since World War II. Siemens, the large German electronics firm, estimates that 40% of all office jobs could be eliminated by automation. The banks hope to "disappear" 13% of all teller jobs through the use of Automatic Teller Machines.

The irony is that the machines that eliminate people from the payrolls are built by workers and paid for with profits created by our labor. So, why shouldn't workers benefit from labor-saving technology by allowing everybody to work fewer hours?

If it didn't mean eliminating workers, eliminating work isn't such a bad idea in itself. It would be a fine thing if it meant that we could all get our share of what the workforce produces without having to do as much work as we do. This is the promise hinted at by those beguiling words, "labor-saving technology." The fly in the soup shows up, however, when we consider that, under the present economic system, "labor-saving" means that employers profit by cutting people from the payrolls.

The alternative would be to cut everybody's worktime without trimming the payrolls. But that won't happen unless workers fight for it.

★ Unemployment hurts all of us

Even for people who have jobs, rising unemployment has its effect. When more people are pounding the pavement in search of work, employers may find it easier to turn their backs on employee demands. And people may find themselves forced into jobs less to their liking. On the other hand, a more plentiful supply of job openings makes it more difficult for employers to ignore their employees' concerns. Fellow workers are more willing to resist the bosses and stand up for each other in countless on-the-job conflicts.

When employees are cut from payrolls, the hardship for the jobless affects society in a variety of ways. Studies have shown that increases in the number of unemployed are correlated with increases in murder, suicides, family violence, and burglaries. A study by the Joint Economic Committee of Congress in the late 1970s claimed that each one-percentage-point rise in the official unemployment rate cost the government \$5 billion in food stamps, unemployment insurance outlays and other social expenditures. In other words, the unemployed are still consuming a part of the social product but they are not helping to produce it. It would make more sense to reduce everyone's hours of work by incorporating the unemployed into the workforce.

Even though unemployment

doesn't make sense for society as a whole, it continues to grow. It does so because each separate business profits when it can get the same sales revenue while employing fewer people. That's why the present economic system, based on control of economic facilities and revenues by bosses and owners, tends to generate increasing unemployment. Despite economic "recoveries" and the "full employment" promises of politicians.

★ How many new jobs would be created?

How many jobs would be generated by a shorter workweek? In 1978 the United Electrical Workers Union estimated that a 35-hour workweek in the U.S. would generate 7.9 million new jobs. On the other hand, if the workweek were cut to a four-day, 32-hour week, the UE estimated that this would require 13.8 million new positions. And a ten-hour cut in the workweek to 30 hours would create 18.3 million new jobs.

There are skeptics for every proposal, however, and the shorter workweek idea is no exception. One sort of skeptical argument goes like this:

If the system always tends to create more unemployment, your shorter workweek movement won't be a solution. As soon as this shorter workweek is imposed on the employers, you can bet that the bosses will be pressing for more work per person. Between speed-up and automation, a shorter workweek doesn't mean the lost hours will be necessarily made up by new hires.

There is some truth to this objec-