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PRESS RELEASE

Working time and forms of employment in Belgium

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This article discusses developments over the past two decades in regard to working time and alternative forms of employment, placing the trends seen in Belgium in an international perspective. It also examines whether the Belgian regulations on this subject are stricter than those in the other EU 15 countries.

For the Belgian working population, the usual working time averaged 37 hours per week in 2004, whereas in 1983 it was a little over 40 hours. The average working time is significantly longer for self-employed persons than for employees. Looking only at this last group, for which working time plays a key role in the debate on competitiveness, Belgian employees worked an average of around 35 hours per week. This puts the Belgian working time slightly below the EU 15 average. There are wide variations within the EU 15. In general terms, working time is significantly longer for men and in industry, which means that the average working time ascertained for the various countries is influenced by the employment structure. After adjustment for that factor, the differences are considerably smaller, and working time in Belgium is roughly equal to the EU 15 average.

The decline in average working time and the increased dispersion which have emerged over the years are inevitably connected with the growing use of part-time working and other alternative forms of employment such as temporary work, employment for non-standard hours, overtime working, variable working hours and home working. This means that the predominance of the typical full-time employee on a permanent contract, working from Monday to Friday, 9 to 5, is constantly diminishing.

In many cases, the growing use of alternative forms of employment satisfies a genuine preference on the part of the persons concerned. For example, many women seek a better balance between work and family life, so that they opt for part-time work or a career break. Also, older workers want to work less towards the end of their career. Temporary contracts are a useful form of work experience for young people and, like part-time work, offer them the chance to combine studying with a job. However, since these forms of employment are more common among risk groups such as women, older workers, the young and the low-skilled, there is a danger of segmentation of the labour market.

On the demand side of the labour market, the alternative forms of employment give employers a range of instruments which are conducive to a flexible production process. For instance, temporary contracts (including working for temporary work agencies) and overtime are used as a buffer to meet fluctuations in demand. As regards working non-standard hours, Belgium is seeing an increase in forms which are commonplace in the service sector (evening and weekend working). Night work is steady, whereas shift work is on the decline. This last development is connected with the structural decline in employment in industry.

The Belgian labour regulations are stricter than the EU 15 average in regard to the maximum permitted working time and night work. In comparison with the other OECD countries, they are stricter on the type of work for which agency employees may be used, and on the cumulative maximum duration of successive temporary contracts. If flexibility is expressed in terms of more/less frequent occurrence of alternative forms of employment, then Belgium displays greater flexibility than the EU 15 average in terms of part-time work, unpaid overtime and home working. All other flexible forms of employment (primarily shift work, variable working times, temporary forms of employment and Saturday work) are less common.