

Introduction

Hiromasa Suzuki
Waseda University

The Theme and Its Background

2009 JILPT International Seminar on Working Time was held in Tokyo, January 21st –23rd (Preliminary Meeting on 21st, Closed Workshop on 22nd, and Open Forum for the public on 23rd), 2009, with participants from the U.S., the U.K., Germany, France, Sweden, and Japan. Under the theme of “In Search of New Research Territories beyond Flexibility Debates” the seminar was designed to explore the current situation of Working Time with special emphasis on its expansion into new areas. As coordinator of the seminar, I sent the following memo to the participants to explain the theme and its background.

The JILPT (Japan Institute for Labour Policy and Training which is a research institute attached to the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare) is planning an international workshop on working time to be held in Tokyo, on 21st – 23rd of January, 2009. The main purpose of the workshop is to take stock of recent developments in the field of working time in selected industrialized countries (France, Germany, Sweden, USA, UK and Japan) and to stimulate research activities in Japan. Invited participants are expected to present recent developments in their own country concerning working time issues (current situation, researches and debates) and discuss these with Japanese participants (mostly academics). We are hoping that the discussions and exchange of views during the workshop will give an effective message to Japanese participants to revitalize research activities and public debates on working time issues.

In Japan, as in many other industrialized countries, public concern and research activities on working time issues have waned a great deal since the 1990s. This is in stark contrast to previous decades when reduction of working time was hotly debated, which led to a major amendment to the Labour Standards Law in 1987 that stipulated 40 hours a week as the legal limit. The deterioration of economic conditions after the burst of the bubble and long series of recessions explain the shift of focus in public debates; discourse on the flexibility in working time and labour markets got the upper hand on that of improvement of working conditions. Employers' circles were vocal in demanding flexibility on the ground that jobs today were mostly individualized, which made collective regulation of working time out of date.

Along with this change of focus in the broad picture, two other related issues have attracted public attention in recent years. Firstly, growth of atypical employment, especially part-time work, has become the subject of debate and research. The issue of part-time work in Japan has been approached from different angles ranging from gender inequality to work-life balance.

Secondly, long and excessive working time has become a major concern. Regular employees of certain age groups work very long hours (one out of five employees aged 30-40 years old work on average more than 60 hours a week). This is probably due to the fact that most Japanese firms restricted recruitment of new graduates during the 1990s, so that young

employees with responsibilities tend to be over-worked. The question of excessive long hours is analyzed from various points of views such as health of workers, work-life balance, and human resource management.

Since working time issues are at the intersection of employment status and family life, they relate necessarily to other important social issues, for instance: conditions of work, industrial relations, gender gaps, work-life balance, health, social norms, international standards, etc. It is with such a state of debate and concerns in mind that we are hoping to take stock of national experiences, so as to find new avenues for research activities and revive debates on working time in Japan.

Concluding Remarks

The national papers presented at the Workshop on the 22nd are contained in the following pages. These papers are of excellent quality written by well-known researchers, and are all very informative. Readers will find it interesting to see various developments of working time issues in each country.

Before bringing the readers to the national papers, I would like to make four short points regarding working time issues on the basis of the discussions during the Workshop.

Firstly, the situation of working time varies widely among the six countries represented: working time generally is lengthy in US, Japan and, to a lesser degree, in UK, while it is relatively short in France, Sweden and Germany. Beyond this diversity, the keyword of the discussion was the flexibility of working time. In the countries where working time is long, flexibility results from employer's choice. In the three continental European countries, worker's preference tends to lead to individual flexibility of working time. It is important to clarify for whom flexibility is adopted, i.e. employer's choice or worker's choice.

Secondly, a policy of reduction of working time is often delicate and difficult to implement in practice, different social groups (managers, low-paid workers, women) having conflicting advantages (and disadvantages) to shorter hours of work.

Thirdly, national experiences show that the issue of working time is closely related with other major social and economic factors. This implies that each country should develop its own policy for working time, taking into consideration the national context (industrial relations, welfare policies or demographic factors) and business cycles.

Finally, the impact of the current global economic crisis was also discussed: Participants were of the opinion that a clear conceptual separation should be made between emergency measures (temporary worksharing schemes) and longer term policies designed for better work-life balance.

I believe this book provides invaluable information for those interested in working time issues.