

Developing Positive Flexibility for Employees: the British trade union approach*

Jo Morris¹

Introduction

This paper examines how trade unions in the UK are developing new worker-friendly definitions of flexibility in response to far-reaching labour market and social changes. The synchronisation of employer and employee time needs in the workplace lies at the heart of positive workplace flexibility, contributing to sustainable work-life balance policies for employees as well as a high performance workplace. This approach, supplementing traditional trade union working time policies emphasising a reduction in the length of the working day/week (the 35 hour week) and employee entitlement to paid carers' leave, has developed in the context of social and economic circumstances, European Union policy and leadership by trade unions to win benefits for workers in a changing labour market.

I will argue that a consequence of economic, labour market and social pressures, as well as a strong European Union agenda, has been innovative working time arrangements which benefit employee and employer. Unions have signed up for the high performance workplace and have used the European model of social partnership to adapt working arrangements to the needs of a feminised workforce. Examples of mutual work arrangements will show that both families and those without caring responsibilities benefit from a work-life balance approach. I will then look at examples of institutional instruments for developing new ways of organising working time.

European and national policy challenges

All EU member states face policy challenges generated by long-term structural changes prompted by demographic, societal and economic developments.² The EU has focussed on the implications of the changing nature of employment, work organisation and working conditions, and of the modernisation of social protection. It is assumed by the European Commission (EC) that the linear career concept of the 20th century (education, work, retirement) will increasingly be replaced by the 'norm of the varied working life' (European Commission 1997).³ The Commission's *White Paper on Growth, Competitiveness and Employment*, published in 1993, set a benchmark at European policy level that influenced the wording of social partner Directives on parental leave and atypical work. These Directives were positioned as instruments to create a flexible and competitive European economy at the same time as ensuring employee security and facilitating the reconciliation of professional and family life.

The European Employment Guidelines stress that competitiveness increasingly requires companies to be more flexible. Modernising work organisation is a core task for companies if they are to survive growing international competition. New working-time patterns are seen as

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¹ Senior Equalities Officer, Trade Unions Congress, Congress House, Great Russell St, London WC1B 3LS, UK e-mail: jmorris@tuc.org.uk

² These trends are well documented and will be covered in separate papers and do not need to be rehearsed in any detail here.

³ Quoted in *A new Organisation of time over working life: European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions; 2003*, upon which much of this section is drawn

necessary to meet the new demands of technological change as well as social change. Employee motivation is a core component of productivity in modern methods of work organisation and there needs to be reconciliation between the needs of the company with the expectations of the employees, who want to manage their working hours in a flexible manner. In addition the European Employment Guidelines underline the need to promote employability and participation in life long learning in order to create a 'competitive and dynamic knowledge-based society' (Stockholm European Council, March 2001). As implied in its name, life long learning makes demands on the organisation of work. The European Foundation, a tripartite EU body whose role is to 'provide key actors in social policy- making with findings, knowledge and advice drawn from comparative research' has argued for a number of years that if Europe is to meet the challenge of these changes 'a new compromise is needed between enterprises, employees, employers' organisations, trade unions and the State'.⁴

Implementing EU social policy at national level: the challenge of flexibility and work-life balance for a diverse labour market

The impact of societal change compound the pressures of work intensification, a long hours work culture, and the unpredictability of changing shift patterns or 'non-standard' hours working (non-standard are in fact becoming increasingly standard in the UK). The feminisation of the UK labour market – women now make up more than half the workforce – has resulted in a variety of atypical work contracts and arrangements as women adopt strategies to deal with the dual demands of parenting and work. An aging population, together with the move away from state welfare, places an increased care burden on families, particularly women. The rise in younger women who are working in turn creates new pressures for grandparents, many working themselves, who are relied upon to perform regular or emergency child care duties. While the impact on women of the double burden of work and caring is well documented, men's increasing role in family arrangements are less likely to be recognised in workplace arrangements and entitlements. Older workers, whose good final salary pensions are being withdrawn, are working until they are older to make up pension funds and/or keep mentally active. The pressure and intensification of family life, particularly in dual-earner or single parent families, means that there is less time for all non-work activities - from going to the dry cleaners, to sports playing or coaching. Time poor families are unable to play established roles in civil society, such as becoming a school governor, a local councillor or running youth groups. In the UK a decline in the number of volunteers is, anecdotally at least, likely to be the result of a loss of 'time sovereignty' for many people. In particular employees need to be able to predict their working hours and make plans accordingly.

Employability and successful participation in life long learning initiatives for employees require a degree of worker flexibility and autonomy over working time, particularly for those groups of workers most under stress and least able to participate in learning outside the work environment. Additional pressures on working lives such as traffic congestion and public transport overcrowding for commuters, can also be pressure points for change in working patterns in order to reduce stress and travel to work time. Avoiding the rush hour has become an important reason for many people to change their working hours – and may be a critical issue for those with disabilities using public transport.

Demand for working conditions which balance work and personal lives are no longer restricted to parents and carers. The intensification of work, the long hours culture and the move of jobs from manufacturing to a customer-facing service sector makes demands that affect male and female,

⁴ *ibid*

carers and non-carers, young and old employees. British workers work the longest hours in Europe. Male employees, especially fathers, managers and professionals and employees with supervisory responsibilities worked the longest hours.⁵ A Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development report found 30 per cent of respondents felt there was an element of compulsion in their working in excess of the EU limit of 48 hours per week, the limit at which the 'voluntary' opt-out clause of the Working Time Directive takes effect. This is an increase from 11 per cent in 1998. One in ten of the workers putting in 48 hours a week or more had suffered some form of physical problem as a result of working long hours.⁶ UK workers will put in more than £23 billion of unpaid overtime in 2004 – the TUC calculates that around five million people work an average of seven hours and 24 minutes without pay every week – worth an average of £4,500 per year for each worker⁷.

Quality of working life has overtaken pay as the prime workplace concern for many employees. According to a survey by IT company Parity, nine out of ten professionals would forfeit up to 40 per cent of their salary, (£13,253 a year based on 40% of average gross annual pay in London, ONS 2003) for a better work-life balance. 78 per cent of the working population would remain in their job because of flexible working opportunities.⁸ A survey of 69 public and private sector organisations found that more than half of the companies surveyed reported improved staff retention was one of the top three main objectives for introducing flexible working.⁹

Work-life balance and positive flexibility has become increasingly important for unions, especially in the service and public service sectors. Diversity of time-need in the workforce, as well as changing needs over an employee's working life, mean that it is no longer sustainable for unions only to pursue family-friendly policies which meet the needs of one section of the workforce, albeit an important group who require special consideration. Employee-centred family leave entitlements or flexible working policies may have an unpredictable impact on business need or work colleagues. For example in its *OurTime* project the Inland Revenue, which employs high proportions of women, found that its flextime scheme and part-time working policies had to be managed to ensure that full-time staff were not taking disproportionate responsibility for customer enquiries on Mondays and Fridays – the busiest days for the service and the most popular non-working days for part-time workers and those taking flextime leave. The solution to this problem was better management of time on a team basis in order that both equal opportunities and equity between team members could be delivered. A mutual benefit model of work-life balance, which should include decent entitlement to carers' and other leave, recognises that if non-carers have access to flexible hours there is likely to be a wider range of working time preferences and that business objectives can benefit as well as employees. Through work-life balance projects unions have attracted new activists, typically women who were uninterested in union meetings and 'politics' but for whom organising work differently 'made sense'.¹⁰

The challenge of translating macro policy to micro action

⁵ Second Work-Life Balance Study: results from employees' survey; DTI Employment Relations Research series No 27 2004

⁶ Calling time on working time? CIPD 2004, quoted in TUC Changing Times News

⁷ TUC Its About Time campaign

⁸ Parity press release 31 March 2004 quoted in TUC Changing Times News No

⁹ Industrial Relations Services Employment Review 797

¹⁰ Following the Bristol *Time of Our Lives* project a union member became active in her male dominated union and later was elected chair of the union branch. The *OurTime* project spurred one 21 year old to become a union learning rep working with the project and later became the youngest TUC Organising Academy trainee. She had had very little previous experience of unions. Two other local union members active in *OurTime* went on to work with unions at a national level.

As European social partners, employers' organisations and trade unions are charged with the task of translating broad EU policies into practical action in their respective member states. In the UK the legacy of twenty years of a conservative government under Thatcher and her successors meant that unions, particularly at workplace level, faced a considerable challenge in interpreting flexibility as a positive concept. Unlike most European countries where social partnership was well established, there was relatively little direct experience of employers and unions working in partnership in the UK. And the word flexibility itself had come to symbolise the worst employer excesses during the Thatcher years: a deregulated, casualised, low paid and low status workforce. In 1997 many trade unionists were deeply sceptical at best, and often hostile, to the concept of partnership. However, issues of workplace time organisation, to which all employees – manual worker to manager - relate, became practical first rung partnership exercises which resulted in an unanticipated enthusiasm for, as union and management participants in the Inland Revenue *OurTime* project put it 'a completely new way of working'¹¹.

Macro European and national policy, as well as participation in the social partner dialogue process, has encouraged unions and employers to build on the foundations of equality legislation and workplace equal opportunities policies to develop sustainable models of positive flexibility and work-life balance. The model often enables new approaches to be taken, finding new solutions to old problems. The hallmark of success is creative thinking 'outside the box', within a framework of established employee rights and entitlements. A brief historical review of two large innovative projects show how unions at local level have developed initiatives which demonstrate the benefits of a new perspective.

***Time of Our Lives* project: reclaiming flexibility for workers**

In 1996, before the new Labour government came to power, the TUC and the Dutch confederation the FNV set up a joint EU funded project to examine what positive flexibility might look like. To some extent the idea for the project had been inspired by the Italian *Il Tempa della Citta: Time in the City* projects. As a result of pressure from women a number of medium sized Italian cities had joined an initiative to examine the organisation of time in their municipalities. Working time and its relationship to urban living patterns and working hours through the creation of a body, on which trade unions and employers' associations were represented, to consult, commission pilot projects and coordinate a programme designed to change opening hours and provide new services. Modena in central Italy was an early example. The population of the city swelled from 175,000 to 500,000 during the day as people come to work in the mainly small and medium sized manufacturing companies in the city. There was serious transport congestion and delays, typical of many older Italian cities, which exacerbated problems with the limited opening hours of municipal and government departments, shops, businesses and voluntary bodies not meeting the needs of users, particularly working women. In Modena, as elsewhere, working hours were re-organised and transport timetables matched with workers', school and service users' needs. Local authorities were given new powers to co-ordinate the 'times of the city' and day centres for elderly people and nurseries tried to match the opening hours or shift patterns of local businesses. In Modena there were benefits for the quality of public services, employees' work-life balance and a significant environmental impact, especially on city-centre traffic.¹²

¹¹ See 'OurTime' Inland Revenue work-life balance resource pack; Public and Commercial Services Union, London.

¹² Quoted in *Changing Times: a TUC guide to work-life balance*; TUC 2001. For a detailed review of *Il Tempa della Citta: Time in the City* projects see *Italian City Time: a review* TUC publications

To the TUC and FNV this inclusive approach by stakeholders to deliver a better quality of life was attractive and prompted thought about how there could be better organisation of working time in the UK and Netherlands, both of whom have a high incidence of female part-time working. The FNV had already adopted a policy, in contrast to many European unions, to promote high quality part-time work and encourage men to work part-time in order to address the inequitable division of domestic labour which led to many women working part-time. In the UK it was impossible for many unions to imagine flexibility as a positive in the context of a deregulated labour market where rights at work had been systematically reduced. But at the same time the TUC was part of the European negotiating teams for the new EU social partner Directives, which committed employers and unions to contribute to establishing 'flexibility with security' to promote a competitive economy, as well as assist work-life balance. How could these be implemented in the UK at a time when trade unions were defensive and bruised by prolonged Government hostility? The joint project aimed to explore options and it was agreed that in the second stage both the TUC and FNV would run employer-union pilots to see what positive flexibility might look like in practice. A fortuitous change of government in 1997 – Labour's landmark victory - made the Bristol City Council pilot in the UK all the more pertinent.

Bristol City Council *Time of Our Lives*

The TUC worked with the Employers' Organisation for Local Government (then named the Local Government Training Board) as national partners in a pilot project at Bristol City Council – a medium sized Labour controlled city in the west of England. The EOLG was concerned with the mismatch between employee-centred flexibility (in particular flextime) and service needs.

It was agreed that the Council and unions would:

- explore the potential for innovative working patterns that would improve both the quality of Council services and employees' ability to balance their paid work with the rest of their lives.
- develop models of partnership between trade unions and employers to enable them jointly to identify better ways to organise work and time
- develop a positive model of flexibility which was win-win for employees, employers and customers
- share experiences of different ways of reconciling work, personal responsibilities and aspirations and access to council services
- widely disseminate lessons learnt.

The Bristol pilot set out to test ways in which to enable staff to choose work patterns that suited their preferred balance between work and personal life. Staff would be asked, through a survey and focus groups to devise working patterns that would improve service provision/delivery. Through information gained from the staff survey a number of work areas were chosen to test out new forms of work organization. The work groups included male dominated jobs, such as the refuse service and the strongly female library service. Key to success was the commitment from the start of the Council's political leadership and management to solutions which reflected the views of staff and trade unions. The survey was sent to 700 staff with a response rate of just under 28 per cent. It showed that nearly 80 per cent of the respondents liked flextime and that more than half wanted a longer bandwidth to incorporate earlier morning and later evening hours. Three in ten respondents were interested in working full-time hours (35/ 37 hours a week) over 4 or 4.5 day weeks or nine day fortnights. Twenty percent expressed interest in job share, annualized

hours and term-time only working. There was a higher interest amongst women about different ways of agreeing rotas. Staff were asked why they wanted to work flexible hours. Just under a half said they wanted an increase in their leisure time, more than 40 per cent of respondents said a different arrangement would enable them to tailor work time to work demands. Over 30 per cent wanted to work flexibly to give them an opportunity to study.

Three findings from the survey are particularly interesting:

- a higher proportion of women (35%) than men (25%) wanted opportunities for education and training
- men (34%) were more likely than women (26%) to say they wanted more family time
- the most common reason for wanting change was the desire to work more effectively in an 'uninterrupted, focused' way

Focus groups of staff showed that staff were initially cautious of new ways of working, but after discussion both men and women were interested in trying out different work patterns¹³. Focus groups played an important role in helping staff to think 'outside the box' and come up with solutions.

UNISON, the public services trade union, suggested a pilot flexible working project in the Library Service, where staff were demoralised because of recent cuts to the staffing budget. A city council customer survey had indicated a demand for Sunday opening but staff felt it would be a further incursion on their time. The local branch secretary of the librarian's section of UNISON, saw the potential of the proposed national pilot in Bristol to deal with work-life balance issues and extended opening hours. Not least, she understood that threatened cuts in the libraries' budgets could best be resisted – and jobs saved – by maximising library use. She proved key to persuading the membership that there was mileage in the proposed project.

Staff were surveyed to see who would like to work on a Sunday. It was made clear that participation would be voluntary, that no-one would be compelled to continue to work on a Sunday if they volunteered, and that individuals would benefit, through the usual additional Sunday payments. Additional staff were recruited to work on Sundays alongside volunteers from existing staff, many of whom were part-time workers who wanted to increase their hours. Part-time staff with children were attracted because additional childcare costs could often be avoided on Sundays. The popularity of voluntary Sunday working to part-time staff was a surprise to management and union, and was only identified as a result of the staff survey.

A further staff initiative was the introduction, at the suggestion of the union, of self-rostering, where staff organized shifts on a team basis. Self-managed shifts resolved a longstanding problem for librarians who were expected to move between branch libraries but who did not know which particular library they were working in more than a few weeks in advance. Severe traffic congestion at the start and end of the day meant that there were great variations in travel to work times, affecting childcare arrangements. Sunday opening has resulted in a marked increase in library use – not only in quantity but in attracting different library users, especially families who came to use the computing facilities and children's library on Sunday. The project evaluation

¹³ For a detailed description of the Bristol Time of Our Lives project see *The Time of Our Lives in Bristol: developing positive flexibility for employees and services*. TUC and Employers' Organisation (available from TUC publications).

showed that Sunday issue figures increased rapidly and that regularly outperformed mid-week averages.¹⁴

Similar projects were carried out in Health and Environmental Services. Though a number of male work groups, such as pest control were initially reluctant to move from their 8 am – 4.30 pm day, following the success of flexible working in other parts of the Council the men asked to test out flexible hours as a way to avoid the chronic rush hour traffic congestion in Bristol. The result was that the service was open for longer periods each day, with staff agreeing their hours on a team basis.

Following the success of Bristol a number of other major projects in the public sector followed, especially in local government – the two below illustrate approaches in a government department and the National Health Service.

Our Time- a partnership work-life balance project in the Inland Revenue

The 2000 Modernisation Agreement committed the Public and Commercial Services union and the Inland Revenue (the UK tax services) to finding ways of working together to deliver better public services whilst safeguarding jobs. The Inland Revenue wanted to extend the opening hours of the enquiry centre so that each Area had one evening (up to 8 pm) and a Saturday morning enquiry service for customers. The customer base of the Inland Revenue was changing, with more people needing face to face advice about tax credits and self-employed tax. The working time culture in the Inland Revenue was largely 8 am – 4 pm, with 85 per cent of staff leaving at 4 pm under the terms of their flextime agreement. Any change in working arrangements was resisted by staff in the local offices but the national union understood that if new opening hours were not implemented there could be job losses – either through moving the work to call centres situated in areas of the country where regional pay was lower, by a greater reliance on electronic forms of communicating with customers or by outsourcing the enquiry work. A key role for the national union was to persuade local members that they could benefit from changed working time arrangements, despite the fact that the new opening hours needed to be implemented on a no-cost basis ie without premium rates.

The *OurTime* project¹⁵ was first proposed by the union and aimed to:

- look at how working time arrangements could be developed to maximize work-life balance over the duration of an individual's working life
- extend accessibility and improve the quality of service provided
- develop partnership working and identify how this could practically be applied
- provide opportunities to up-skill staff and deliver life-long learning through the workplace
- spread use of the expensive technology in Inland Revenue offices, insufficient for the peak core flexi hours

These aims were agreed at a joint project planning meeting, where managers and union reps contributed on an equal basis. This planning stage began a long process of union and management, used to working in an adversarial setting, arriving at a shared understanding of problems and producing joint solutions. The project team established what staff wanted through a survey and focus groups examined ways to match staff and business need. Individual comments in the survey showed how business and staff need could be compatible:

¹⁴ Peter Cressey: Evaluation of the Bristol City Council Working Time Flexibility project; University of Bath 2001

¹⁵ *OurTime* project resource pack PCS 2002

- one woman wanted to take three hours to give her frail mother lunch, returning later in the day
- a male staff member wanted to take longer holidays in the winter by accruing hours in the time bank which would not put pressure on colleagues with children who were likely to take holiday in the summer months.

One of the difficulties of carrying out surveys of staff on topics such as working time is that respondents can be guarded in their answers. Focus groups and face-to-face dialogue helped the project team understand how flexible people were prepared to be and on what terms.¹⁶ Employees were most receptive, and often enthusiastic, when they had practical examples of new work patterns and what the gain would be for them. For example the opportunity to work evenings or Saturday morning and bank the time over a longer period than flextime was popular and enabled staff to 'save up' for traveling abroad or sabbaticals. No-core flextime was also popular, as was the proposal to include a workplace learning centre in the project.

Convincing both managers and union reps of the potential mutual benefits of new working patterns was necessary if they were to become change agents. In time managers and union reps on the steering group became important ambassadors for the project. Three pilots tested out the central aim of the Our Time project – to match business need with improved work-life balance for staff. The Enquiry Centre and Telephone teams tested the scope for extended opening using staff volunteers. The third pilot in the Risk, Intelligence and Analysis team tested the mutual benefit of increased flexibility for staff where there was no external customer interface. An important factor in the success of each of the pilots was the willingness and ability of line managers to manage a team flexibly. Initially there was a strong perception by managers that flexible working would curtail their ability to manage and deliver the required business targets. By the end of the project that perception had changed and previously reluctant managers said that flexible working and a team approach to managing time had helped them. Managers had been assisted by training courses designed in consultation with the joint steering group.

Extended opening became more popular with staff as they saw how colleagues who volunteered were using the system to their own advantage. People began to think differently about how their own personal time might be organized. A number of men, including line managers, opted to work a compressed week over 4 days – the most usual reasons were to look after children one day a week (and often save a significant amount on childcare costs for pre-school children) or participate in sporting activities. Individual arrangements were tailored to need – for instance one member of staff returned to university and an agreement was reached that he would come back to work for the Inland Revenue during the vacations – the time when most staff wanted to take holiday leave. Another, whose wife was on dialysis, did not have to reduce his hours in the period immediately before his retirement (and therefore affecting his pension) because he provided remote technical back up for the extended opening hours.

Extended opening in the Enquiry Centre (IREC) was most difficult to manage because the centre was small and initial demand did not justify more than two staff members – this raised health and safety concerns. There was also an issue of staff leaving premises at 8 pm, especially on dark winter nights. Technical support needed to be available for extended openings, which was provided remotely. There needed to be active management in the early stages of the volunteer rota to ensure that there were sufficient volunteers, (who came from all sections of the Service and could work in any of the three area sites) – this changed over time as the option to work an

¹⁶ OurTime evaluation in resource pack PCS 2002

evening or Saturday morning in lieu of another time in the week became more popular. Some staff used the volunteer rotas to bank holiday for later use, others to widen their knowledge base and improve career development opportunities and some staff, who had had to move to work in another town as a result of reorganization were able to work all day in the Brighton office if they were working there for an extended evening. Others received car parking places (at a premium as the office was very near the shopping centre) for Saturday mornings, after which they could go shopping. Customer attendance at the IRECs during extended opening steadily increased during the pilot, with both Thursday evenings and Saturday mornings proving popular – the highest number of callers on a Thursday evening was 75 in the week before the deadline for Self Assessment returns. Saturday opening was less well attended for enquiries but five workshops aimed at newly registered self-employed customers were run on Saturdays. Attendance at these workshops was often better than those run on a weekday and was run by staff who volunteered, career development being a main reason.

Life long learning

A significant achievement of the *OurTime* project was the linkage of lifelong learning with the work-life balance project. Following a local learning needs analysis new union learning reps were able to set up learning access points with computers provided by the union and the employer in each of the three offices in the pilot area. PCS Learning Services in London provided free remote access to Learn Direct courses to all staff (including non union members). This was the first time the union had brought its excellent learning services into a Government department as a partnership project, providing a model for other parts of the civil service. Staff combined flexible working options with an opportunity to develop their own learning needs – from computer skills to learning a new language. Staff chose courses for their personal development, complementing the Inland Revenue work-based skills learning. The computers could be used in conjunction with flextime for any non-vocational course and, with the manager's agreement, staff could use them to improve vocational skills (eg IT skills) during working hours. Union learning reps were enthusiastic in promoting the service with the result that 85 people registered with Learn Direct in the pilot offices, approximately 2 out of ten staff. The union produced a new guide to bringing learning into the workplace¹⁷.

The *OurTime* project was set up as a pilot to help the wider Inland Revenue and other government departments to develop creative solutions to time organization. It showed that despite a major reorganization and prolonged industrial action, it was possible to maintain an initiative which included staff as partners. New ways to deliver the service were established which met employee and business need. There was a genuine commitment and enthusiasm from individuals from both sides who built a new trust, surviving the pay dispute. At local level extended service was managed on the basis of staff volunteers; new links with the community were established; and life long learning was successfully promoted. Several involved in the project developed their careers significantly as a result of their involvement in the project.

Changing Times in Health Services

A London Primary Care Trust (PCT) is currently a pilot for the development of partnership working to create and achieve work-life balance for staff. The Improving Working Lives Practice Assessment has already given a high rating to the Trust's practices on work-life balance. Although the Trust has a very positive attitude to work-life balance and flexible working hours, they tend to be rather ad hoc and there are concerns about the management of flexible working.

¹⁷ Bringing Learning into the Workplace PCS/TUC 2001; available from TUC publications

The aims of the project are to:

- Explore different options for working time in order to contribute to improving working lives and work-life balance for staff and improve service delivery for consumers.
- Draw up a coherent policy on work-life balance.
- Embed and implement work-life balance across the PCT through partnership working.
- Enable more effective service delivery by improving access to services

The learning from the project will be used to support work-life balance initiatives in other Trusts across the UK. A *Changing Times in Health Services Resource Kit* will also be developed from the work that is carried out in the PCT. This will provide guidance and practical examples to assist with the development of work-life balance initiatives.

Four pilots have been set up and staff consulted on options. District nurses will test a compressed working week - 12 hour shifts to cover evening home visits and a gap of cover between 6 and 7 pm. Health Visitors will run an evening and Saturday morning clinic for working mothers. Homeless health teams are looking at establishing a mechanism to manage and coordinate existing flexible working patterns more effectively. A General Practice (GPs, practice nurses, admin and reception staff) are establishing a time bank. The projects are at an early stage but has generated enthusiasm from staff and has revitalised the union role in the Trust.

The project is being supported by the NHS Improving Working Lives¹⁸ programme through the NHS Strategic Health Authority.

In the public sector the threat of job cuts has sometimes resulted in creative new organisation of work, delivering unanticipated benefits for employees where the changes were negotiated with the union. For example grounds staff at Redditch Council worked long hours in the summer on overtime rates and additional contractors were brought in to work in the busy period. But there was relatively little work in the winter months for the employed ground staff. Budget cuts were predicted and the Council was preparing to put the ground maintenance contract out to tender. The Council suggestion that annualised hours for the gardeners could keep the contract in-house was initially rejected by the UNISON union membership. Long and detailed joint working between union and management provided a mutually acceptable solution. The men, mostly in their twenties and early thirties, worked a four day week in winter with no loss of earnings and longer hours in the summer but with virtually no outside contractors to assist. Savings from the contractors' budget was used to create more jobs and overtime and allowances were consolidated to ensure no loss of earnings over the 52 week year. The union involvement in working out the details of the scheme enabled it to be successfully sold to members. The pragmatic solution to threatened budget cuts resulted in unanticipated benefits for fathers, showing the effectiveness of new forms of negotiated work organisation in promoting improved work-life balance. The UNISON branch secretary Mark Piscapore-Carruanna said that:

'the men were up in arms at the start. But being honest, if you tried to take it off them now they'd commit murder. Most have got small children and enjoy having time off over the Christmas holiday to spend with their family'.¹⁹

Developing Creative Approaches in the Public Sector

¹⁸ See NHS Improving Working Lives: National Audit Instrument www.doh.gov.uk/iwl

¹⁹ TUC Changing Times: op cit

The modernisation of public services, including extended opening, was high on the agenda of the new Labour government. Unions agreed to confront the inherent tension between the needs of customers and employees (many of whom were customers when not at work) through finding creative ways to maximise employee choice whilst improving service. Achieving change rested on the recognition that the organisation of working time could give more choice to a diverse workforce with varying working time preferences. On occasions national union policies conflicted with local working time culture. Initiatives in Bristol City Council and the Inland Revenue showed, not surprisingly, that unions at national level had a longer term perspective on the implications of resisting change than union activists. National and local union representatives were important change agents, interpreting the implications of social and economic circumstances to their members, steering through new approaches to bring new work-life benefits to employees. At Bristol and in the *OurTime* project, local unions moved from scepticism or hostility to proactive problem solving, demonstrating commitment to delivering high quality public services whilst giving members more choice and control over working arrangements.

Work-life balance and Time Organisation in the Private Sector

There are many examples of changed working times and greater flexibility in the private sector. Arguably, however, compared to public service organisations, private sector proposals for ‘win-win’ organisation of working time tend to be less complex schemes designed to meet specific business need. This is why in this paper I have concentrated on public sector case studies.

Some Institutional Responses

The National Health Service

The Department of Health has published its Improving Working Lives National Audit Instrument,²⁰ which includes a target of ‘Flexible Working’ with indicators in improving service delivery and work-life balance. Evidence required for accreditation includes a wide range of examples such as testing different rosters, workforce planning systems and evidence of ‘team-based employee-led rostering’. There is an organizational requirement on managers to demonstrate the benefits of new working arrangements for staff.

Investors in People²¹

Investors in People (IiP) has developed a model on work-life balance to supplement the IiP Standard, which is awarded to organizations which have met the performance indicators. The model is based on four basic principles: culture, strategy, effectiveness and action. Each principle is broken down by Indicator and Evidence of good practice which promotes work-life balance for employees.

TUC Changing Times process

The TUC has produced an eight stage model, based on successful joint union/management initiatives. The process emphasises the need to ask employees about their preferred working patterns, and to involve staff in identifying problems and finding solutions. The process has been widely used in both the public and private sector and is outlined in the TUC Changing Times website www.tuc.org.uk

²⁰ op cit

²¹ Investors in People guide to helping organisations manage work-life balance; IiP www.investorsinpeople.co.uk

Conclusion: Who Gains?

A recent Business in Britain report from Lloyds TSB Corporate reports that one third of firms currently offer flexible work options for full-time employees and that the companies are 'reaping benefits'. Record low unemployment in the UK is making the recruitment of skilled staff increasingly difficult and 43 per cent of the 2,000 businesses surveyed reported problems with recruiting the 'right people'. TUC and CIPD research shows the long hours culture continues unabated²². A DTI survey showed that 70 per cent of job seekers want to work more flexibly and almost half would look for flexible working over any other benefit offered by employers. Firms offering flexibility claim that staff retention and morale are significantly improved and productivity is increased.²³

At the same time the Maternity Alliance reports that there is evidence that the 2003 'right to request' flexible working, allowing parents of children under 6 to ask for a change in working hours (see also Hegewisch in this volume), can have an adverse impact on workers (mothers) who reduce their hours to accommodate parenting demands²⁴. Another report indicates that low income parents, though in many cases aware of the new right, seem to have less chance of having their request accepted by employers, although more than eight out of ten parents of a child with a disability had their request agreed²⁵.

So is the emphasis on work-life balance simply a corporate response to a tight UK labour market?

There is a clear business drive to the introduction of flexible work policies, particularly in the customer orientated service and public sectors, where there is a need to recruit and retain female employees. In the private sector flexible working policies have largely been directed to assist women, and to lesser extent older workers. But choice is constrained in a society where childcare is expensive and inadequate. Flexible working policies can enable a parent to meet the dual needs of family and work during childrearing years. But without a range of other positive equality policies – including equal pay - flexibility can turn into the glue of the sticky floor that holds women back and keeps them unequally paid.

Reducing the long hours culture in the UK is the first step to giving men and women more options about the organization of their working hours – men need more time to participate in the social economy and civil society while mothers need to escape the penalties of enforced short hour working, necessitated by time demands of other family members. Government, employers and unions need to confront the division of labor at work and at home – the two are inextricably linked.

As social partners signed up to Social Europe, UK trade unions are going beyond a strong regulatory approach – necessary though that is – to engage with workers and employers organizing time to suit the demands of a modern economy and needs of a diverse workforce. In the public sector, where trade union organization and social partner relationships are strongest, imagination and creativity have produced models of work organization that recognize the individual needs of the worker and business.

²² op cit

²³ Quoted in TUC Changing Times News Dec 2003

²⁴ Happy Anniversary? The right to request one year on Maternity Alliance 2004 quoted TUC Changing Times News March 2004

²⁵ The Work Foundation: the right to request -ibid

Where there are collective working time rights, I have argued that changes in working time organization can be achieved by taking a holistic approach to work-life balance. Individuals have different time needs over the life course: these should complement not compete with one another.