



Turning the Double Day into One Working Day at a Time

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I like conjuring up the term “double day” – the old-school phrase used to describe the plight of working mothers. It succinctly depicts the exhaustion experienced by so many American workers who pack in two days’ worth of work into one – combining a paid day on the job with an unpaid day of work at home. This dilemma is most pressing for employed mothers, but also applies increasingly to fathers and other workers that also have significant family responsibilities. The goal for policymakers and American democracy should be to turn a double day into a single day, so that every day every worker can do the paid job and also have the time, energy, and income to provide necessary physical and emotional care to family members and him or herself.

What can be done? Think of the possibilities as a two-sided coin. One side provides more time to workers to care – or just clean the house – especially at times when care needs are most acute. The other side of the coin ensures the availability of more care services provided through publicly financed work. Specific suggestions have been around for a long time:

To make more family time possible:

- **Enact a federal paid family and medical leave law** to ensure that all workers can take short periods of paid time off to cope with illness or care for vulnerable family members. This can be financed either through unemployment insurance systems in the states or by expanding Social Security Disability Insurance.
- **Require all businesses to provide a minimum of five paid sick days a year.**
- **Require employers to negotiate with workers around work time**, so that workers can bargain for more predictable or flexible work schedules.
- **Make it easier for workers to organize.** Unions have and continue to be a strong voice for workers’ needs and the best agents to raise employment standards for all workers.
- **Move toward a standard 35 hour work week.**

To expand publicly available caregiving services:

- **Provide taxpayer funded early education for three to five-year-olds.**
- **Fund a longer school day and summer programs.**

- **Enhance public provision for elder care services**, including respite care to give family caregivers some time off.
- **Boost the pay and prospects of care workers**, who today frequently labor in poor conditions for paltry wages, leading to worker stress and constant workforce turnover that harms the quality of care for children, the disabled, and feeble older people.

Indeed, the rigors of the double day take their largest toll on low-wage workers in low-income families and communities. That happens because low-income workers cannot “buy” their way out of double binds. They cannot easily afford to cut corners by eating out, renting a car when the family vehicle is in the shop, or paying for safe and enriching after-school programs. In addition, low-wage workers cope with conditions of employment that are typically much less flexible than for higher paid workers, leaving them less space to carve out personal solutions to meeting demands of both jobs and families. Low-wage workers usually can't work from home to wait for the repair person or schedule work hours to be at home when kids get home from school. In addition, their capacities to care for families are undercut when low-wage workers must reside in unsafe neighborhoods and take jobs that do not have health benefits. Given all of these realities, U.S. efforts to help working families need to be targeted to give extra help to low-wage workers.

Because U.S. working women are more likely than their male counterparts to work for modest wages and low annual incomes, they stand to benefit most from such appropriately targeted new policies. In addition, specific measures can further help women with low or modest earnings (as well as men in similar situations) carve out more family time and afford additional caregiving supports:

- **Increase the minimum wage.** This would immediately allow many low-income working mothers the choice of working less or buying more of what they need for their families.
- **Assure health care coverage for all U.S. residents.** This can happen if all states extend Medicaid coverage under the recent Affordable Care Act to all poor adults, and if health coverage is ensured for immigrants.
- **Make higher education more affordable and expand other education and training programs.**
- **Increase employment and education opportunities for low-income youth**, which would help their mothers stay employed even as the young people themselves gain better prospects for the future.
- **Make neighborhoods safe and affordable.** If children can't walk the streets, employed mothers (and fathers) face additional worries; and everyone suffers if families cannot afford decent housing and move frequently or end up without any place to live.
- **Reform anti-poverty programs to support low-income working women and men.** Most current “safety net” programs have such low income eligibility requirements that newly employed parents immediately earn too much to get any help at all. This penalizes employment and forces too many poor families into no-win choices between long work hours and time for family care.