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## **Winning on working time: Pressing the case for a better work-life balance**

A Report for the Alex Ferry Foundation

By Emeritus Professor Phil Taylor, Department of Work,  
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### About the author

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# 1 Introduction and Background

## 1.1 Context and background

This report is the outcome of a two-phase research study by Emeritus Professor Phil Taylor of the University of Strathclyde. It is commissioned by the Alex Ferry Foundation (AFF) and the Confederation of Shipbuilding and Engineering Unions (CSEU) and is facilitated and published by the Institute of Employment Rights (IER). The overarching aim of the study, integrating both phases, has been a robust evidence-based case for a renewed campaign for shorter working time in the broadly defined engineering, shipbuilding, automotive and defence industries in the United Kingdom. Ian Waddell, the CSEU General Secretary, in the introduction to the 2022 report (Taylor, 2022), based on the first phase of the study, made an important observation. It was now over three decades since one of the most significant trade-union conflicts in the UK, the 35-hour campaign for a shorter working week. Led by the CSEU, it involved hundreds of thousands of union members, either through voluntary donations of one hour's pay per week, or directly participating in strike action to press the demand for shorter working time (McKinlay and McNulty, 1992).

The outcome in 1990 was a widespread reduction in the working week, implemented in the immediate aftermath of the agreement or in successive years. A broader consequence was that the 37-hour week many achieved, had ramifications, becoming a new normal for many more broadly.

This study was prompted by the fact that the question of working time in the engineering, automotive, aerospace, defence and shipbuilding should justifiably be regarded as 'unfinished business'. The ambition to achieve a 35-hour working week has endured as a powerful ambition of the CSEU and especially of the Alex Ferry Foundation. While the evidence in this report reveals that only a handful of sites have achieved this totemic objective, the convenors, shop stewards and union reps interviewed for this Phase 2 of the study are dedicated to its realisation. Moreover, and importantly for any forthcoming campaign, the commitment voiced by union officers at plant level resonates with the powerful aspirations expressed by the overwhelming majority of workers surveyed in Phase 1 of the study.

Evidence has accumulated of the benefits of shorter working time, for mental and physical health, for better work-life balance (WLB), and improved productivity as a result of more-committed and less-fatigued workforces. Much discussion (Coote *et al*, 2021), and many policy initiatives, have centred on the four-day week, with schemes and pilots in several countries, including Belgium, Germany, Iceland and Spain. The world's largest trial, of 61 UK companies (Autonomy, 2023), has delivered positive outcomes – lower stress, burnout and staff turnover, and improved WLB and increased revenues.

Despite the compelling case for a four-day week, this study does not focus exclusively on a shorter working week *per se* for several reasons. Companies' shift patterns may include four-day working, so the seemingly clear-cut objective might not apply. Indeed, a four-day week might mean condensed hours, or extended shift working, and thus no cut in working time, which may exacerbate work intensity, fatigue and demands on workers. One study found that 80% of respondents did not favour a four-day week, if it meant earning less. While advocates of a four-day week may argue that 'one-size-does-not-fit-all' and develop, alongside the classic 'Friday off', 'staggered', 'decentralised' or 'annualised' models, this study centres on **reduction in working time** with no loss of pay, that delivers the health, well-being and WLB benefits for workers, while improving productivity. Realising shorter working time and its distribution in the sector is inevitably the outcome of collective bargaining between employers and unions at company level, but most important at site levels in all its detail, as this study explores.

## 1.2 The members' survey – first phase of the research

The intention of Phase 1 of the study was to drill deep into the experiences and perceptions of workers regarding their working hours and shift patterns, and to discover what their aspirations were in relation to shorter working time. The quantitative findings of an extensive survey of members would provide a bedrock understanding of their views that could contribute to union officers' perspectives and inform any future national campaign by the CSEU and its constituent unions for shorter working time. Accordingly, a survey was undertaken in 2022 that delivered 2,390 responses from members from six companies - BAE Systems, Rolls Royce, Bentley, Jaguar Land Rover, Airbus and McVitie-Pladis – the most extensive survey of workers on the issue of working time in the UK engineering, aerospace and shipbuilding industries.

It is not necessary to repeat in detail the findings of the survey here. However, it is recommended that the first report (Taylor, 2022) be read as a preliminary to, or consulted alongside, this present report, not least because it engages more widely with literature on shorter working time. Equally important is the fact that the first report's rich survey data and extensive worker testimony deserve close attention. Nevertheless, providing a precis of the headline findings is helpful for placing into context the evidence from this Phase 2 of the study, not least because the convenor and shop-steward respondents had read the first report.

The survey findings were emphatic: 93 per cent report that they wished to have reduced working time with no loss of pay, 88 per cent to have extended weekends and 82 per cent fewer shifts. The better work-life balance that would result from shorter working time was regarded as important by 97 per cent, improved mental health as important by 94 per cent and improved physical health by 89 per cent. Very large percentages perceived the benefits of shorter working time for spending more time with their partner or family and, for those to whom it applied, being able to undertake caring responsibilities. What might be seen as advantageous from the perspective of the employers, is the fact that four-in-five believed that shorter working time would improve their efficiency at work.

The impact of Covid-19 was evident, with workers confirming that the experience of the pandemic had prompted a widespread re-appraisal of attitudes to work and work-life balance, with very many workers concluding that less time should be spent in the workplace. It was a transformative episode in peoples' lives. For manual workers and for production-facing staff, remote working was obviously not possible, so for a majority of workers there was no alternative but to work on-site. Consequently, workers in the sites surveyed were at risk from exposure to the SARS-CoV-2 virus. Although the unions worked with their respective managements to put mitigations in place, mostly physical distancing measures, the principal mode of viral transmission, through airborne particles (Taylor, 2022), remained a major hazard. When combined with the systemic failures of labour law and regulation (Ewing and Hendy, 2020; James *et al*, 2021) the existential threat from Covid19 had huge significance for workers in the sector. There is no clearer illustration of this than the fact that more than 80 per cent of those surveyed believed that the experience of Covid-19 had increased their appreciation of time spent with their families (Taylor, 2022:28-9).

Of significance for the prospects of a renewed national campaign for shorter working time was the fact that 94 per cent declared their support for such a campaign, and almost three-quarters reported that they would strongly support a campaign.

## 1.3 Phase 2 - schedule of questions

Phase 2 involved 13 semi-structured interviews with convenors, senior stewards or reps at plants/sites (May-August 2024), nine face-to-face and four by Zoom/Teams, each recorded and transcribed for accuracy and data analytical purposes. Some interviews had one respondent, while others involved several union officers. In total, 28 union officers participated. The schedule of questions was as follows:

- What are your current arrangements for working time and hours? How many hours are worked and how is working time distributed (to include discussion on OT arrangements)?
- When was the current agreement regarding working time and hours signed? (Perhaps some reflection back to longer-term changes in working time)
- What is the situation now? Have there been recent changes to the signed agreement?
- What working hours and working-time arrangements would you ideally like to have?
- What working-time arrangements do you think would be achievable?
- What perceptions do you have of employers' willingness to negotiate over reduction/redistribution of working time? What do you regard as the major obstacles? What do you regard as the arguments/evidence that you can use to push for reduction and move the employers?
- What are your attitudes towards bargaining over productivity or flexibility, in exchange for reduction in work hours and/or redistribution of working time?
- Do you have ideas about how your job could be done more efficiently to free up time? Does your employer ask for your ideas?
- What elements do you think could form part of effective campaigns for shorter working time at national/sectoral, company and plant levels?

Interviews lasted between one and two hours. Access to the transcribed interviews is restricted to the author and kept securely according to GDPR and research ethics' protocols. Transcriptions formed the basis for the analysis which essentially follows the ordering of the questions. A draft of the final report was sent to each lead respondent so that they could check for the accuracy of data and for quotations attributed to them. Appropriate modifications were then made to the draft.



## 2 Contracted hours and distribution of working time

### 2.1 Introduction

The important point of departure for Phase 2 of the study was to establish the current arrangements for working time and hours in the plants across the sector, broadly defined, and its specific sub-sectors. Accordingly, appropriate questions were asked of the convenors, stewards and reps regarding both contracted hours and the distribution of working time. In addition, interviewees were probed as to when the current arrangements were agreed. For clarity of presentation and for analytical purposes, the data is organised according to the following categories: ‘Shipbuilding’, ‘Defence’, ‘Automotive’, ‘Aerospace’ and ‘Manufacturing’. Nevertheless, these distinctions are artificial in several respects, for they overlap. For example, all the sites and firms in the shipbuilding category are defence establishments in that they are engaged in warship building. The overall contracted working hours for each of the 13 selected plants is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Working hours – shipbuilding, aviation, defence, automotive, manufacturing - 2024

Shipbuilding for:				
BAE Systems (Glasgow)	BAE Systems (Barrow)	Babcock (Rosyth)	Babcock (Devonport)	Harland and Wolff (Belfast)
36 (37 contracted) 37 (37) staff 45 globally sourced	35.5 (37 manual contracted)	36	35 contractual hours 40+ registered	37
Defence:		Automotive:		
Leonardo (Edinburgh)	Thales (Belfast)	Jaguar Land Rover (Solihull)	Bentley (Crewe)	
37	37	36 majority (37 contracted)	35 production 37 (tariff plus, non-production)	
Aerospace:			Manufacturing:	
Rolls Royce (Barnoldswick)	Airbus (Broughton)	GE Aviation (Cardiff)	McVitie-Pladis (Manchester)	
36 37 some other sites	35	37.5	42 (some 40)	

### 2.2 Shipbuilding

At BAE Systems (Glasgow) manual workers work 36 hours a week although they are contracted to, and are paid for, 37 hours. The arrangement was introduced in 2017 when BAE came to the union with a proposal to move from a five-day to a four-day week. In the convenor’s words:

...we’d have grabbed [that] anyway, wouldn’t we, a four-day week? We went, right, we want a shorter working week out of that, so they took an hour off it, so we’re on 36 just now, contracted to 37 and paid 37, but we work 36.



However, there is a notable discrepancy between manual workers and staff, not uncommon in the sites studied, in that the majority of staff are still required to work 37 hours. The staff reps reported that some worked flexitime, called smart working, although it did not apply uniformly or indeed universally, particularly because of *'how the individual managers choose to work with their given teams'*. In addition, most teams, but not all, were 'hybrid working', although the rules governing the balance between home and on-site working differs by department. An additional difference within the staff side is between those 'aligned' or 'ops facing', such as quality control or supervisors, who cannot avail themselves of hybrid working or flexitime, as they are tied into the production schedules. A source of *'friction and difficulty within the staff environment'* is also the fact they are still working the 37 hours. Furthermore, the company insists that changing production needs require certain work teams to be on-site four days a week, the example being detail planners, their unnecessary differential treatment an additional source of discontent.

The manual side work four day shifts, 7am to 4.30pm, and four night shifts, 9.30pm to 7am. There is also a voluntary weekend shift, consisting of three days of 12-hour shifts, with a shift allowance the same as for the night shift. A small back shift also operates.

Another section of the workforce is foreign labour, who are contracted to work 45 hours a week. This labour, mainly steel workers, is sourced by *Intermarine* (<https://intermarineuk.com/>), which claims to be *'the gold standard for global recruitment of skilled workers for businesses in the UK and internationally'* bridging *'the gaps in capacity and capability across manufacturing workforces'*. Reps reported that the workers came from diverse geographies, including South Africa, the Philippines, Eastern Europe and Turkey. The convenor explained that their employment was an *'absolute necessity'* for the company given the acute labour shortages, but it was *'not a business model that's sustainable going forward'*, and *'maxing out in apprenticeship programmes and giving people a second chance at missed apprenticeships'* would not solve the immediate problem.

At **BAE Systems (Barrow)** a Unite manual rep reported that the approximately 3,000 manual workers *'work 37 hours...and the vast majority are currently on a shift pattern, which is three shifts on, four shifts off'*. The day shift commences at 6.30am and finishes at 6.50pm. While that makes 37 hours in total, *'we've got a paid lunch break, so the working time is down to 35.5 hours'*. The three on, four off shift pattern works over a six-day period, with half the workforce on Sunday, Monday and Tuesday, and the other half on Wednesday, Thursday and Friday. A dedicated night shift has the same pattern of three on and four off, so with the paid lunch break they also work 35.5 hours. There are other shifts with fewer numbers, but if they exceed the 12-hour duration they also get the paid lunch. The convenor summarised: *'So, virtually all the manuals are actually at a thirty-five and half hour week at the present moment'*.

The major discrepancy again appears to be between the manual and the staff side. The staff side (300-400) work 37-hour weeks, but there is a difference among them, depending on whether staff are working *'on a shift or...not on a shift'*. If staff are classed as production related, they work from 7:30am till 4pm, whereas non-production-related staff get flexi time, meaning they still have to do the 37 hours, but core hours are between 9:30am and 11:30am and then from 1:30pm till 3pm. Staff have to be on site during these core hours, but can flex any other time.

At **Babcock (Rosyth)** blue-collar workers currently work a non-flexible four-day week, Monday to Thursday, of 36 hours at nine hours a day. Day shifts, back shifts and night shifts are covered by contracted shift workers. The day shift, from 7am to 5pm, is the core shift. The back shift starts at 2-3pm and the night shift at 9.30pm or 10pm depending on what management and the workers have agreed. These relatively flexible start and finish times were introduced during Covid to avoid a crossover of workers at the time of shift changes. The 36-hour week, nine-hour shift was agreed in September 2023 as part of the pay negotiations and registered on 31 March 2024, replacing the 37 hours which had comprised four shifts of nine hours and 15 minutes, 7.30am to 5.15pm for the day shift. The only reported point of resistance, or reluctance, to reducing working time, was management's need to convince customers that there would no impact on production times.

One caveat to these predominant working hours relates to some of the contracts **Babcock (Rosyth)** undertakes, such as the maintenance of North Link Ferries or UK maritime research vessels. Then, the work may be for only two to three weeks and workers could be doing seven days of 12-hour shifts.

At **Babcock (Devonport)** terms and conditions and consequently working hours vary considerably. Devonport operates as a licensed site, under which registered agreements apply to those working principally on nuclear submarines, either on-site or on-dock, and must conform to legislative requirements through the Ministry of Defence and the Office for Nuclear Regulation. This non-industrial side has a legal obligation to provide 24x7 cover and thus 'normal' working hours do not apply. According to the recently retired convenor, under the licensed agreements it *'could be anywhere from 40 hours upwards'* with shift allowances applying. *'Ideally, you wouldn't be working more than 60 hours, although because of sickness and skill shortages, there could be more overtime'*. From his perspective, these 'registered agreements' were unique and he was unaware of anywhere else in Babcock where they applied.

In contrast, there is the industrial side where registered agreements do not apply and work takes place in the main factory, in fabrication, on surface ships. All pay rises negotiated by the Dockyard Works Committee (DWC), representing Unite the Union and the GMB (but not Prospect), apply to all hourly paid employees, including those who work to a registered agreement. As a result of the last pay round, negotiated in October 2023 and applying from 1 April 2024, a reduction in working hours from 36 to 35 was agreed, but the working day has remained the same, the difference being a reduction of 15 minutes from the lunch break, meaning that workers leave 15 minutes earlier, but the core hours remain at 35. This reduction may not apply to the registered agreement where overtime is payable above the core 35 hours. The 35-hour week covers all workers on contractual and not registered agreements, that constitute around two-thirds of the workforce, compared to a third on registered agreements. On the *'more settled'* industrial side, a two-shift system, called casual, is essentially day shifts and back shifts, Monday to Friday.

The company has introduced a phased-in Optimised Working Time (OWT) pattern on a 12-month trial, which could not be formally agreed because, as a change to terms and conditions, it would have necessitated a ballot. *'Technically it's what you call new ways of working'*, where the sole customer, the MoD, *'want their assets back quickly'*, interpreting this requirement as the need to work seven days a week. Babcock drew back from the unions' request to hire additional skilled labour, but agreed to a working pattern on a voluntary basis where individuals work two Fridays and one Saturday a month. According to the convenor, it was agreed that certain workers on the project who did not wish to work the shift could stay on the project working somewhere else. Thus, the OWT pattern would not cover 'bow to stern' but would apply only to certain areas classed as a priority.

At **Harland and Wolff** a 37-hour week is worked by both the manual and the staff side, an arrangement that has been in place for over 30 years. However, the company has been pushing the unions – Unite the Union and GMB have single-table bargaining – for three years for an increase in working hours to a 40-hour week. While the union has resisted, in the words of the convenor, *'they have got partially the way there'*, in that the first three hours' overtime worked is paid at flat rate. Nevertheless, it is important to emphasise that this overtime is not compulsory. The reason the employer has driven this arrangement is to portray to customers that the yard is working a 40-hour week and, therefore, is a marketing device to induce commercial contracts. The manual side work day or night shifts, four days a week on a four-day loop at 9ff hours per shift. The day shift is 7.30am to 5.15pm and the night shift 10.15pm to 7.30am. The four-day shift pattern was introduced after the year 2000, replacing the previous 4ffi day working. Staff, on the other hand, work 4ffi days, the half day being on the Friday. A remote working agreement is in place but, in common with establishments across the sector, it does not apply to all the staff. Staff in functions including HR and engineering can do so, but those who are operations-facing are most likely to be required to attend on-site.

## 2.3 Defence

At Leonardo (Edinburgh) Unite the Union is the sole bargaining union for terms and conditions. The standard, contracted weekly working time is 37 hours for both manufacturing and all other staff. Mainly in the manufacturing halls, a four on and four off shift pattern operates, of ten and a half hours per shift, which applies to day-shift and night-shift working. Day shifts and night shifts are undertaken by separate cohorts of workers, constant working, so there is no rotation between the two. One of the stewards indicated that a main reason for shift working is capacity in the halls, where constraints of space make it impossible for all to be working a day shift. The core day shift is from 7am to 5.30pm although there is *'some flexibility at managers' discretion'*, and some workers commence at 6am and finish at 4.30pm. The night shift can start at 7pm and finish at 5am, but again some discretion applies following agreement with the manager, but any variation is essentially product-dependent. For the day shift there was a 30 per cent uplift and for the night shift a 40 per cent uplift. Subsequently, the company have conceded a 1.5 weekday overtime premium as part of the wage agreement which was accepted in late Summer 2024.

The traditional pattern for non-manufacturing workers is four-and-a-half-day working, finishing at noon on a Friday. However, two aspects of working for office and technical workers' working time are important. The first is flexitime, which the company terms 'custom' working, which the convenor indicates *'gives you the ability to start more or less whenever you want and finish...when you want, as long as you do your hours'*, and was introduced as a result of Covid. Notwithstanding its broad acceptance by workers, custom working, as discussed more fully later in the report, presents a challenge to the union, in that the company counterposes flexibility to the demand for shorter working time and, relatedly, because it encourages individual arrangements that may undermine collective efforts. The second is remote working for those who are not in production or on the secure network, which covers *'probably two-thirds of the workforce'*. Stewards reported that workers, because they might be working in different blocks, could be working longer hours than those contracted and that presenteeism, working when ill, is more common when working at home. A final facet is that increasing numbers are working what is called a 'compressed working week' by which workers do their five days work in four days, nine and quarter working hours per day.

Thales Belfast (Integrated Airspace Systems) and Thales Glasgow (Optronics) are the only two significant sites in the UK Thales group that have sufficient numbers to effect collective bargaining. A smaller 'collective bargaining unit' for historical reasons which arose through an acquisition may still exist in name, but being without sufficient strength and located on a site with a few thousand employees, Unite the Union is the sole union representing workers in Belfast, with perhaps 430 members out of a workforce of 750-800. A working week of 37 hours applies to all employees, whether 'blue-collar, grey-collar or white-collar', so that there is no differentiation by contract but by 'Level of Responsibility' grade. For Belfast, 37 hours represents an increase of one hour on the previous contractual arrangement of 36 hours, when the company harmonised its terms and conditions across its UK operations. The standard day shift consists of four days (Monday to Thursday) of 8.25 hours and an additional four hours on a Friday, the latter being quite unproductive according to the convenor/senior shop steward. Its wastefulness is illustrated by the shift being dubbed Fry-day by the workforce given the queues at the canteen for the legendary Ulster breakfast.

The shift starting time used to be 7.30am but that was moved to 7.15am and then to 7am. Flexible start operates (7am to 9.30am) and a corresponding flexible finish time up to 6.30pm, but a previous fuller flexibility was phased out by the company in 2016. At the same time, a compressed-hours arrangement is in place, by which 37 hours are worked by blue-collar and white-collar workers from Monday to Thursday, but not 'grey-collars', who still come in on a Friday. The convenor estimated that perhaps approaching 50 per cent were now working compressed hours.

A significant contextual factor that has major implications for shift arrangements has been the great increase in demand as a result of the Russia-Ukraine war, which has seen the workforce at Belfast double in size. The convenor is convinced that 'new shift patterns' are imminent with 24x7 and weekend working distinct possibilities.

## 2.4 Automotive

At Jaguar Land Rover (Solihull) the majority are currently working 36 hours, although the formal duration of the working week is 37 hours. The Unite regional officer indicated that there was no negotiation down from 37 to 36 hours but that the agreed shift pattern made it 'mathematically' the case that *de facto* workers are working 36 hours. Accordingly, from Monday to Thursday, morning shifts run from 6am to 1.30pm and afternoons from 1.30pm to 9pm, 7.5 hours in each case. The night shift is 9 hours from 9pm to 6am. On Friday, for both the mornings and afternoons, there is a six-hour shift, from 6am to noon and noon to 6pm respectively. The night shift finishes at 6am. So, for all three shifts the total is 36 hours. In areas, such as one of the body shops, where two shifts could deliver sufficient production, the shifts would be 6am to 2pm and 2pm to 10pm, the 'traditional eight hours' times four. On a Friday they would do 6am to 11am and 11am to 4pm, a shorter shift, which would mean 37 hours, because *'they've got that capacity Monday to Thursday to do the 32 hours and not 30'*.

The issue of overtime is discussed more fully below, but suffice to say at this stage there is an agreement that workers on mornings or afternoons can have up to five hours' contractual overtime Monday to Thursday to compensate for losses or extra sales. From the three shifts, workers may be obliged to work an extra three hours so, for example, instead of finishing at 6 pm they could be kept till 9pm and, according to the convenor this *'never goes down well'*.

At Bentley (Crewe) the collective agreement on working time, agreed in 2016 and implemented in 2019, was for 35 hours, representing a reduction from 37 hours, the initial benefit being *'the same money for less hours and increase in hourly rate'*. It was a Bentley agreement, but was driven by Volkswagen, due to commercial difficulties which caused them to restructure the business. Nevertheless, in successive pay negotiations preceding this agreement the union had continued to push for the long-held aspiration for a reduction to 35 hours, which might have been somewhat ritualistic, but on this occasion *'the company took the bait'*. According to the Unite the Union works convenor, the reduction of two hours *'makes a big difference'* for *inter alia* workers' mental and physical health and travel-to-work times, because of reconfigured shift times. The standard day shift is from 7am to 3pm, although flexibility permits some people to come to work a quarter of an hour early or a quarter of an hour later, which operates from Monday to Thursday, with a five-hour shift on a Friday which finishes at 12 pm. The night shift is also 35-hours, but is based on four not five shifts.

The 35-hour week applies both to the manufacturing side and for all those staff who are 'tariff', which compose the bargaining group, and covers those on zero to 16 grades, but not those above 16 up to 24 who are termed 'tariff plus'. Many staff are on 'tariff', including administrators and secretaries, but also some engineers and professional people on tariff 14-16 grades. Semi-skilled workers are 8 and skilled workers are 10, and team leads are 12. 'Tariff plus' grades are effectively management, either people managers or technical managers, the latter including technical specialists in their field of expertise.

In the 2019 agreement that established the 35-hour working week, the company did get *'some wins off it... flexibility around production'*. For nine weeks, now increased to 18 weeks, management have the right to extend the working day by an hour and 15 minutes, so the shift becomes 7am to 4.15pm, with the provisos of six weeks' notice and the extra hours being paid at a premium of 1.66x insisted on by the union. According to the stewards, the 18 days is rarely actualised, as is the nine weeks.

Another trade-off to the 35-hour-week pattern was the option of a 45-hour week straightforward night shift in one area only, paid at premium. The union's agreement with the company states that it is implemented for a specific period of time, but it cannot be introduced ad-hoc, brought in or ended without notice whenever the company decides. Moreover, it is entirely voluntary. At the time of the interview, this shift was not running because there was *'not enough sustainability within the car production plant'*.

## 2.5 Aerospace

At Rolls Royce (Barnoldswick) the last iteration of the collective agreement, which covers all working arrangements, including working time, shift arrangements and pay, was in 2015, although of course pay has been subject to successive negotiations and agreements. The standard working week, covering all shifts was 37 hours, but as a result of the pay deal in 2023, as the Unite the Union works convenor reported, *'we negotiated for the entire UK, both works and staff, a one-hour reduction in the working week...[but] It was not easy to get the hour's reduction'*. The convenor, who sits on Unite's Executive Council as representative for Aerospace and Shipbuilding, also leads on negotiations for all Rolls Royce manual workers throughout the UK, with the exception of the Derby plant. The reduction in the average shorter working week manifests itself differently at the various sites, but at Barnoldswick, because shift patterns have remained the same, it has resulted in the accrual of an extra six days' annual holiday.

A complex pattern of seven shifts operates. The day shift commences at 8am and finishes at 4pm from Monday to Thursday and from 8am to 3.30pm on Friday, while the early shift runs from 7am to 2.30 pm Monday to Thursday and 7am to 2.00pm on Friday. An earlies/afternoons shift alternates between 7am to 2.30pm and 2.15pm to 10.15pm from Monday to Thursday and 7am to 2pm and 1.45pm to 6.45pm on Friday. There is an earlies/afternoons/nights shift which has these previous timings for the earlies and afternoons, but additionally includes in its cycle a 10pm to 7.15am night shift from Monday to Thursday but does not run on Friday. In addition, a condensed hours shift runs between Monday and Friday which consists of three shifts at 12 hours and 20 minutes, which are aligned to the day-shift and night-shift start times. There is a continental shift of 12 hours and spans seven days. Finally, there are weekend shifts Friday to Sunday and Saturday to Monday that run either from 7am to 7.20pm or from 7pm to 7.20am.

At Airbus (Broughton) the standard weekly working time is 35 hours, which was introduced in 2001 in the conditions of the aerospace industry crisis following 9/11. The Unite the Union site convenor reported that the reduction from 37 to 35 hours did not mean any loss in pay, although the union did forgo a 4% pay increase in order to save and protect jobs, a deal that was balloted on and agreed by members. The shift pattern which was established at the time of this agreement involves morning shifts which commence at 6am and finish at 1.10pm, and afternoon shifts which start at 1.30pm and finish at 8.40pm, except on a Friday when they finish at 8.20pm because of an earlier start time. These shifts rotate. There is also a dedicated night shift, Monday to Thursday, which starts at 8.45pm and runs till 6am. In addition, a couple of other shifts operate in certain sections, including the machining areas, which are twelve-hour shifts, four on and six off, which are called 'multi-shift' and are based on annualised hours, and a 'three on, four off' of twelve hours, which allows holiday entitlement to be used, unlike annualised hours where holidays are baked into the shift. Shift premia for the double days, the mornings and afternoons, are paid at 20% on top of the rates, for night shifts at 30% and the multi-shift at 42%. For the 'three on, four off' the premium is 29% for days, and 38% for nights, because that shift involves Sunday working.

Another change introduced in 2001, at the time of the reduction in hours, was in the ways holidays were booked, that is in hours. Each worker, as a minimum, is entitled to 175 holiday hours per annum, but there is a constraint on entire flexibility because, due to the age and the size of the plant, it shuts down for two weeks in late July and early August for maintenance, during which everyone must take that break. However, this period and usually two days at Christmas aside, the flexibility on holiday hours does mean that workers can book a minimum of an hour at a time. In addition, there is what is called a 'time saving account', by which hours can be accrued in circumstances where, for example, workers come in to work a Saturday and can take the hours back as a holiday



up to a maximum of 35. It is similar to TOIL (time off in lieu) but is more formalised and applies only to manual workers. A further agreed arrangement relates to service days. A worker with ten years' service will gain another day, 15 years gives two days and 20 years three days.

At **GE Aviation (Cardiff)** according to the Unite the Union convenor, *'the basic expectation for all our lead staff is around 37.5 hours a week'*. The current shift pattern is called 4-5-5, which is four on, five off and five on, four off, five on, five off, and then the pattern resets. These 11-hour shifts start at 6.30am and finish at 6pm and include a 30-minute unpaid meal break. Another shift is a modified double-day shift, which consists of a week of days, with a day off, followed by Saturday and Sunday working. A following week of days again, includes another day off to make up for the Saturday and Sunday, which is followed by a week of afternoons, without a following weekend on. The afternoon shifts are based on 7ff hours and the morning shifts are slightly longer at 7ffl hours. When accumulated, the afternoon shift is 6ffl hours which, in the words of the convenor, is a *'nice, shorter afternoon shift, the most popular shift on site'*. The workforce is split 50:50 between the 4-5-5 shift and the modified double-day shift just described. The convenor anticipated a forthcoming change because of the throughput of engines from the 4-5-5 to *'probably some variation of that, days, days, afternoons'*.

## 2.6 Manufacturing

While this study of working time has concentrated on shipbuilding and marine, defence, automotive and aerospace sub-sectors, one case from manufacturing, specifically food manufacturing, was included to provide some additional insight. The Unite the Union convenor at **McVitie-Pladis (Manchester)** reported that every group he covers, including Manchester, work a 42-hour week. From four on and four off, what is called the Pitman pattern (<https://www.shiftbase.com/glossary/pitman-shift-schedule>) which is threes and twos. These are 12-hour shifts. It means that every other weekend workers work Saturday, Sunday, Monday or Friday, Saturday, Sunday, but it guarantees every other weekend they finish on Thursday and do not return until Monday. The engineering department have got a day shift where they do projects or continuous improvement and they work a 40-hour week.

## 2.7 Summary and observations

It is instructive to evaluate these current working times against the yardstick of the objective of the *'Drive for 35'* campaign of 1989-91. Over three decades, only three sites have achieved this goal; **Babcock (Devonport)** for non-registered workers (35 hours), and **Airbus (Broughton)** and **Bentley (35 hours)** for production workers. One site, **BAE Systems (Barrow)** has *de facto* 35.5 hours, although contracted to 37 hours. Three are contracted for 36 hours, **Babcock (Rosyth)**, the majority at **Jaguar Land Rover (Solihull)** and **Rolls Royce (Barnoldswick)** and at **BAE Systems (Glasgow)** manual workers work 35.5 hours, although contracted for 37 hours. At **Harland and Wolff (Belfast)**, **Leonardo (Edinburgh)** and **Thales (Belfast)** the contracted hours are 37, while at **GE Aviation (Cardiff)** 37.5 hours are worked. *Table 1* shows two outliers for manual workers, 40 hours or more for registered workers at **Babcock (Devonport)** and 42 hours at **McVitie-Pladis (Manchester)**. There is a tendency evident in some sites for non-manual staff (e.g. **BAE Systems (Glasgow)**, tariff-plus non production (**Bentley, Crewe**), to work longer hours than do manual workers.

It might be instructive at this point to make some reflections on the findings from each of the sectors separately. For the five shipbuilding cases, it is notable that the core workforces are currently working four shifts (day, night, back) at most per week. In a nutshell, this captures the limitation in the applicability of the generalised objective of the wider, societal case for a four-day week. A further summary observation is the evident discrepancy prevailing with the staff side in that, while remote working is possible for certain categories of worker, it is not for those variously described as 'aligned' or 'ops facing'. In addition, there is variation regarding shipbuilding and ship repair, where the latter report extended working hours to tight deadlines.

While differences are detectable between the two **defence** establishments, some limited generalisations are possible. Once again, the shift patterns for manufacturing workers at Leonardo, and for those on compressed hours at Thales, challenge the ‘one-size-fits-all’ applicability of the four-day week precept, although 4ffi days are worked at Thales. As with shipbuilding, there are discrepancies between manual and staff workers. One final observation, raised by union officers at Leonardo and Thales is the common report of physical space constraints, related to increased production demands, that impinge upon the respective companies’ ability or willingness to reconfigure shifts. A common element in both the **automotive** cases is that manual workers, night and exceptional shifts apart, work 4ffi days Monday to Friday.

What is notable from the **aerospace** establishments is the diversity, even complexity, of shift arrangements. Nevertheless, certain generalisations are possible. At Rolls Royce and Airbus, some commonality exists in that core shifts, days/earlies/afternoons at the former and generally at the latter, occur over five days. However, for Rolls Royce nights, condensed, continental and weekend shifts take place over 3 or 4 days, while at Airbus the 12-hour multi-shift arrangement differs markedly. GE’s shifts overall are too intricate to permit commonalities to be drawn with the other aerospace plants.

A more general observation, though, that engages with these findings and this study’s overall objectives and outcomes, is that the average actual hours of full-time workers in the UK, according to the most recent official statistics (ONS, 2024) is 36.9. While acknowledging that the statistical mean of manufacturing workers is not synonymous with the sectors and sub-sectors researched for this study, it is helpful to report that for the former, the weekly hours are calculated at 35.7. The UK, thus, has working hours that are amongst the longest in Europe, comparing unfavourably with, for example, the Netherlands (32.2), Austria (33.6), Norway (33.9), Germany (34) and Denmark (34.3). All sites of the surveyed companies have durations of weekly working that exceed those of best practice in a range of European countries (Eurostat, 2024).



## 3 Changes in contracted hours and working-time distribution

This section follows logically from its predecessor. It presents the chronology of the most important developments at each site, organised by the appropriate sub-sector, by which working time and its distribution have changed over the past three decades or more, to arrive at their current state. For the most part the timeline stretches back to the *Drive for 35* campaign and its significant outcomes. The section concludes with a summary and some observations and an overall conclusion that considers the limited progress in reduction of working time over this extended time span.

### 3.1 Shipbuilding

Prior to 2017 at **BAE Systems (Glasgow)** when a 37-hour week was worked for manual workers, the shifts were eight hours Monday to Thursday and five hours on a Friday. The 37 hours at the Glasgow shipyards was an outcome of the *Drive for 35* campaign, in that, after ‘the big strike’ when concessions made by Rolls Royce and British Aerospace, other employers ‘*fell like dominos*’ shifting from ‘*total opposition*’ to having ‘*to accept the reality*’ and reduced the working week by two hours from 39 hours in the early to mid-1990s. So, on ‘*the back end of the campaign*’, the 37 hours was phased in over a couple of years.

As indicated, the reduction in hours from 37 to 35.5 hours at **BAE Systems (Barrow)** came from an agreement negotiated in 2021 which formalised the shift pattern introduced in the context of Covid but required ‘*a long battle*’ to get the reduction in hours through a paid dinner break. The 37-hour week again was an outcome of the *Drive for 35*, introduced in the early to mid-1990s, which took two hours off the working week.

The convenor of **Babcock (Devonport)** reported on how the historical reduction in working hours has always been an outcome of pay negotiations. Hours decreased from 40 to 37 over a long period of three decades. From 40 to 38 occurred in 2000-01 and from 39 to 37 around 2008, followed by the reduction to 36 in 2014.

At **Babcock (Rosyth)**, prior to this year’s registered change to 36 hours, the working week was 37 hours, consisting of four shifts of 9ff hours and was bound up with pay negotiations. The day shift was from 7.30am to 5.15pm. This duration and shift pattern, a four-day week, was introduced in 2002, replacing the previous 4ff day week, eight hours Monday-Thursday and five hours on Friday. This agreement was based on the premise that Friday working was essentially ‘*non-productive time for the company and it was obviously of benefit for us*’, according to the convenor. In the light of the recent and contemporary societal interest in the widespread introduction of the four-day week, it is interesting to note that the Rosyth Dockyard has had this arrangement for over two decades. The previous change in working time had occurred in 1996, with the reduction from 39 to 37 hours.

The convenor of **Harland and Wolff (Belfast)** reported that through negotiation they moved from a 40-hour week in the late 1980s to a 39-hour week in 1991 and then a 37-hour week by the mid-1990s.

### 3.2 Defence

One reported change at **Leonardo (Edinburgh)** was that the four on, four off shift used to be 12 hours, but that changed more than a decade ago. At the same time, the clock-in system under which workers had to swipe in and out was removed ‘*on an honesty basis*’. However, according to stewards’ testimony, this was ‘*not really a big gamble for them*’ because, although a minority might take advantage of it, the majority of workers in a culture of presenteeism were probably going to do ‘*more hours*’.

To reiterate the major change reported above at **Thales (Belfast)**, harmonisation across the group led to increased hours for some establishments and decreased hours for others. At Belfast, an alignment process commenced in 2013, which resulted in a phased transition in 2016 and the working week being extended by one hour from 36 to 37 hours. The other change in 2016 related to flexi-time. Previously there had been a ‘proper’ agreement which had benefited workers, enabling them to work to take an additional two days a month, which was phased out. Arguably a counter-productive change from the company’s perspective, restoring this agreement remains one of the site union’s objectives.

### 3.3 Automotive

As indicated above, at **Jaguar Land Rover (Solihull)** there was no formal, contractual reduction in working hours for the majority of workers from 37 to 36 hours but, rather, the latter became a fact because of the specific agreed shift pattern. The previous decrease in working time, from 39 to 37 hours, occurred in the early 1990s, again in the wake of the *Drive for 35* campaign.

According to the Unite the Union convenor at **Bentley (Crewe)**, although it preceded his employment at the plant, the working week was 39 hours in the 1980s, but then reduced to 37ff hours and then to 37 hours at the end of the decade in the context of the CSEU’s *Drive for 35* campaign. In effect, then, no reduction in working hours had taken place from the late 1990s until agreement in 2016 and implementation in 2019.

### 3.4 Aerospace

The convenor at **Rolls Royce (Barnoldswick)**, when reflecting on the history of working time, recalled that 37 hours had been ‘*what we had fought for back in 1989*’, so that no further reduction, to 36 hours, was negotiated until 2023.

To reiterate, at **Airbus (Broughton)** the big change was in 2001, with a reduction in hours from 37 to 35 to protect jobs, albeit through giving up a 4% pay increase but with no loss of pay, an agreement approved by members in a ballot. Notwithstanding the particular circumstances of market crisis following 9/11, this agreement may well be regarded as a sector leader for the reduction in weekly hours to 35.

The convenor at **GE Aviation (Cardiff)** reported that 37.5 hours has been the working time since the ‘early to mid-1990s’. However, there has been some ‘*tinkering*’ with shifts, so that ‘*we got rid of one of the paid breaks and managed to get the night shift down to a 36-hour week*’. In addition, if working hours are calculated on an annual basis, extra leave has been agreed, ‘*which has probably gained us two or three days over 30 years*’.

### 3.5 Manufacturing

At **McVitie-Pladis (Manchester)** working hours increased to 42 hours in 1998, prior to which 40 working hours were contracted. However, an optional overtime shift on a Friday, once a month, meant that *de facto* working hours were in the high 30s. Since 1998, there have been changes in shift patterns. Historically, there had been a permanent day shift and a permanent night shift which were replaced by a rotating shift and then by a different rotating shift. Nevertheless, every shift pattern averaged out at 42 hours.

### 3.6 Summary and observations

Leaving aside the two plants (**McVitie-Pladis** and **Thales**) at which working hours increased over time, one general conclusion to emerge from the data is how minor has been the reduction in working time over the three decades. In at least six plants (**BAE Systems [Glasgow]**, **BAE Systems [Barrow]**, **Harland and Wolff [Belfast]**, **Babcock [Roysth]**, **Jaguar Land Rover [Solihull]**, **GE Aviation [Cardiff]**; **Rolls Royce [Barnoldswick]**) the decrease to 37 hours (from 39 or 40 hours) is reported to have taken place in the early or mid-1990s, a

consequence of the *Drive for 35* campaign. In certain cases, further reductions have been recent or relatively recent developments: **BAE (Glasgow and Barrow)** to 36 and 35.5 hours *de facto* respectively (2017 and 2021), **Babcock (Rosyth)** to 36 hours in 2024 and **Rolls Royce (Barnoldswick)** to 36 in 2023. The decrease in hours at **Babcock (Devonport)** on the non-registered side has occurred more in stages, down from 40 in 2000-01, to 37 in 2008 and 36 in 2014. At **Bentley (Crewe)** the reduction from 37 to 35 hours was negotiated in 2016 and implemented in 2019. The exception among the sites is **Airbus (Broughton)** where hours reduced from 37 to 35 hours in 2001 as a result of negotiations instigated by exceptional market conditions. Despite amendments, most of them recent or relatively recent, the general point holds. Adopting a longer-term perspective, the reduction in working hours across the sector overall is limited, especially when both the increases in productivity and the broader European trend to decreasing hours are taken into consideration.

## 4 Overtime and the impact of Covid

The logic of inquiry of Sections 2 and 3 was to present evidence of, respectively, the current working hours and working-time arrangements and then a historical overview of the changes over time to the present. While these sections concentrated essentially on negotiated terms and conditions, they did not consider overtime working. This section includes for most but not all of the sites' respondents' accounts of current overtime arrangements as formally agreed with employers. At the same time, it reports on convenors' and stewards' perceptions of members' take-up of overtime and their attitudes towards it. In this respect, and apropos the discussion in the introduction, some evaluation is made of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on members' behaviour and attitudes.

### 4.1 Shipbuilding

According to the union convenor of **BAE (Glasgow)**, there is still *'a substantial amount of people that want overtime'*, although he reported *'a big change where it used to be almost desperation at times for people to do it...but particularly after COVID, [many] people just don't really want to do it'*. Another officer agreed and suggested a reason, that it is *'because the workforce is ageing...so age groups like myself...with the workforce, kind of, edging towards retirement, their appetite for hours goes down'*.

As reported above, the reduction in working hours **BAE (Barrow)** from 37 to 35.5 hours agreed in 2021 formalised the change in shift that had been instigated in 2020 during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic. The convenor reported that members *'actually liked it, because it gave them flexibilities for the rest of the week'* and people were getting too tired with the long days.

The convenor reported that **Babcock (Rosyth)** had always been a yard that had to fight to win contracts. Overtime working was very much a case of 'peaks and troughs', so that workers tended to work it when it was available because they did not know when it would next be so. *'Now because we are busy all the time, we are probably working less overtime across the year than we have in the past'*. The impact of Covid-19 was that people re-assessed the balance of their lives, *'because of the worry and fear and the realisation that we are all mortal'* but *'the greedy monsters will always be greedy monsters'*. So, there is a division in the workforce between those *'piling in the overtime'* and others who, since Covid, have said *'enough is enough'* and want to spend time with their family and *'realise they can get by with less'*. It is reported that there is more consistency now and people can choose to work overtime for weeks before their holidays unlike in the past when they had to *'bang in the hours whenever they could'*.

The recently retired convenor of **Babcock (Devonport)** reported that a major change occurred at the last-but-one pay agreement, when the company bought out premium overtime payments. In the union's view because overtime equated to 1⅓ of pay rates, it made sense to accept a £1,600 buy-out and to have consolidated hourly pay rates, bearing in mind that this agreement applied to non-registered 'casuals'. Further, it was understood that the issue of overtime would come back to the negotiating table. The amount of overtime depends upon productive requirements so that, for example, when HMS Vanguard was behind schedule, a considerable number of hours were worked. One estimate made by the union was that on average roughly eight hours a week were worked. The Covid-19 pandemic has had a 'massive impact'. In the short term, the union won an agreement that workers worked only for the duration of their hours and then went home in order to minimise on-site footfall. The question of overtime is now bound up with the introduction of the optimised working-time (OWT) pattern, discussed above. A general observation is that the consolidated agreement that raised hourly pay rates lessened members' impulse to work overtime. Moreover, the experience of Covid was to make more widespread the attitude: *'I don't want to work overtime, Friday or Saturday, but want to spend more time with my family'*.

At Harland and Wolff (Belfast) the convenor reported that *'overtime working depends on the circumstances and is not constant'*, but a general trend in ship repair is for either overtime working to be either excessive when ships come in and turnaround times are tight, or non-existent. By contrast, in the main yard overtime is *'more consistent'*, although there could be a few months with little overtime and then *'peaks depending on the schedule'*. A significant observation, however, is *'a trend to less overtime being worked over the past few years'*. Previously, many had worked voluntary overtime on Fridays, *'but it's not like that now'*. The experience of Covid has been important and in the words of the convenor, *'I do believe people got a taste of what home life is like'*, drawing the conclusion, *'It should be working to live not living to work'*.

## 4.2 Defence

The officers at Leonardo (Edinburgh) made a number of observations related to the impact of Covid-19 and issues relating to overtime. The convenor agreed that there had been a perception among workers that work-life balance should be tilted more in favour of life away from work. *'People understood the value of not being here'*. With the company pressing for increased overtime working the union at site level has responded with a demand to increase the premia paid from the current 1.25 during the week and 1.5 at weekends. The company's response has been to say that they want to harmonise with the company's helicopter division to 1.3 during the week and 1.5 at weekends *'which is poor'*. Another observation on the consequences of Covid-19 related to young workers who, according to the convenor, have been hit the hardest, particularly because of the experience of working from home. Being removed from the workplace has meant that *'they're not getting the cross pollination of experience and knowledge that they used to get'*.

At Thales (Belfast) there is a discrepancy in the overtime pay arrangements according to the *'Level of Responsibility'* grade of the worker. Those on LR8 and LR9 (graduate and post-graduate engineers, team leads) and above do not get paid overtime, but rather receive an annual one-off Voluntary Compensation Payment (VCP) based on what is essentially a performance assessment score. In the convenor's experience those grades entitled to overtime payments will work *'as much overtime as they can, especially the [lowest grade] LR3s'*, although currently overtime is paid only at time or at 1.2 or 1.3 depending on the shift.

The convenor confirmed the observation, applicable to many of the sites in this study, that there had been a general decline in overtime working and a wider perception that work-life balance had become of greater importance to many workers. However, *'now it's very much [individual] case specific'* and it's difficult to generalise. One notable development, related more directly to the concerns of the engineers and working from home. When the company requested a return to the workplace and that *'two-thirds of their time had to be spent on-site'*, it was opposed by them and the union. In fact, it was not possible to implement this demand, because of the significant space constraints in the workplace.

## 4.3 Automotive

At Jaguar Land Rover, the union officers revealed a major difference within the plant in respect of manual workers and the hours of overtime worked. In the off-track, rather than the production facility, workers, who are often the longest-serving and older members of the workforce, *'tend to get asked to do the overtime quite a lot'*. The reason is the huge pressure in this area, that repairs faults, scratches or dents, whether minor or more significant. *'Sometimes...it could be a supplier issue and we've got a batch of like a thousand dodgy wheels or something'*, reported the convenor. Most often these repairs are required to be made to the *'really complex'*, large vehicles, *'full of gadgets'* (e.g. Range Rovers, Range Rover Sports), where pressing customer demand increases the pressure for completion, particularly when payments are dependent on delivery. For other markets, payments are made when vehicles are placed on lorry loaders or boats or when they *'land in the showroom'*. So when, for example, *'800 vehicles are in WIP (Work-In Progress) we need to rattle through it...12 hours Saturday, 12 hours Sunday is not unusual'*.

By contrast, in the production facility, workers tend to work the standard 36 hours on three shifts and *‘they only really do overtime if they’ve had some sort of disruption’* or because of extra sales. *‘Sometimes everything flows and runs lovely and apart from his [the senior steward’s] area there’s very little overtime’*.

Regarding the impact of Covid-19, a significant difference between manual and staff workers was reported. Production workers had only the briefest hiatus during the early weeks of the pandemic, returning to the plant after two to three weeks to resume vehicle manufacturing. In contrast, office-based staff began working remotely, and it is amongst them that *‘people have got into that mindset from being at home’* coming to believe that *‘there is more to life than being at work’* and *‘don’t want to work all the time’*. These reflections on the consequences of Covid-19 on work and workers resonate with studies that emphasised the ‘systemic failures of labour law’ (Ewing and Hendy, 2020) and the impotence of the HSE’s regulatory enforcement (James *et al*, 2021). Confusion over, and ambiguity regarding, the categories of key workers who should continue to undertake on-site working, exposed many of the manufacturing workers in the sites studied to the risks of infection, morbidity and even mortality.

At Bentley (Crewe) the convenor was of the view that since Covid there has been generally less desire to work overtime and *‘more people appreciate time over money’*. At the same time a balance has to be struck. Although people may *‘value time off more than money, we have to be careful in our negotiations sometimes because, obviously, our primary goal is to generate money for our members’*. Another steward believed that the fact they had a 35-hour week gave workers ‘more scope’ to work overtime as a matter of individual choice.

## 4.4 Aerospace

At Airbus (Broughton) the convenor emphasised how many workers’ perceptions of working time had altered. *‘Due to the likes of 9/11 and Covid, people change their lives now, they want more time off’*. At the same time there are some, depending on their position in life, who *‘chase the overtime’* if it’s available. An on-site accident in 2011, when a worker died when servicing a snow plough, prompted a change in attitudes to and company policy on overtime. It transpired that the individual had been working excessive overtime, so the rule was established that no one can work more than 13 hours a week overtime. For the union it is a priority to protect the workers.

The GE Aviation (Cardiff) convenor confirmed some of themes that emerged in the testimonies of other union officers. Covid had prompted people to discover *‘a world outside of work’*, which has led to considerably lower levels of overtime being worked. *‘So maybe they are not having a shorter working week per se as they have 37.5 hours, but they are certainly not upping it with the levels of overtime that they previously did’*. The second ‘big thing’ is the desire to work from home, where their job permits them to do so, which does not necessarily mean shorter hours, but has the advantage of not having to travel to work every day. At the same time, though, the ability to work from home might result in a degree of presenteeism. *‘Whereas in the past, if you had to come to work, you would have rung in sick and therefore not done any work. I think now people are taking the option of well little bit under the weather, I’m not really sick, so I don’t want anything going against my record, but I’ll work from home instead’*.

## 4.5 Summary and observations

Inevitably, overtime arrangements, including the availability of hours and premia, varied according to sector, to company and most particularly at plant level. Not only do these arrangements reflect the nature of the product market in which the firm is embedded, but also express the outcomes and legacy effects of collective agreements and adjustments made over the years, as well as custom and practice and trade-offs concluded in union-employer negotiations over pay and conditions. Illustrations of the ways in which overtime working might differ, even within the same establishment, can be seen, first, in shipbuilding. For example, at Babcock (Rosyth) and Harland and Wolff intense turnaround time pressure in ship repair, as opposed to the main yards, prompts

extensive overtime working. At **Jaguar Land Rover**, the urgent financial requirement for mostly expensive, large and complex vehicles to be delivered to customers and suppliers at home and abroad means disproportionate overtime working off-track and to complete work-in-progress. In this case, the burden was falling on a section of the workforce who were often longer-serving and older and perhaps more reluctant to commit.

A significant number of the union convenors and shop stewards interviewed (**BAE Glasgow, Babcock Rosyth, Harland and Wolff, Leonardo, Bentley, Airbus, GE Aviation**) explicitly spoke of a general, albeit not universal, reduction in the levels of, or appetite for, overtime working in the aftermath of, and related, to the Covid-19 pandemic. Unpicking their testimonies, several themes emerge. The existential threat of the pandemic had prompted many workers to reconsider their values and attitudes to their working and non-work lives, concluding that time spent away from work, with family or friends or in other pursuits, had become more important. In the Leonardo convenor's words *'people understand the value of not being here'*. In short, the evidence from union officers affirms the emphatic findings from the survey of workers in the Phase 1 of this study (Taylor, 2022:28-30). Some commentary suggested that this trend was most pronounced among older workers who had reached a stage in their life-cycle where maximising income had become less of an imperative. The Harland and Wolff convenor succinctly captured a widespread shift in attitude as *'It should be working to live, not living to work'*.



## 5 Reduced working time – ideal and/or achievable

The schedule for the semi-structured interviews with convenors and stewards included two separate but related questions: *what working hours and working time arrangements would you ideally like to have and what working time arrangements do you think would be achievable?* The intention was first to elicit responses on more aspirational and ambitious aims for working-time in the longer-term and, perhaps, rooted in a broader moral or political sense of equity and fairness, and then to consider more concrete and realisable objectives. In practice, almost all respondents gave answers to the latter, on what further reductions to working time and beneficial changes to working-time arrangements could be achievable in the short or medium term. An important element in these discussions, understandably, was how amendments to existing hours and shift patterns might be made, which took full account of the interests and wishes of the members. So, any reflection on the ideal inevitably shaded into discussion of the achievable, as the weight of the testimonies below demonstrates.

### 5.1 Ideal working time

Some did consider what the ‘ideal’ might constitute. At **BAE Glasgow**, the convenor commented that ‘32 hours, four times eight, that sort of thing’ would be *‘brilliant, that’s what we would be wanting, that’s the ultimate’*, but the discussion moved quickly on to the realisable. The question did also stimulate a debate between the stewards on the prospect of ‘ideal’ shifts through three-day working, as, for example, Sunday, Monday and Tuesday and then four days off and back on the Monday with the Saturday *‘technically on paper’* ‘left a free day off for everybody’. However, objections were raised, notably that *‘the majority of the workforce would be against the length of time they would have to work to get the other day off’* and that it would mean working a Friday or Sunday, impacting the weekend. Lengthier shifts, even if overall working time were reduced to 35 hours, would be a factor given *‘the age of a lot of our guys’*. It was also reported that there could be resistance from workers, in that they *‘want stability and build their life around that’*, which the moveable shift days would prevent. Accordingly, the consensus on the practical and achievable, as discussed below, focused on reducing working time to the existing four-day week.

The convenor at **Babcock Rosyth** re-affirmed that *‘what we would like to get to is the 35...Ideally 35 hours over the four days as standard would be good’*. At **Leonardo (Edinburgh)** one rep declared that their ideal would be *‘four actual work days of 7.5 hours’*, supported by the convenor as a *‘good aspiration’*, *‘a clearly radical break’*, while another steward added *‘we want the Denmark model’*.<sup>2</sup> Regarding the shift pattern, another suggested that ideally workers should have the choice of which four work days they could work, whether taking a Monday or Friday off or, reflecting workers’ wishes they could spread their hours across the working week, as some people might want to take the Wednesday or Thursday. At **Jaguar Land Rover (Solihull)** the convenor stated his belief that the ideal would be *‘four eights’*, that is eight hours for each of four shifts. The convenor of **Bentley (Crewe)** commented that having had their hours reduced from 37 to 35, *‘the logic would suggest we come down to 33, a similar amount of decrease’*.

The **Rolls Royce (Barnoldswick)** convenor adopted a different approach when answering the question of what ‘ideal’ working time might be, that is more fully discussed later in this report. Rather than a quantitative proposal, he suggested that any long-term objective should be rooted in the *‘onset of new technology’* (AI, automation, Industry 5.0). While the net effects, specifically the scale and nature of job displacement or job creation, cannot be predicted, the opportunity exists for pay and productivity to be maintained and that workers can share in the spoils through ‘shorter working time’.

The Unite the Union convenor at **McVitie-Pladis (Manchester)** stressed the importance of eradicating across all sites the rotating shifts, as the most unhealthy shift configuration for workers, particularly in relation to 12-hour shifts. Questioning the management logic across the food-manufacturing sector, he insisted *‘They should be able to work Monday to Friday, eight-hour shifts’* and it should be not forgotten that *‘an eight-hour shift is a physically demanding job, you’re on your feet all that time’*. In addition, the 42 weekly hours should be reduced significantly.

## 5.2 Achievable working time

### 5.2.1 Shipbuilding

The general consensus of the union officers at **BAE Glasgow** was the realistic goal of achieving a reduction in working time from nine hours to eight hours and 45 minutes for each of the four existing shifts, that would mean a 35-hour week. Consideration was given to the acceptability of this objective for the members. One steward provided important insight on the negotiating process, the requirement to balance the potentially differing interests of those working dayshift, nightshift, sometimes backshift and a weekend shift and the importance of *‘bringing them all together’*, and concluded that *‘our first goal’s got to get to 35’* and get it ‘consolidated’ for all the workforce. A significant aspect of this aim relates to a change in shift times, with the consensus being that an earlier start time and finish time for the day shift, of 15 minutes, would be desirable for most (if not all), through shortened travel times that avoided heavy traffic.

At **BAE Barrow** the stewards believe that the first achievable objective and campaign should be to make contractual *‘what we’ve got’*, that is to say the 35.5 hours *de facto*, and that *‘would be substantially an achievement’* over the next two to three years. A ‘realistic’ aim *‘would be to push it to the 35’*, but less than 35 would not be achievable. It was reported that the company actually want more hours while the union were striving for fewer. At the same time, the union officers want to ensure that the current three on, four off, shift pattern for manuals became permanent because the flexibility it gives benefits the members. The other principal objective is to achieve harmonisation for the manual and the staff sides *‘to get the 35 contracted right across the site for all groups’*.

The **Babcock (Rosyth)** convenor believed *‘that they would get there [35 hours] but I think it will take time’*. One aim was in relation to the distribution of working time and more flexibility for individuals, so that the 36 hours could be done over three days, enabling workers to spend more time away from the site with their families. However, he conceded, although it might suit some, it would not be for everybody. He summarised the possibility as follows: *‘When we had 37 hours, 35 looked like a mountain, maybe not now’*.

At **Babcock (Devonport)** the recently retired convenor placed emphasis on achieving a four-day week. *‘For work-life balance it’s something we should be looking at now’*, although Babcock, driven by the customer, it was reported, is very reluctant to go to four days, despite this having been established at Rosyth for several years through compressed hours. At the last pay deal but one, the Devonport works committee had pushed for a reduction in hours to dispense with Friday working, on the back of extensive feedback from members to an electronic survey of Unite and GMB members that favoured this outcome. The requirement to complete work on an overdue vessel had thwarted this endeavour but, as indicated above, the unions succeeded in negotiating in 2023, and implemented in 2024, a 35-hour week. The objective now is to strive for four-day working with shifts of 8.5 hours which, in the respondent’s mind, would be desired by the members, but involves *‘alternative ways of working’* that *‘would work for the benefit of the members and the company’*. However, further reduction in working time was probably not on the agenda: *‘Speaking from experiences no [because] we would need to increase the workforce by 30 per cent, but the labour market isn’t there’*

The Harland and Wolff (Belfast) convenor believed that *'the 35-hour working week is achievable'* but it would be necessary to build a case with leverage. The immediate difficulty was that the company *'is currently going in the opposite direction, where they want people in 40 hours a week'*. An important contextual factor is the fact that the company is going through a transition in troubled financial circumstances. It was not known who the directors were going to be and whether they would be more sympathetic to the demand. However, he opined that if they were on a *'journey to a 35-hour week, then they would also be on a journey to extensive shift patterns'*, because of the company's need to have cover all the time. Accordingly, while the 35-hour week is definitely achievable, it could not be just for one shift but multiple shifts.

### 5.2.2 Defence

The consensus among stewards at Leonardo (Edinburgh) that what was achievable in the first instance would be to go from the existing 37 to 36 hours, *'prove that you can do it'* and then to 35 hours over two to three years. That would mean a compressed four day, nine hours shift pattern. One steward did raise the possibility of directly moving to a 35-hour week by removing 0.4 of an hour from each shift of 7.4 hours, but it was thought that this would mean taking industrial action that the members were not ready for. In summarising the discussion, the convenor considered that *'at the moment, moving from 37 to 36, and then to 35, would be steps in the direction'* of the longer-term aspiration and ideal alluded to above.

At Thales (Belfast) the answer to the question of what is achievable seems connected to compressed working, which means that 37 hours are condensed into four shifts, mostly Monday to Thursday, but for some Tuesday to Friday, depending on individual circumstances. For the convenor the obvious objective would be to reduce the duration of a shift to nine hours, which would mean a reduction of one hour a week to 36 hours, a reversion to the hitherto duration of working time.

### 5.2.3 Automotive

The convenor of Jaguar Land Rover (Solihull) believed he *'could get us down to a 35'*. However, *'the payback'* would be *'flexibility where it would almost be like annualised'*. The company could probably *'live with'* the 35 hours but would insist on an agreement that permitted them to *'call in the 40 or 41 hours'*. One obstacle might be members' suspicions that management might announce additional hours with little notice, given their experience of need to work *'catch back'*, following breakdowns or downtime, even though these required extensions have to be evidenced. Such instances indicate a wider difficulty, experienced by workers here and more widely, of the unpredictability of working time due to demands from management that may disrupt carefully constructed work-life arrangements. One final observation made by the stewards was that there had been previous experience of working 35-hour weeks. Following the financial crisis in 2008-9, the union negotiated a reduction in hours from 37 to forestall threatened redundancies.

At Bentley (Crewe) the Unite the Union convenor considered the question of what was achievable from the perspective of his union role as *'the art of the possible'*. If, for example, the union was to request a further reduction in working hours to 33 or 32, then there would be a counter-argument from the company. If, as the company currently emphasised, an additional 90 hours per year was needed from each worker, this annual requirement would not change where a 32-hour week was conceded. There would necessarily have to be a trade-off through overtime working or more of the longer, albeit voluntary, shifts. Nevertheless, he did believe that in the short-term, reduction [to 34 hours] was *'not in the realm of impossibility'*. The difficulty might be that the company would place caveats on a shorter working week, such as a reduction of annual holiday entitlement that might not be acceptable to the membership. In any event, it was the plant union's view that a shorter working week was not uppermost in their minds at present as they *'were just drawing breath from a protracted pay negotiation'*. This concrete situation draws attention to a more general observation. The specific collective-bargaining agendas and issues of priority, as well as the timings and outcomes of negotiations, might differ between companies and at plant levels, and thus impact in the short and medium term on pressing the demand

for shorter working time. This differentiation is considered more fully below, when the evidence is evaluated of respondents' perspectives on what could constitute a renewed campaign for shorter working time across the sector and, concretely, at plant level.

### 5.2.4 Aerospace

At Rolls Royce (Barnoldswick), the convenor believed they could *'achieve another hour's reduction in the short term'*, although he was *'agnostic'* about how that was likely to manifest and would be a matter for the membership to decide. His view was that the site membership would *'greatly welcome another six days' holiday to use when they want'*. There might be a demographic element underpinning this objective and the way the form that shorter working time might be realised. The age composition of the site workforces across the sector is an important factor in this analysis and is discussed fully below. The convenor indicated that there is some division between older workers, who might be characterised as *'cash-rich, but holiday-poor'* and would *'welcome the extra holidays'*, and younger workers *'starting out on their careers'*, many with young families and mortgages, for whom maximising income might probably be the priority. Nevertheless, the recent introduction of a shorter working week was *'broadly well received'* and would be *'welcome again as a future pay deal'*, so that a realistic medium-term objective would be to get a reduction down to 35 hours.

The convenor at Airbus (Broughton) reflected on the recent reduction in hours at the plant, which he summarised as constituting 50 minutes in the working week since the Covid-19 pandemic. Given the recency of this achievement, he believed that the company would be *'dead against'* a further reduction from 35 hours. Bentley's terms and conditions were *'probably one of the best around the area'*. The union at plant level had not pushed for lower than 35 hours, not least because of the *'need to remain credible sometimes'*.

At GE Aviation the union's long-term commitment to 35-hours was restated, but considered *'36 hours achievable based purely on our current shift pattern'*. The days, days, afternoons arrangement could deliver a lunchtime finish on a Friday: *'That would do 35 hours, in my opinion, from 12 o'clock to 3 o'clock on a Friday. There's your two and a half hours on the working week'*. The convenor thought it was achievable *'because we are currently discussing a new shift pattern'*. The union was working with the proposal of going to 7ff for all the shifts which would then give a Friday off on the afternoon shift, *'so we'd have a 14 day, three-week period...so, instead of 5, 5 and 5 Monday to Fridays we would then not work every 3rd Friday'*. That third Friday would land where the Saturday and Sunday did not need to be worked, which would mean a 5-5-4, a long weekend and *'you're down to a 35-hour week'*.

### 5.2.5 Manufacturing

For McVitie-Pladis (Manchester) the convenor was adamant that if the current shift pattern was kept in place, any reduction in hours would not be much of an advantage. Reduced working time would *'one hundred per cent'* have to accompany a changed shift pattern. So, both the ideal and practicable position is to dispense with rotating shifts and reduce the working week to 38 hours, consequent upon a thought-out, reconfigured shift pattern based on a more sophisticated understanding of demand and planning that would minimise non-productive, idle 'standing around' time.

## 5.3 Summary and observations

In sum, while discussions did tend to shade from the ideal to the achievable, at several sites convenors and stewards expressed ambitious, aspirational aims such as 33 hours at Bentley, 32 hours at BAE Glasgow and Jaguar Land Rover and even 30 hours at Leonardo. The content of the discussion also focused on how radical change would necessarily have to be accompanied by reconfigured shifts and their duration. At McVitie-Pladis the convenor insisted that reduction in working time was intimately tied up and, indeed, would have to follow the eradication of rotating shifts.

With regard to the achievable, union officers at sites where hours exceeded 35 thought shorter working time was a realistic objective, whether from 37 to 36 (Thales, Leonardo, Harland and Wolff) or as steps to 35 for the latter two, or from 36 to 35 (BAE Glasgow, BAE Barrow, Babcock Rosyth, Jaguar Land Rover, Rolls Royce). While at Bentley from 35 to 34 was considered to be not in the *'realm of impossibility'*, reduced hours at Airbus were not considered to be imminently achievable. At Babcock Devonport, for non-registered workers, the focus was on achieving a four-day week. All changes in working time would necessarily be outcomes of detailed negotiations over pay, terms and conditions and/or shifts which may involve trade-offs.

## 5.4 Legacy of the 'Drive for 35'

An addendum to this account of what working hours would be 'ideal' and/or 'achievable' is the legacy of the *Drive for 35* of 1989-91. That the desire to realise the campaign's objectives remains enduring and powerful is evidenced by the testimonies of respondents. Older union officers frequently recalled their direct experience of the 1989-91 campaign, while others, too young to have been involved, referred to how significant it was for the legacy they inherited. At BAE Glasgow two stewards, recalling the campaign, emphasised the importance of the strikes at British Aerospace and Rolls Royce, the manner of the concessions made and the impact across the sector. As a result, *'Our mob and various other companies'* did not want a long strike and thought *'Lets' be realistic'* which led to the phased reduction of shorter time at their yard. *'And we flag up to the company that one of our main priorities is the 35-hour week and it won't be going away'*. The Harland and Wolff (Belfast) convenor referred to how the legacy of the *Drive for 35* campaign was still alive, so that *'in every negotiation they pushed for a shorter working week'*.

At Leonardo (Edinburgh) officers, who had been involved, drew on their memories of the *Drive for 35*, how they had collected the levy in person from their colleagues and how it was *'the sites that had taken strike action, the BAE, the Vickers and Rolls Royce'* which won. Then, with *'the big companies...collapsing if you like, the argument for the second group was all the companies who had paid into the levy needed to get the 37 hours as well'*. The Rolls Royce (Barnoldswick) convenor, as an apprentice, remembered the campaign. His records contain a collection of cards and cheque stubs which showed that the site had contributed £147,500 to the CSEU. The GE (Cardiff) Convenor reflecting on the long-term influence of the *Drive for 35* campaign said: *'Well, to be honest, being in Unite, we've always had a 35-hour campaign and that's where the Alex Ferry fund came from'*.



## 6 Arguments and evidence for reduced working time and employer resistance

### 6.1 Introduction

Until this point the report has detailed the current arrangements for working time at the 13 sites, how these had changed over the decades, the agreements on overtime working and union officers' experiences of workers' uptake of working extra hours including, particularly, the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on workers' behaviours and attitudes. It condenses and evaluates answers to two important and related sets of questions included in the interview schedule. The first is *'what do you regard as the arguments/evidence that you can use to push for reduction and move the employers?'* The second is *'what perceptions do you have of employers' willingness to negotiate over reduction/redistribution of working time and what do you regard as the major obstacles?'* Accordingly, the section is divided into two parts. Sub-section 6.2 presents the arguments and evidence for the reduction in working time and is organised by the following themes: productivity improvements, overcoming management-generated problems and downtime, the '15-minute argument', physical- and mental-health benefits and family-friendly policies. Sub-section 6.3 considers respondents' experiences and perceptions of the obstacles and resistance to shorter working time. Both sub-sections conclude with summaries and observations.

The material in this chapter is clearly important for identifying those elements that could form the basis of a renewed campaign for shorter working time at national, sector, company and site levels. The findings resonate with evidence in the following Sections 7 and 8, but most importantly are central to the concluding Section 9 which considers the basis for the renewed campaign for shorter working time.

### 6.2 Arguments and evidence for reduced working time

All respondents agreed with the need to present to employers the strongest possible, evidence-based case for shorter working time and reconfiguration of shifts. While, in the previous sections, the responses have been presented sequentially plant by plant, in this and the following sub-section the material is organised thematically. While the interview transcripts reveal company or plant-specific elements to persuade, convince or leverage management, certain common arguments are identified, especially those successfully used in negotiations, or are anticipated to be effective, emphasising those that may contribute to the most persuasive case.

#### 6.2.1 Productivity

Productivity was the theme most frequently identified by the union respondents as being core to the case for reduced or reconfigured working time. In short, that shorter working time would have no detrimental impact on productivity, or indeed could even lead to increased productivity and efficiency, was considered to be a key persuasive argument, particularly when evidence-based. So, at **BAE Systems (Glasgow)** the convenor commented that *'we all know there's millions of ways of getting production up'*, rooted to a large extent in poor management processes and downtime (discussed more fully below), that could bolster the case. Providing evidence based on recent experience is self-evidently important.

The **BAE Systems (Barrow)** convenor explained, *'If you can prove that by doing a shorter working week, the improvements in productivity are going to increase, that is how you are going to get the gains'*. A specific argument at their yard is that the *de facto* reduction to 35.5 hours 'has benefited both sides', especially in the sense that *'the workforce is telling them [the company] that that's what they really want'*, leading to greater engagement and improved morale. A similar argument was put forward by the former convenor of **Babcock (Devonport)**. Evidence of actual or potentially improved productivity was a perquisite – a 'perk' – for

bargaining over working time. *'If you're looking for something, then you've got to give something. You've got to prove to them that if they give you what they want then you've got to give them what they are looking for'.* At **Harland and Wolff (Belfast)**, again, *'We could definitely build a case that productivity would not suffer'*, I think it absolutely feasible', focusing also, as at BAE Glasgow, on overcoming the problems of poor planning and process.

A **Leonardo (Edinburgh)** shop steward emphasised the need to prove that *'everyone is on board with what you need to do with productivity, because productivity will drive everything'*. The convenor believed that the argument around productivity should be combined with benefits to workers' mental and physical health and gender and family-friendly implications, deriving from shorter working time. The **Thales (Belfast)** convenor reiterated the importance of *'business efficiency improvement that would need to be demonstrated'*, but added the caveat that the employer might *'turn around and use your arguments against you'*. In concrete terms, it was suggested, the union could argue that the four hours working in a Friday was inefficient and should be abolished, but the concession to shorter working time might mean management giving seven hour shifts for five days, and insisting on the need to work two extra hours when they required. The main thrust of the union case lies in the fact that, *'The business will always look at what will be the return on investment'*, but not if they reduced the working week to 36 hours and then *'they take an hour's pay off us again'*. *'We're looking at the current salary level – it's the productivity that pays for it'*.

The market success of **Bentley (Crewe)** since 2019 has been and remains important to any case for shorter working time. Rather than reduced working hours having negatively affected productivity, it can be argued that they have contributed to the strengthening of the company's position. Nevertheless, there is a suggestion that the growth in productivity has been accompanied by – or causally connected to – increases in work intensity. The convenor commented how, *'we've been a lot more efficient, you are working harder too...less downtime, you're always on the go. There's more people on the line [so that] track time reduces, you've got to be there, that's the difference'*.

The 2023 pay deal at **Rolls Royce (Barnoldswick)**, which delivered an hour's reduction (annually-based) in the working week, included the requirement to have a subsequent review. The convenor reported that with the *'benefit of the last six months' 'living and breathing shorter working time...there's been no impact financially, a positive impact, from the company's perspective in terms of productivity'*. His verdict is that this is the *'empirical evidence that adds great weight to our argument'* going forward. For the **GE Cardiff** convenor, the evidence for improved productivity, that could underpin the case for shorter working time, lay with the company initiating production schedules, where teams *'could just get on with the work [with] less distractions...'* *'Look! Leave this team to itself, let the trial run', and we would show you the productivity that they can have'*.

Some made very specific suggestions as to how productivity could be enhanced which could contribute to enabling the introduction of shorter working time. The **Harland and Wolff** convenor suggested that managers might give workers *'commitment sheets at the start of a shift [and putting] the right people in the right place to do the right job'*. The **Rosyth (Babcock)** convenor reported that shorter working time had been negotiated in part by minimising the social time at the start and at the end of the shifts, thus accentuating productive time.

That shorter working can improve, or at least have no negative consequences for, productivity, is widely held across the sector to be the most persuasive argument to engage and shift employers. The evidence suggests, though, that it is by no means a straightforward matter to convince employers of the case, not least because of their preoccupation with short-term cost calculations and metrics. Some report the challenges in constructing a case, having to contest senior management's interpretation of data and evidence. Some reported, notably at **Jaguar Land Rover**, that employers' short-term fixation on production targets and output meant they were unresponsive to arguments.



### 6.2.2 Management generated problems and downtime

In addition, and related to the positive, persuasive case that shorter working time can improve or has improved productivity, union officers focused specifically on management's shortcomings. Addressing and overcoming deficiencies would improve productivity. A senior steward at BAE Glasgow made a telling observation that is worth quoting in full: *'We can be more productive easily, but it totally comes down to how you're managed, right, how they enable you. And we're a distance away from being what we should be. But the savings they would make from that could pay for what we're talking about ten times over. If you're spending most of your day trying to find equipment and trying to find this or not being able to do that...you know the company's losing money hand over fist [and] it's poor management'*.

Downtime was widely reported. The Glasgow BAE convenor believed it to be *'the biggest thing in our industry... the lost production is horrendous'* and resulted from *'a multitude of things'*, including bad planning, poor management and notably materials and supplies being unavailable at the production front line. Babcock Devonport's convenor observed *'that nobody comes into work to stand with their hands in their pockets [but if they are] then there's something wrong, you've got a problem and it's not the guy at the bottom, it's further up the chain of command'*. Measures, including improvements to processes and planning, material and resource utilisation, streamlining flows or eliminating document duplication, were cited that could be taken to enhance efficiency and improve productivity.

The GE Cardiff convenor cited distractions and interruptions to production as major negative impacts on productivity. During the course of day shifts, there would normally be *'three or four interruptions... when your manager changes work schedules, changes priorities'*. He gave a concrete example, *'there's nothing worse than we pull an engine out of the kitting facility, where all the parts become available and all of a sudden, you'll get somebody saying look priorities have changed. We need to put that back on the shelves and start this one. It can take three or four hours just to put all the main cases into stands, lay out all the parts, check all the parts applicability'*. Some, particularly, the convenor at Jaguar Land Rover made reference to supply-chain problems, post-Brexit or exacerbated by the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic that, in the overall context of just-in-time production, caused interruptions to production and downtime.

It is not merely the deleterious effects for production that trouble the union officers. A major concern is downtime's negative impacts on the workforce. A steward at BAE Glasgow put it succinctly, *'It sucks the soul out of people'*, it was *'soul destroying'* according to the GE Cardiff convenor, *'a killer'*, as another respondent stated. The McVitie-Pladis convenor concurred, reporting that re-tooling machines during shifts, often because of insufficient planning, created unnecessary morale-sapping downtime.

### 6.2.3 The '15-minutes' argument

It is worth reporting on a concrete argument regarded as important to formulating a persuasive case for shorter working time. Stewards at BAE Systems (Glasgow) emphasised the effectiveness of their argument to the company of breaking down the sought-after reduction of an hour's weekly working time into the specific bargaining proposal that this would mean only 15 minutes a shift (given the four-shift working week). The convenor recalled *'...all they could see was the hour disappearing and [when we] put it simply, as "It's 15 minutes a day"...that was basically something they never thought about'*. An hour had been *'this gigantic thing that they wouldn't get by'*, but when the case was put in those terms, he recalled, it was difficult for a counter-argument to be put, especially with a commitment to jointly finding *'a way of claiming 15 minutes a day to improve the business'*. This interview was the second in the author's schedule, so that at subsequent interviews, it was possible to probe respondents on their perceptions. The convenor of Babcock (Rosyth) also reported that when they pushed for an hour's reduction in the working week, they said *'it's only 15 minutes a day'*.

Several positively affirmed the potential efficacy of this ‘15-minute argument’. For example, the Harland and Wolff (Belfast) convenor agreed that he would ‘definitely adopt that at some stage’ when he could. The Thales (Belfast) convenor believed ‘That is a very good argument’, although it would apply only to the site’s compressed-hour workers.

### 6.2.4 Physical- and mental-health benefits

A slew of respondents emphasised the mental and physical health benefits from reducing working hours. For the Thales convenor they would include ‘less sick days - flu, colds, mental health’. The Rolls Royce convenor revealed that ‘well-being’ was ‘a most persuasive line of argument’ that he has adopted with management: ‘I said, you lot spend millions on well-being and mental health, and all this stuff...one hour will do far more for your business than you realise and all these gizmos and quangos and everyone else you bring in. I said, it’s real, tangible, talk is cheap – it’s actions we want to see. One hour reduction reduce your sickness absence’ and other benefits’. This narrative was echoed by the Jaguar Land Rover convenor who commented on the company’s belated acknowledgement of the problems of mental ill-health and their declarations of being supportive and providing counselling, but challenged their commitment as rhetorical. ‘Well if you’re that concerned about people’s well-being and mental health why there is nothing better than a shorter working week?’. Improving mental health is ‘our best bet’ in the case for shorter working time, particularly in respect of its potential for reducing sickness absence. ‘We’ve got ten thousand people on absence could easily run at 6/7/8%...the cost to the business is huge’, so if it was reduced by 1-2%, ‘it’s big money’.

Bentley’s (Crewe) convenor stated shorter working time meant that ‘morale is a lot higher, productivity is better, people doing a better job because they are less fatigued, happier going home at three, they are off sick less, less chance of getting injured’. Similar to many respondents, the GE Aviation (Cardiff) convenor emphasised the interconnections between shorter working time, improved worker health and enhanced productivity. ‘Well, I think normally the fight you get with American companies is to prove your productivity. So, if we can show that there could be productivity gains for a healthier, agile workforce that’s our avenue to approve it to the business’.

The Babcock Rosyth convenor highlighted a general truth that the manual work in these establishments is arduous and takes its toll physically. Working in a shipyard means, ‘you are on your knees a lot, you’re in awkward positions, lifting heavy gear and people feel it in their late 50s, early 60s’. While there has been an influx of apprentices and younger ‘production support operatives’, the older workers who are in ‘a different place in their life’ generally want to spend more time away from the workplace, because it can be stressful’. Yet, the shortage of skilled workers, again discussed below, means that this cohort are indispensable to the company’s production. ‘A shorter working week will enable people to survive longer in the industry’.

### 6.2.5 Gender- and family friendly policies

The stewards at Leonardo (Edinburgh) made insightful observations on the importance of shorter working time and recalibrated shifts for women workers and for family-friendly considerations. We put forward the argument that current arrangements for compressed hours are inconsistent with ‘the firm’s family-friendly policies [which] were failing women and carers and only reducing working time could bring their effective application’. Again, the case related to the dominant objective of boosting productivity: ‘bringing a shorter working week would allow more women with family caring responsibilities to take up compressed, four-day working, which they can’t at the moment if you’ve got children and you’ve got to do nine-and-a-half hours every day’.

### 6.2.6 Summary and observations

The issue of productivity, specifically that shorter working time and reconfigured working patterns or shifts would have no detrimental impact, indeed could contribute to increases in productivity, was the argument most

widely reported as being the most persuasive. The case for shorter working time should as much as possible be based on proof or evidence that it has succeeded or would succeed. Some made very concrete suggestions. Nevertheless, although the union respondents emphasised that their arguments could be compelling, they affirmed that it was by no means straightforward to shift managements that were preoccupied with immediate production demands, targets, output, short-term metrics and cost calculations.

Closely allied to the positive union case, stewards highlighted how poor management practice, including inadequate planning and flawed processes and sub-optimal deployment of human and material resources that too often led to ‘soul destroying’ interruptions, changed schedules and downtime, were major problems that had to be overcome. In this regard, consultation with the unions by management, reported to be frequently neglected, was required.

The ‘15-minute argument’ is worthy of particular emphasis. Essentially, managements’ opposition to an hour’s reduction in weekly working time could be undermined by the union breaking this down into ‘15 minutes a day/shift’ on the basis of a four-day working pattern. As reported, particularly by stewards at **BAE Systems (Glasgow)**, casting the claim into what seems more achievable can help to shift management’s perceptions.

The benefits for workers’ physical and mental health were widely reported, in terms of both improvements to workers’ well-being and their lives and, from the perspective of management interests, for advancing the case for productivity through more engaged and rested employees and better morale. Some highlighted the potential cost advantages for employers of reduced levels of sickness absence. One final argument concerned the importance of shorter working time for women workers and the implications for their family and caring responsibilities.

## 6.3 Obstacles and resistance to shorter working time

### 6.3.1 Obstacles and resistance

The stewards at **BAE Systems (Glasgow)** reported on the resistance that management has to demands for shorter working time, and the specific arguments they advance to counter them. The principal obstacles from their perspective relate to the number of programmes the company has and the volume of the workload. A senior steward articulated the company’s principal defence that they use *‘the customer as their excuse, that the MoD can’t afford to cover the costs and...we’ve got to get these ships built on time’*. When the union presents demands for shorter working time, the company defaults to the *‘finance guy’* to calculate the impact that an hour’s reduction would have on production costs, *‘ten million pounds a year or something like that’*. This preoccupation with a short-term, cost calculation dominates management’s mindset, and is then countered by the union’s case that productivity can be improved, a case that includes the ‘15-minute argument’.

Unsurprisingly, some similar management objections were highlighted by union officers at **BAE Systems (Barrow)**. They reported that the ‘biggest problem’ is the fact that the company is *‘tied to one customer, that is the MoD’*, and they would be preoccupied by performance criteria, including cost, and delivery schedules. So, the company’s reference to the MoD’s requirements would be a default point of resistance to making concessions on working time.

It was reported that management’s resistance at **Babcock (Rosyth)** to the shortening of each shift in the four-day week by 15-minutes was based on the view that productive time would be accordingly reduced. The union’s commitment to eliminating ‘social’ non-productive time was questioned, to which the union responded that that this did not constitute a problem if managed. ‘Tradition’ and ingrained habits and practices were obstacles, reinforced by the view of managers if they themselves were having to work long hours, then workers should also have to. The convenor reported that ‘fortunately’ a forward-thinking MD who regarded the union’s case as reasonable asked questions and sought clarifications rather than defaulting to refusal.

The recently retired **Babcock (Devonport)** convenor highlighted the legacy of controls, regulations and standards from the MoD to which Babcock have been obliged to comply, leading to the unnecessary duplication of processes and documentation, which have inhibited the ability to improve productivity. Nevertheless, the MoD has become more proactive with Babcock in streamlining processes, although it is necessary to be mindful of the unlikelihood of further reduction in working time for non-registered workers as indicated above.

A strategic priority dominating **Harland and Wolff (Belfast)** was the need to attract customers by marketing itself competitively as having the capacity to deliver maximum production coverage, that included the appeal that its workforce worked 40-hour weeks. As indicated above, manual workers are contracted to work 37 hours but three additional hours had been agreed, although on an entirely voluntary basis. As a result, the resistance the unions were encountering to their claims for shorter working time came from the company's insistence on having 'as many people here as often as possible on a flat rate of pay...That's why they are preaching the 40-hour week.'

The **Leonardo (Edinburgh)** convenor highlighted the company's strategic approach that was intended to be an impediment to the union as it pursued its demands. In the words of the convenor, Leonardo 'counterpose custom working to shorter working time'. They maintain that they provide workers with '*the best flexibility in the industry*'. The effect has been '*to introduce as much management discretion as possible*' to individualise employment relations and 'avoid collective bargaining'. While the union has been able to get rid of performance-related pay, discretion and individualisation '*exists in most parts of the business*', against which the union strives to collectivise workers' interests through concrete demands.

The resistance to shorter working time by **Thales** was related to the company's reluctance to concede the four-day week to the whole workforce. The Belfast convenor reported how the company had used consultants at Glasgow to conduct a study of the viability of the four-day week, but it was a superficial exercise, the outcome of which – to reject the recommendation – was a foregone conclusion.

**Jaguar Land Rover's (Solihull)** preoccupation was to increase flexibility, '*the ability to catch [production] losses back faster with the current workforce*'. The company's objective was to move in the opposite direction to the shorter working week, to actually increase working hours. The convenor reported that not a week goes by '*when the ops director or HR director or both, either ring me or come and see me and go "what are we going to do? Three hours isn't enough, we're under pressure"*'. Thus, the biggest obstacle is the employer's fixation on cost, a refusal to '*employ more people*' that would lead to more productive outcomes.

At **Airbus (Broughton)**, similarly, and in common with many companies in this study, the main point of resistance is management's insistence on meeting the demands of production; they want people here '*building wings, that's the issue*'. In addition, to achieve any further reduction in hours, which the convenor has indicated as not imminently realistic, or to reconfigure working time, a major obstacle is the '*cost of employing more people*'; notwithstanding the evidence of, and arguments for, improved productivity.

### 6.3.2 Summary and observations

The most frequently reported point of resistance to union claims for reduced working time were managements' fixation with the demands of production, both immediate and projected, and the need to fulfil customers' orders. Often related to these imperatives was antipathy towards the perceived increase in labour costs that would ensue from conceding shorter working time, including the possibility of having to engage additional labour. In naval defence, the regulations and controls imposed by the MoD were regarded as impediments. Some obstacles were company-specific. For example, it was reported that Leonardo management's strategic aim was to individualise employment relations in the form of flexible 'custom' working at managerial discretion at the expense of collective agreements over working time.

## 7 Labour supply and the workforce

Having evaluated, most importantly, the principal arguments and evidence that can be adduced to support the case for shorter working time, and having evaluated the employers' points of resistance, the report turns to examine contextual factors which have implications for the case for reduced hours and potential outcomes. This section evaluates the significance, actual and potential, of the related factors of labour shortages and workforce demographics.

### 7.1 Labour shortages and changed workforce demographics

Across the sector, albeit not for every plant in the study, two related issues of considerable significance emerged from the interviews: the **BAE Glasgow** respondents discussed the labour shortage problem, which was so severe that *'we've got guys coming back two days a week'*. An *'absolute nightmare'*, the convenor commented, so that the company was *'maxing out in apprentice programmes and training up people and giving people a second chance at missed apprenticeships and all that'*.

The shop stewards at **BAE Barrow** confirmed the existence of a skills labour shortage which the company was attempting to address through the recruitment of apprentices. It was reported that 1,000 apprentices would be taken on in September 2024, in addition to the 800 currently progressing. Stewards commented on the demographic composition of the workforce, the result of the long-term gap in apprentice recruitment. The outcome is an 'hourglass' shape, with an aging, skilled cohort at the top and a growing layer of younger workers, but as one steward put it *'from like 35 to like 50 you are missing'*, so there is this gap.

At **Babcock (Rosyth)** *'We really struggle to get the shipbuilding trades at the moment'*. The company planned to recruit another 1,000 blue-collar workers over the next 18 months, while 'taking on 100 apprenticeships a year over the next four years' and in addition hiring 300 semi-skilled 'Product Service Operatives' (PSOs). Similar to BAE Glasgow, overseas workers were being hired – 170 on visas from the Philippines – *'to get us through this period'*. On the positive side for the union, as far as progressing shorter working time claims, *'The skills shortage certainly strengthens our hand'*.

The recently retired convenor at **Babcock (Devonport)** reported how they had gone through 'a period of ten years where we had no apprentices supporting welders'. The union argued with the company that relying on contract staff *'was a very dangerous game because these guys could just leave without a week's notice'*. The consequence was that eight years ago, the average age of the workforce was 58. At that time, the convenor undertook a piece of research that calculated that the company needed to recruit 400 apprentices a year for five years *'just to maintain numbers'*.

Another element of the altered demographic, that has implications for reconfigured working time, relates to the geographical locus of employees, in the context of changing skills and shortages. The **Leonardo (Edinburgh)** convenor commented on how one of the *'biggest changes in the composition of the workforce over the last 15/20 years'* is that no longer do the bulk of the people necessarily live locally. Workers come from Glasgow and the west and from further afield, partly because there are less blue-collar, semi-skilled employed, and that it has become *'more professional in engineering'*. As stewards elsewhere, particularly at Bentley, have indicated, the changed travel-to-work distances raises issues over temporal flexibility and the reconfiguration of shift timings, for example, to enable commuting workers to avoid travelling at peak traffic times.

The **Thales (Belfast)** convenor reported on how five years ago the company had been 'depressing' the levels of skilled workers they were employing. However, in a changed market and specifically for the company, the Russia-Ukraine war, they were looking to bring in *'several thousand more people a year'*. Since the market has changed *'big time'*, there's a competition problem because *'other companies have their time-served engineers on a different field'*.



One explicit reference to the age profile of the workforce that arose in the discussions with stewards at **Jaguar Land Rover** related to the fact that it was most often the longest-serving, older workers, concentrated in off-track, who tended to work longer hours, through overtime, to undertake the repairs and *'tend to get asked to do the overtime quite a lot'*. The huge pressure in this area of the facility is because of the financial imperative to complete ordered vehicles for customers, showrooms and deliveries

The **Bentley (Crewe)** convenor confirmed the *'shortage of a skill set within the labour market'* and added that a specific deficit, that would clearly be of significance in the future, was around *'electrification'*. He added that, *'it sounds derogatory, but it is not meant to be, non-skilled labour was in abundance'*. Nevertheless, the skilled labour shortage was not an issue for Bentley specifically, which could be attributed, he believed, to the good terms and conditions, including the 35-hour week, which were attractive to labour and led to high levels of retention. One steward commented that *'People drive past other car plants to come here'*. The demographic profile in evidence at other plants of a layer of older workers, gaps in the middle-aged range and a newer cohort of younger workers, but still an aging workforce in general, was not applicable at Bentley. The average age of the workforce is reported to be 43 years, although it had been a lot higher. Release packages had whittled down the average age.

Consistent with the testimony of other respondents, the **Rolls Royce (Barnoldswick)** convenor attested to widespread skill shortages, which *'are going to be real for the next five years, make no mistake'*. He referred to the legacy of the general failure to recruit apprentices during the 1990s, exacerbated *'in our industry'* after 9/11 and, then, following the 2008 financial crash. Then, *'you've got all these cohorts of gaps compounded by the pandemic, where people just left the industry and thought, I'm not going back into that'*. The convenor believed that many young people now had a different mindset and would *'not put up with bad corporate behaviour'*, they would *'lift and shift'*. Demographic differentiation among the workforce may have implications for orientations to working time. For the convenor, *'If you look at the older demographic...certainly within areas of relatively well-paid manufacturing, such as Aerospace and Shipbuilding'* they may be regarded *'as cash-rich, holiday-poor'* and would welcome extra holidays. Yet, the younger demographic, *'starting out on their careers', 'family life', 'young children', 'they've got mortgages'* might welcome *'pound notes'*, which could be *'a challenge'* in some respects. At the same time, shorter working time, additional holidays and greater temporal flexibility might well chime with younger workers' family, domestic and caring needs. The convenor concluded that the reduction in the working week was very well received across the age spectrum and *'would be welcome again as part of a future pay deal'*.

At **GE Aviation (Cardiff)** different demographic issues emerged. First, there were the consequences arising from the retirement of *'older guys'*, impacting negatively on the skill base of the workforce, through the loss of tacit knowledge that could be passed on to younger worker, and which negatively impacted on productivity. The convenor estimated that the average length of service pre-Covid had been 20-25 years but was now 10-15 years, and the average age of the workforce had dropped from the *'high forties to mid-thirties'*. The majority of responses in this study indicate that skill shortages affected their sites. However, this was not the case at this plant, for there was *'an abundance of skilled labour at the moment'*, which the convenor attributed in part to the relatively recent closure of the Ford plant in Bridgend. The conclusion for this site at least being that local labour market factors may run counter to more general trends.

## 7.2 Summary and observations

Labour shortages across the sector overall were widely, although not universally, reported. The source of the skills deficit lay in the longer-term consequences of the failure to have recruited apprentices during the 1990s and later. The outcome has become manifest in aging workforces, or the *'hourglass'* demographic with a legacy layer of older workers and the recent recruitment of apprenticeships, in many cases significant, and younger workers. This uneven age structure has several implications for union claims for shorter working time, including the reported health benefits for older workers, their particular desire to work shorter hours, the lengthening of travel-to-work distances. One important observation, with consequences for the realisation of reduced working time, was that labour and skill shortages strengthen unions' bargaining positions.

## 8 Emerging market conditions

The second contextual factor that has a bearing on employers' willingness to make concessions to demands for shorter working time and which, inescapably, is and will be an important issue in negotiations, collective bargaining and outcomes at plant level particularly is the state of the order books and the market conditions in which firms are embedded.

### 8.1 Order book and market

The health, or otherwise, of a particular company's order book within the prevailing market conditions at macro-economic and sectoral levels are important factors impinging on union's ability to exercise bargaining leverage over terms and conditions that include working time. Inevitably, there is differentiation across the case studies in the study. Beginning with shipbuilding, the evidence, with one exception, is of full order books the consequence of government and MoD spending on warship building.

At **BAE Systems (Glasgow)** the company's imperative to fulfil orders has manifested itself, as indicated above, in certain short-term fixes, notably the recruitment of contracted overseas labour. The stewards believed that implications of the order book (reported to be full until 2040) were double-sided. As one said, *'It's worked to our advantage in a lot of ways [but] to our disadvantage in some ways as well'*. The company uses the argument that the workers will not be able to get 'more settled employment' elsewhere. At **BAE Systems (Barrow)** the stewards reported that the 'prediction' was that the order book runs to 2055 and that they are *'in a very fortunate place at this present moment', 'a nice position to have'*, when negotiating with the company. The impact of AUKUS (the trilateral security partnership among the USA, the United Kingdom and Australia) will be to double infrastructural capacity and increase its workforce from 13,500 to 17,000 (BAE Systems, 2024).

Without going into the specifics of the order book, the **Babcock (Rosyth)** convenor commented on how *'really busy'* the industry was and, because *'the skills aren't available...the worker is in a strong position'*. The company's recent annual report (Babcock, 2024) provides evidence, for example, of the announcement in 2024 of 1,000 new roles at Rosyth and, despite reported rising costs, the continuation of the Type 31 frigate programme.

The recently retired convenor at **Babcock (Devonport)** provided valuable insight into the relationship between demand (for vessels) and the realisation of shorter working time. He emphasised the fact that, specifically in the naval-defence sector, orders are driven by the customer (the MoD) and not by the employer. Concretely, the sector will be impacted by the demand that will be generated by AUKUS but, while that may be considered as strengthening the union's bargaining position in a general sense, a problem exists in relation to the deficiency in labour supply and infrastructure. His view was that, to get to a position where the demand for a four-day week was attainable, there would need to be a significant increase in the supply of skilled labour.

The exception in the shipbuilding sector to the market situation of the certainty of sustained demand is **Harland and Wolff (Belfast)**. The company fell into administration in September 2024 after it failed in July 2024 to secure a £200 million loan guarantee from the incoming Labour government. At the time of writing the first draft of the report (November 2024), negotiations were taking place between the UK government and Spanish defence group, Navantia, which was seeking an additional £300 million in return for rescuing Harland and Wolff (Financial Times, 2024). Navantia had partnered Harland and Wolff in 2020 in a successful bid for a £1.6 billion contract to build three Royal Navy vessels. Despite Harland and Wolff having tripled its revenues and halving its losses in 2023, the firm has been badly encumbered with debt from US hedge fund Riverstone.

After many months of uncertainty, Navantia completed the purchase of Harland and Wolff on 27 January 2025. After some tough negotiation with the UK government and other parties, it was agreed that all jobs would be retained as part of the deal. Additionally, the workforce will likely double over the next two years. It is expected that the workload, the infrastructure and expansion of the yard will increase dramatically and should secure



the long-term future of the yard and the fulfilment of the Fleet Solid Support (FSS) programme. The current wage agreement expires on 31 March 2025 and the union's wage proposal will include a request for a reduced working week and clarification of proposed shift-work definitions. There will be wholesale reorganisation of the company and, at the time of writing in late-January 2025, it is not known how this restructuring will impact future negotiations.

According to the convenor, **Thales (Belfast)** has experienced a significant rise in orders and an expansion of operations and output following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. This was vividly described: *'...after Ukraine our sales guys used to be all over the world trying to drum up business, going to companies, visiting delegations...Now they're saying "We don't have to go anywhere anymore, our phones are ringing from all over the world". That was the reality after Ukraine'*. Respondents at **Leonardo (Edinburgh)** indicated that the business had a healthy order book, illustrated by the fact that the company was continuously pressing employees to work overtime.

Without full elaboration, the respondents at the three aerospace companies made reference to the healthy stream of orders. The **Airbus (Broughton)** convenor talked about how the company was an attractive employer not only because of the terms and conditions on offer but also because of the healthy order book. At **GE Aviation (Cardiff)** the convenor reported on how demand was increasing *'from the Covid days'*, despite problems with supply chains.

At **Bentley (Crewe)** the trajectory over decades had been growth. The convenor recalled that when he commenced his employment (in 1990) the site was producing 2,000 vehicles a year with a workforce of 1,800, compared to the present of 16,000 vehicles with a workforce of 5,000. The future market situation for the company is dominated by the prospect of electrification. While the site presently does not manufacture electric vehicles, *'we've got a couple of projects ongoing and we are anticipating 2027'*. However, he cautioned it would be *'challenging'*.

## 8.2 Summary and observations

The relative health of a company's order book within prevailing market conditions is an important factor in union's ability to exercise bargaining leverage over terms and conditions, including working time. With the exception of the uncertainty surrounding **Harland and Wolff (Belfast)**, the shipbuilding sites have decades-full order books, because of government and MoD spending on warships, including the forthcoming AUKUS projects. Other defence companies have experienced increases in demand, with **Thales (Belfast)** attributing significant expansion in operations and headcount to the Russian-Ukrainian war. The aerospace companies referred to increasing orders. The automotive sector appears more uneven, but union officers at **Bentley (Crewe)** commented on the plant's growth trajectory and the prospects for electrification.

While companies' secure position in their respective markets should strengthen unions' bargaining positions, particularly when allied to the shortages of skilled labour, reports suggested the achievement of advantageous outcomes was not so straightforward. Companies' resistance, as indicated above, often centred on the preoccupation on meeting productive demands.

## 9 Campaign for shorter working week

### 9.1 Introduction

The final questions in the interview schedule asked convenors and stewards what elements they considered could be part of an effective campaign at national, sectoral, company and plant levels. Some officers tended to bundle together responses that related to plant/company and national levels, partly because they perceived a connection between a national campaign and the possibility of achieving shorter working time at plant or company, the level at which bargaining is conducted. In the following account the attempt is made to separate out, as far as possible responses, according to these specific levels.

This section is separated into sub-sections. First it presents testimony and arguments relating to the importance of a national campaign and touches on the emergent moves towards sectoral bargaining in the context of the UK government's proposed Employment Rights Bill. Second, it restates the salience of research and evidence-based cases. Third, it emphasises the importance of a dedicated one-day national conference of shop stewards. Fourth, it provides space for those convenors and stewards who wished to raise matters pertaining more specifically to their respective site and companies. Fifth and finally, the section concludes with a summary and observations that draw together some of the most important issues and gesture towards the renewed campaign for shorter working time.

### 9.2 Importance of a national campaign

At BAE Systems (Glasgow) shop stewards, in discussing the importance of a national campaign, reflected on the Drive for 35 of 1989-91 and its outcomes. The convenor recalled how the dynamic of the national campaign provided a focus for the sector to unite around, but *'it took a fight with a couple of major companies as we know, but eventually it did come down to good old site negotiations to get it over the line within all the various businesses...so that would still apply'*. Similarly, a national campaign would enable unions at individual sites to take a compelling message to their employer, *'this is coming for you sometime, so do you want to deal with it now or wait until we really have to do something about it?'*.

Another steward emphasised how it had been the national campaign that had forced the company's hand: *'...if you look back [to] the 35-hour-a-week campaign, it was a national campaign, and where we worked at the time, they wouldn't give you the time of the day...and they very quickly saw that they would lose and they came to the table. They would never have come if that wasn't national'*. Another believed that a national campaign *'brings in the potential of national action [which... our employer] wouldn't want [to be] involved in, so they might tend to be a wee bit more proactive in getting it sorted.'*

The BAE Systems (Barrow) convenor was of the view that, if the CSEU were going to launch a campaign, *'they will need to show that by working in partnership with these companies at bigger level, there's a way to get not a win-lose situation, but a win-win situation'*. They would *'have to drive that right across all the union structures and then into the management'*. It should be based on a win-win scenario for all parties. Another steward argued that it is important that people don't get *'mixed messages'*, that the campaign is for *'a shorter working week, not a four-day week'*. For the Babcock (Rosyth) convenor a national campaign would build a positive narrative around the benefits, so that companies could understand there is *'more of a reason'* to reduce working time.

The Harland and Wolff (Belfast) convenor believed that a national campaign could draw on what they had learned from the save UK shipbuilding campaign. A social-media and media campaign were required to reach more people. He registered his disappointment that they have proposed motions and participated at conferences, but *'it doesn't really get anywhere'*. There will not be *'any traction'* unless there was *'a plan of action'* to go forward. The CSEU should organise a conference of the sectors *'so we're working on the same plan,*

*coming from different directions*'. At the same time, the campaign would be *'bombarding the employers, the employees and the general public with this argument of why the 35-hour week is a better lifestyle for people'*.

The **Leonardo (Edinburgh)** convenor re-iterated the fact that *'the 35-hour week is union policy'*. He recalled that at a national industrial sector conference in 2023 there had been widespread agreement when he had argued that, because of the *'huge skill shortages'*, the sector was in *'a hugely powerful position [which] remains the case, and now's the time to push for a shorter working week'*. For the **Thales (Belfast)** convenor a national campaign should *'promote the benefits for society as a whole'* from reduced hours, because it can deliver *'efficiency gains'* and *'productivity is the key argument for a business'*.

The **Rolls Royce (Barnoldswick)** convenor believed that 'at sectoral level' the empirical evidence from Rolls Royce, that shorter working time had been introduced *'at no detriment to the organisation'*, could be used to bolster the case for shorter working time. For the national level *'it's about telling our counterparts what we've done'* and *'could be easily done'* through presentations at RISCs (Regional Industrial Sector Committees) and even put it together for the NISC (National Industrial Sector Committee), *'so all the stewards can have input there'*. This ties in with initiatives being taken in the current legislation for the institution of sectoral level collective bargaining. The Institute of Employment Rights (Ewing and Hendy, 2024) have included recommendations, missing in the initial draft of the Employment Rights Bill (UK Government (2024) for the 'simple expedient' of an amendment to the Bill empowering the Secretary of State to make provision for the establishment of sectoral collective bargaining arrangements in sectors where prescribed statutory criteria are met (*op cit*: 6)

At **GE Aviation (Cardiff)** the convenor, similarly, first considered what the campaign could consist of in sectoral (aviation) terms. His proposition was that *'a shorter working week would keep our mind sharper, keep us well rested'*, so the drive could be on the quality side of things.

Despite respondents' positivity regarding the prospects for a national campaign, a pessimistic note was sounded by the convenor of **Jaguar Land Rover (Solihull)**. He was unconvinced that members *'would give up even a couple of quid a week, for weeks or even months'*, because the *'political base'* on the shopfloor of *'the different demographic now of younger people'* was not strong enough. He could not envisage a campaign happening *'like it was back in the day'*. The *'best hope'*, he believed, lay with Angela Rayner and supportive Labour ministers, partly because this company has *'regular dialogue'* with the government. Notwithstanding his generally negative perspective, the convenor also argued that *'leverage'* could be exercised through arguments over mental health and well-being.

However, the tenor of most of the contributions from respondents contrast with this view. This section concludes with two comments that stress the appropriateness and timelines of a renewed campaign and what might be achieved. A **BAE Systems (Glasgow)** shop steward reflected on the changed, more favourable bargaining position in a tighter labour market with greater competition for skills:

*'at this moment in time, for me the tide has turned, right. And we need to try and make hay while we can...I don't get dismayed when competitors get something because to me, that gives us a bit of a leverage, right. You might not get what they got, you might get something else that you maybe want. So, I think the worm's turned a wee bit'*.

The **Babcock (Rosyth)** convenor echoed these views: *'*

*'For me this is the right time for a campaign because [the] industry is really busy and the skills aren't available so the worker is in a strong position. If we wait five or six years the balance will have tilted back to the employers'*.

### 9.2.1 Research and evidence

Several respondents in different ways concurred with the position of the convenor of **BAE Systems (Glasgow)** that *'...a national campaign will obviously be backed up by research...so there's substance behind it, for when you go in to do the face-to-face negotiations'*.

### 9.2.2 One-day national shop stewards' conference

At the second of the study's interviews (**Leonardo, Edinburgh**) the convenor made the 'key point' that there should be *'a national shop stewards' meeting of reps in aerospace and shipbuilding'*, that could provide a focus for 'the way nationally we could shift it'. A steward concurred that they needed *'to re-ignite'* the campaign, because *'it has sat for too long'*. The consensus was that a national shop stewards' meeting was required *'to discuss and agree a strategy'*. The convenor proposed that the branch could put forward a motion that would go to the RISC and then the NISC to call for such a conference.

Respondents at subsequent interviews were asked to comment on the appropriateness of such a conference. **BAE Systems (Glasgow)** stewards could see its value. One steward referred to how the legacy of the historical fight for shorter working time and the Alex Ferry Foundation could be explained to younger workers, but more importantly a meeting should discuss *'exactly what the young people are feeling now compared to when the older people had to fight for the 37...Now the fight is for 35, are there similarities, what are the contrasts, what's the model and are there equivalents to the arguments we were having back then?'* The consensus was that a conference would be an important exercise, enabling the CSEU and reps to get *'a broad sweep across what it means for different industries and different shift patterns and different age groups'*.

All shop stewards at **BAE Systems (Barrow)** agreed that a one-day national conference on shorter working time would be a positive step. The **Babcock (Rosyth)** convenor thought that *'the conference would be helpful once you get the report together, one we've got the data'*. The **Harland and Wolff (Belfast)** convenor believed that this conference would be *'absolutely'* helpful. However, the caveat is that the conference must have a structure *'and we all come away with a plan of how we can proceed'*. Everyone should report their experiences, but they need to be turned into *'a plan of action'*, so that delegates go away with that confidence and a clear idea of *'what I need to do next, step by step'*. *'That's going to be the success of the conference'*.

The **Thales (Belfast)** convenor agreed on the importance of a conference but proposed a caveat: *'To make it less nebulous and more concrete, have a pro forma sent out to convenors, to ask members questions and get managements' position. Then report back at the conference'*. The **GE Aviation (Cardiff)** convenor thought that the idea of a national conference was *'a very fair point'*. He emphasised that the National Industrial Sector Committee formed a good platform for a campaign because its members had now been on the committee for *'a long time'* and *'we've all grown together'*.

Experiences could be reported and successes in achieving shorter working time shared, the obstacles encountered, the timing of a national campaign, what it could consist of, its demands and the resources required to sustain a campaign could be discussed. Building on the survey findings of the first phase of the research, a principal aim would be to tap into the experiences, expectations and aspirations of members. In this respect the delegates and participants at the conference should reflect the views and interests of the mixed demographic of their workforces. Older workers may specifically wish for shorter time, having reached a stage of their working life cycle where they want to spend more time away from work, given the relative importance to them of leisure, family life, holidays and for well-being and health reasons. Younger workers, perhaps with young families, might be seeking improved work-life balance for different reasons. Women workers with particular concerns and interests should be able to express their wishes.

### 9.2.3 Company and site level

A number of respondents commented on the site-specific implications of a campaign. The **Babcock (Rosyth)** convenor thought that another survey was required for his site to understand exactly *‘where the workforce is at’*. At the time of the first phase of the study and its survey of members (Taylor, 2022), the yard was *‘a different place’*, working a 37-hour week, but now *‘we are looking at 35’*. Once this report is published questions could be asked again to gauge members’ attitudes, *‘Is 35 important to you?’*, *‘Would you like it if there was no reduction in pay’ (obviously)? and ‘Would you take it if there was?’*. *‘I think it’s about how important it is to the members and how sustainable it is for the business’*. The **Leonardo (Edinburgh)** convenor reported that the union branch had already set up a hardship fund, which currently is made up of branch donations *‘but with a view at some point to considering a levy’* although he admitted they were *‘some way away from that’*.

Given the nature of decentralised bargaining in the sector and the reality of plant/site-based bargaining, with certain company-wide exceptions, the ultimate achievement of shorter and recalibrated working time will be through negotiations and agreements struck at that level. Unavoidably, then successful outcomes will depend on the concrete detail and complexities of negotiations at site level, that consist of the multiple factors that have been considered above, including; the willingness of senior management to negotiate; the health or otherwise of the company in the marketplace; the robustness of the union case, specifically formulated for maximum leverage on the company, and the ability to overcome management resistance; the ability to engage, enthuse and mobilise the membership around a campaign, and the profile and effectiveness of a national campaign.

To repeat the words of the **BAE Systems (Glasgow)** convenor, ultimately it will come down to *‘good old site negotiations to get it over the line’*. In this localised arena, the very stuff of negotiations and bargaining will depend on trade-offs, *quid pro quos* and detailed adjustments to working-time arrangements, without losing sight of the overall objective. The effectiveness of the national campaign will give essential sustenance and impetus to these local negotiations.

## 9.3 Summary and observations

A CSEU national campaign would provide a focus around which the sector could unite, enabling the unions at site level to take a compelling message to their employers that they needed to respond to the claim for shorter working time or would have to deal with the consequences of the campaign. The **BAE Systems (Glasgow)** convenor believed that a *‘win-win’* narrative had to be driven across the industry, into management and across the union structures. The **Harland and Wolff (Belfast)** convenor argued for a thoroughgoing social-media and media campaign *‘bombarding’* employees, employers and the public with the case for shorter working time. It was important to emphasise, highlighted the **Leonardo (Edinburgh)** convenor, that the 35-hour week has been and remains union policy. The **Rolls Royce (Barnoldswick)** convenor believed that empirical evidence affirming the benefit to the employers, particularly in relation to productivity gains, should be a core part of the campaign. A discordant note was sounded by the **Jaguar Land Rover (Solihull)** convenor, who questioned the willingness of the younger demographic on the shop floor to commit to a sustained campaign.

The proposal advanced by the **Leonardo (Edinburgh)** convenor for a one-day national shop stewards meeting/conference to discuss shorter working time was supported by all those subsequently interviewed. Such a conference could *‘re-ignite the campaign’*. However, it would need a structure with *‘an agreed plan of action’*, according to convenor at **Harland and Wolff (Belfast)**, that could enable site unions to proceed in unity *‘step by step’*. Perhaps, suggested the **Thales (Belfast)** convenor, the conference could be preceded by a pro forma sent to senior union officers to take soundings which could then inform the conference. Others thought that the circulation of this IER report and its consideration by convenors and stewards could help provide a focus for the conference.

The conference would be a forum at which experiences were reported, successes in achieving shorter working time were shared and the obstacles encountered were discussed. The timescale of a national campaign, its demands, the resources required to sustain it could be deliberated. The key resource, it is acknowledged, is the membership and their engagement with any campaign. Building on the survey findings of the first phase of the research, a principal aim would be to tap into the experiences, expectations and aspirations of members. In this respect, the delegates and participants at the conference should reflect the views and interests of the mixed demographic of the workforce.

National campaigns and site negotiations should also include the implications of automation, robotisation, AI and the potential implementation of other new technologies. As the Rolls Royce (Barnoldswick) convenor argued, it is imperative that *‘workers can share in the spoils through a shorter working week’*.

The final observation is that ultimately the achievement of shorter working time will depend upon the outcome of detailed negotiations and agreements struck, generally, at site level, with all the complexity and concrete bargaining trade-offs that are inescapably involved. A determined, high-profile, national campaign that unifies the sector with a clear plan will give the sustenance and impetus required to bolster successful local negotiations.

In conclusion, a wind of change is blowing in favour of shorter working time. The economic, social, trade-union and moral case has been unequivocally established. A powerful campaign, empowering unions and members to fight for and negotiate a long-overdue reduction in hours and changes in the distribution of working time, can bring significant improvements to workers’ mental and physical health, well-being and working lives.





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## Notes

- 1 The terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001 in the United States precipitated an unprecedented crisis for the civil aviation industry, that included a sharp decline in aircraft manufacturing demand. For a brief overview see McGuire (2011).
- 2 The shop steward is referring to the widely-known understanding that Denmark has a short average working week, the second lowest according to the OECD (2025). While the country has not officially adopted a four-day working week, it is relatively common. For example, the Odsherred Municipality did so in 2019, although employees were expected to work longer hours from Monday to Thursday.



# IER

## Institute of Employment Rights

### About the Institute

The Institute of Employment Rights seeks to develop an alternative approach to labour law and industrial relations and makes a constructive contribution to the debate on the future of trade union freedoms.

We provide the research, ideas and detailed legal arguments to support working people and their unions by calling upon the wealth of experience and knowledge of our unique network of academics, lawyers and trade unionists.

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# IER

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In this second timely IER report on working time, written by Professor Phil Taylor of the University of Strathclyde and commissioned by the Alex Ferry Foundation, tangible examples of unions negotiating a reduction in working time with no loss of pay, are explored in detail. The report analyses the material conditions in each manufacturing sector which affected how a reduction in working time was made possible, as well as analysing the hurdles that needed to be overcome to get there. It includes some common threads, such as the positive impact of the CSEU's 'Drive for 35' campaign in the 1990's, but also explains how each site navigated management resistance to a reduction of working time. The benefits of reduced working time are multiple, with workers being able to spend more time with their families, be under less stress, and live happier and healthier lives. The report concludes by examining what next steps the trade union movement might make, in order to advance the collective case and win on working time further.

This report should give trade unionists across various sectors the ideas and transferrable arguments they need to successfully negotiate with their employers for a reduction in working time with no loss of pay.