

TAKE BACK THE CLOCK

Working longer hours, **FLEXTIME** is the work option American families want most. What choice do you have?

BY JENYA CASSIDY

If you're like most US workers, you have at least two jobs: one at work and one at home. According to a new study by the Center for Law and Social Policy, balancing these two jobs and doing them well has become a tremendous challenge for the whole family. Working women alone are putting in 270 more hours at work each year than they did two decades ago. According to the same study, two-thirds of parents report that they don't have enough time to spend with their children—and that their children are paying the price

THE FLEXIBLE SOLUTION

How can we spend time with our family, give them what they need and still earn a living?



“Two words,” says Patricia Gonzales, office manager in a federal department. “Flexible scheduling. Without flexibility, I couldn't meet the needs of two children and still do my job. I value flexibility almost as much as my health benefits.”

FLEXTIME RECOGNIZES THAT WORKERS PLAY MANY LIFE ROLES AT ONCE

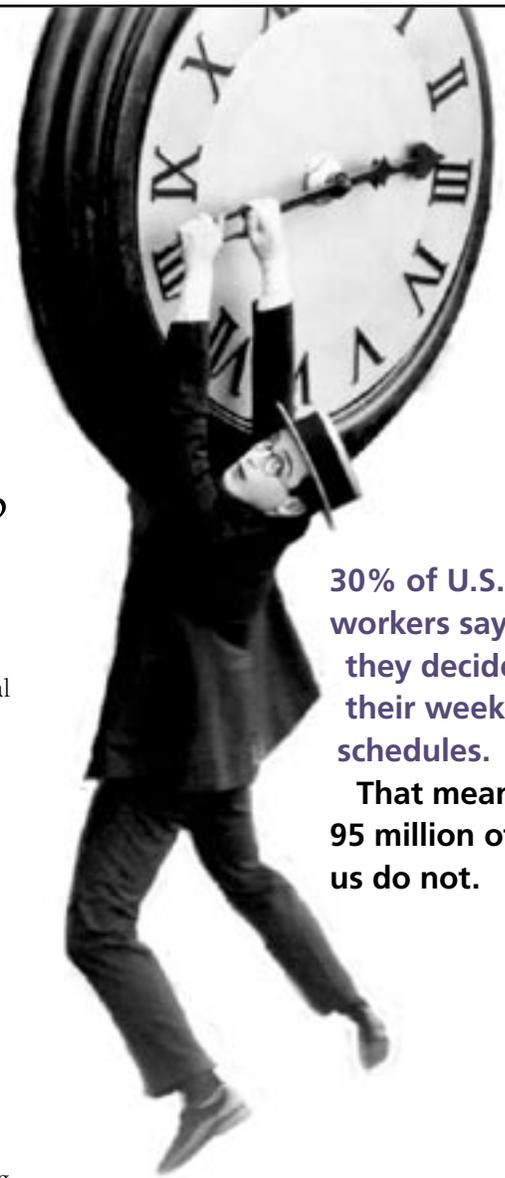
Flexible schedules — flextime — means workers can design a work schedule to fulfill the needs of their jobs and your families.

The goal is to earn enough to support your family without robbing your family of the most precious thing of all: the precious time needed to take an elderly parent to the doctor, stay home with a sick child, or move to part-time work, with benefits, when kids are out of school.

Of course, flexible schedules are nothing new. Traditionally, professionals and managers have exercised discretion in their own daily schedules while wage earners' shifts have been set in concrete.

But now, as balancing work and family becomes more difficult for working families, unions are starting to bargain for the power of working men and women to shape their work days and weekly shifts, and even to move deliberately between full and part-time.

“I see it as a justice issue,” says Andre Spearman, political organizer for SEIU Local 790, which



30% of U.S. workers say they decide their weekly schedules.

That means 95 million of us do not.

represents workers for the City and County of San Francisco workers.

“This is a benefit that all working families need,” Spearman adds. “It should no longer be reserved for the upper echelons.”

ACHIEVING BALANCE BY THE HOUR, WEEK, SEASON OR YEAR

More unions, like Local 2 in SaFlexibility gives workers control over their own schedules within boundaries agreed upon with the employer.

For example, with a flexible schedule agreement, an employee might start earlier and leave earlier in order to pick kids up from school. Another might compress forty hours a week into four 10-hour shifts to get another full day off. Still others might

continued on next page

choose to leave early when needed and make up the work later in the week.

The idea behind flexible scheduling, says Kris Rondeau, organizer for the Harvard Union of Clerical and Technical Workers is that schedules should adapt to the individual worker's needs. "We negotiated language that allows for members to work out a schedule to fit their circumstances. There are so many options and life circumstances change so that schedules have to be renegotiated every year."

EXERCISING UNION RIGHTS INCREASES FLEXIBILITY

A single mother who belongs to SEIU Local 790 in San Francisco, explains, "I need my job and benefits. But what's the point if my job prevents me from being there for my kids when they need me? Especially in my situation, where my kids only have me, flexible scheduling is a must."

The union's Andre Spearman lays out the winning process step-by-step:

ASK: Survey members about their exact needs and identify those who would benefit from flexible scheduling.

BUILD UNITY: Bring members together around the need for flexible schedules. Remind them that even if they don't need it now, it could benefit them in the future — and it's important to support their co-workers.

PROPOSE: Come up with a

written proposal for management describing the flexible scheduling you need and how it would work. "Be sure to include statistics about its benefit to overall work performance," Spearman reminds.

GET IT IN WRITING: Sign off on a written agreement that describes exactly how flexible scheduling will be administered.

FAMILIES UNDER GREATEST TIME PRESSURE NEED FLEX THE MOST

Marcia Kropf, vice president of research at Catalyst, a non-profit for women in business, lays out similar steps for negotiating flex time even without union representation:

"While employees must determine their own needs, make your case from the employer's point of view," she says. "Even family-friendly organizations must keep an eye on the bottom line."

And, adds Kropf, if management is skeptical, create a review period to discuss how flextime is working.

Andre Spearman agrees that a process of engagement is involved. "You have to work on alleviating managers' fears that the 'floodgates will open' and everyone will ask for time off at the same time," he says.

"But if you don't give up, it will happen. It really benefits union members and management. It makes for healthier families and a healthier work place."

FLEXTIME *When unions negotiate FlexTime, it can give you more control over your work schedule on an hourly or daily basis, by the shift, the week, season or year. Some examples:*

- Time your lunch break for a personal appointment
- Compress your work week to four days
- Split shifts or share positions
- Telecommute
- Flexibly satisfy an annual budget of work hours
- Change work locations

More U.S. unions are seeking and winning flextime options. Is yours?

Reprint freely with the following acknowledgement:
Reproduced from the Fall 2006 issue of the Labor Family News – Newsletter of the Labor Project for Working Families. For more information, please email info@working-families.org, call 510-643-7088 or visit www.working-families.org

"We thought we would negotiate for alternate schedules and that would be the end of it. But people's lives change. Their needs change. The parent of an infant has different needs than the parent of a preschooler, so members have the right to negotiate their schedules as needed with management."

— Kris Rondeau, organizer, Harvard Union of Clerical and Technical Workers

