



The Market Cannot Deliver Real Work Life Balance

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While the national obsession with houses – as distinct from homes, or even housing – may have abated, we are in danger of being enveloped by an even greater fixation with the economy and a threatened slowdown in growth.

This is not to trivialise people's genuine fears about future prospects, but some of the more alarmist economic bulletins tend to focus on abstract figures and indices that say lots about quantity and little about quality. They paint a one dimensional picture of an economy with little room for people, except in how they can serve it.

Such is our fixation that the merest hint or threat of economic recession generates a veritable firestorm of debate, while the fact that we are almost certainly in the midst of a full-blown 'social recession' sparks little comment.

For the vast majority of our hugely-expanded labour force, work now dominates to the detriment of all else. Family, community, political, social, religious and voluntary participation have all suffered. It is arguable that civil society has been a major casualty of this social recession.

On the occasion of National Work Life Balance Day, it is only right to commend the good work done by the National Framework Committee

and acknowledge those workplaces with policies that facilitate greater choice and flexibility. But unfortunately they remain in the minority.

A recent study of Ireland's top companies by the National Centre for Partnership – *New Models of High Performance* – reveals a 17 percent national usage of flexible working systems, which confirms 2004 data from the Central Statistics Office showing some 80 percent of people enjoyed no discretion over start or finish times.

It would seem that the achievement of genuine work–life balance is impossible to reconcile with the neoliberal, free market model that has obtained in Ireland for the last two decades. After all, achieving that elusive balance presupposes the existence of both good quality work and the quality services necessary to enhance family life.

But in recent years we have created thousands of poorly–paid, insecure and low grade jobs. The 2006 CSO National Employment Survey (published Dec. '07) reveals that some 300,000 people earn less than €10 an hour, with over one million people earning €20 or less. And this in a country whose cost of living is at the top of the EU scale.

Insecure and poorly–paid work tears at the social fabric and damages community. With the move to casualisation and agency–type work, we sacrifice what is valuable in working life: the sense of participation and self–esteem; the opportunities to develop new skills and realise potential; the longer–term security it gives to family life and the resultant social cohesion.

Those in insecure employment will turn increasingly to public services only to find that, here too, the market has forced a shrinkage of services to create more room for private profit. The result is clear deficiencies in healthcare, education, public transport, housing and the care sector.

The voluntary approach to flexible working and better work life balance has failed to deliver. Thus, we must now extend a legal right to flexible working to all; provide meaningful opportunities for the

low-skilled and low paid to access skills' development and create an infrastructure of care that supports working parents.

In 2003, the UK provided a legal right to flexible working for parents, later extended to carers. It was strongly resisted by employers. However, by 2007, some 92 percent of their number expressed a willingness to seriously consider requests for changed work patterns from all employees. The initiative had obviously delivered tangible benefits.

But while the business case may be important, there are far more compelling reasons for shifting the balance: to improve people's quality of life, facilitate learning opportunities and skills development and allow full participation in community activity. In short, to enjoy a full life outside the workplace.

The availability of and distribution of time, like wealth, is fundamental to creating a more equitable society.

Unions have a crucial role to play in this regard, by negotiating changes in the workplace practice and influencing national policy to ensure a genuine realignment of work and family life.

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