

# The obsession with 'hard work' as a route to economic success is a dangerous distraction

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*The omnipresent slogan at the Conservative party conference, 'for hardworking people', reflects the belief that hard work is the proper way of living one's life and the route to economic success. The rhetoric of George Osborne and his colleagues around hardworking people is not new but it remains regressive in its effects, not least in ignoring the real hardships faced by those who work hard for a living. **David Spencer** argues that there are other areas of life that matter to our well-being and allowing work to dominate us can only lead to harm.*



This year's Conservative Party conference has reminded us incessantly that George Osborne and his fellow ministers are "for hardworking people". This same slogan has also become popular among Labour politicians – indeed support for "hardworking people" has replaced support for the working class. The broader use (and [overuse](#)) of this slogan by politicians reflects a deeper belief that hard work is the proper way of living one's life. Working hard is the way one gets on in life. No matter that real wages have fallen in recent years, work is promoted as the route to economic success.

Negatively, the benefits of hard work are contrasted with the evils of idleness. The "idle poor" are the ideological counterpoint to hardworking people. This inevitably feeds hostility towards those on benefits and leads to support for [draconian measures](#) to force the poor and jobless into work even when jobs are in short supply. But this obsession with hard work as the route to economic success and moral redemption has proved a dangerous distraction in several ways. Working hard to earn a living need not be seen as a good thing if it means enduring long hours of drudgery, long hours away from one's family and friends, or undertaking several low paid jobs with no security of employment. We lose sight of, and indeed deny, the costs of wage labour by eulogising hard work.

History shows that capitalism brought about an increasing focus on the virtues of hard work. Life in pre-capitalist times was more leisurely and less pressurised; people worked much more irregularly and enjoyed extended periods of free time. It is essentially with the rise of capitalism that the work ethic has become idolised and lauded. The rhetoric of George Osborne and his colleagues around hardworking people is not new but it remains regressive in its effects, not least in ignoring the real hardships faced by those who work hard for a living.



Thinking beyond capitalism? Don't bet on it  
(Credit: M. Holland)

The dream in the past was that capitalism would bring about a reduction in work hours. [Keynes](#) famously looked forward to the day when we would work only 15 hours per week. He thought that rising levels of affluence would lead to a shorter working week and to the liberation of humanity from hard work. History has proved Keynes wrong as workers have continued to face relatively long hours at work, and the prospects for shorter work hours any time in the future look bleak indeed. In fact, with the squeeze on real wages, the likelihood is that many more workers will be forced to work longer just to make ends meet.

But there is a sense in which we could live better lives by working less. Firstly, shorter working hours would provide a means to spread work more evenly in society thereby combating the twin problems of unemployment and overwork. Secondly, working fewer hours would free up more time for people to pursue activities outside of work and

thus to realise their creative capacities in other ways. Thirdly, working less would help to combat the stress and burnout associated with long and intense working hours.

Working hard, to be sure, can be rewarding. We can gain intrinsic reward by doing work well on a continuous and intensive basis. Work that matches with our needs, creative and material, [can be uplifting](#). But work has its place. There are other areas of life that matter to our well-being and allowing work to dominate us can only lead to harm. In essence, the struggle against the ideology of hard work is about the struggle to overcome an economic and political logic that forces us to work longer and harder than we would otherwise. Working less thus ultimately requires us to think beyond capitalism. George Osborne to think beyond capitalism? Don't bet on it.

*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.*

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