



Eight Hours: How the Eight-Hour Day Came to Germany and What Remains of It

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How the eight-hour day came in 1918, how it was hollowed out and enshrined in law in 1994, and why a weekly limit is now being debated.

Eight hours of work, eight hours of sleep, eight hours for your own life: this demand is older than any German republic. It was fulfilled in November 1918, in the days after the end of the First World War. Since then, the eight-hour day has been hollowed out and reinforced several times. This article traces how it came about, how it came under pressure and how it stands in the law today.

How it was won in 1918

An old demand in a brief moment

The demand for the eight-hour day is one of the oldest of the labour movement. In many countries people went on strike and demonstrated for it, and 1 May as a day of struggle goes back to this movement. In the German Empire, however, it remained unfulfilled. In industry, ten hours or more a day were common, and the week had six working days.

In November 1918, this changed within a few days. The war was lost, the Kaiser had abdicated, and workers' and soldiers' councils were forming in the cities. Many employers feared that their businesses would be expropriated. At the same time, hundreds of thousands of soldiers were returning and needed work. Shorter shifts meant that more people could find employment.

The Stinnes-Legien-Abkommen

In this situation, the major employers' associations and the trade unions reached an agreement. On 15 November 1918 they signed an agreement named after their negotiators, the industrialist Hugo Stinnes and the trade union chairman Carl Legien: the Stinnes-Legien-Abkommen (Stinnes-Legien Agreement). The employers recognised the trade unions as the appointed representatives of the workforce and as equal partners in collective bargaining. They agreed to workers'

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committees in establishments with more than 50 employees and to the eight-hour day with full wage compensation. Returning soldiers were given a right to their former jobs.

In return, the trade unions gave something of equal weight: they recognised the private enterprise economy and rejected the socialisation of the means of production that parts of the left were demanding. The agreement was therefore an exchange. Workers gained recognition and protection, employers gained security for their property.

From agreement to decree

An agreement between associations is not yet a law. The eight-hour day became one on 23 November 1918. On that day the Anordnung über die Regelung der Arbeitszeit gewerblicher Arbeiter (Order on the Regulation of the Working Hours of Industrial Workers) was issued, as part of demobilisation under the government of the Council of People's Deputies. Eight hours a day thus became the statutory maximum working time in trade and industry.

A year later, the International Labour Organization took up the demand. Its first convention, of 1919, limits working time in industrial undertakings to eight hours a day and 48 hours a week. Germany has never ratified this convention, nor have the United States and Great Britain.

The hollowing out

The working time decree of 1923

The eight-hour day lasted only a few years in its original form. In 1923, the year of hyperinflation and the occupation of the Ruhr, employers pressed for longer working hours. The Reich Minister of Labour, Heinrich Brauns of the Centre Party, issued a new Verordnung über die Arbeitszeit (Working Time Decree) on 21 December 1923. It left the eight-hour day in place as normal working time, but permitted longer hours through numerous exceptions, for example by collective agreement. A ten-hour day was now also permissible.

The consequences could be measured. Until 1923, the eight-hour day and the 48-hour week largely remained in place in practice. In 1924, average weekly working time in industry rose to 50.4 hours.

The Arbeitszeitnotgesetz of 1927

The trade unions fought against this development, and in 1927 they achieved a partial success. The Arbeitszeitnotgesetz (Emergency Working Time Act) of May 1927 once again established eight hours as the regular daily working time. Longer hours remained permitted, but only in return for a wage supplement. Additional work thus became more expensive, not impossible.

The trade unions did not base their demand on health alone. Shorter working hours, they argued, would distribute the available work among more people and were necessary, given technology and rationalisation, to reduce unemployment.

The National Socialist period

After the trade unions were smashed in 1933, this countervailing force disappeared. The Arbeitszeitordnung (Working Time Ordinance) of July 1934 allowed the state Trustees of Labour to increase working time far beyond eight hours. The Arbeitszeitordnung of April 1938 extended the exceptions considerably further. With rearmament and during the war, long working days became the rule.

The eight-hour day in current law

The Arbeitszeitgesetz of 1994

The Arbeitszeitordnung of 1938 continued to apply in the Federal Republic, in revised form, for decades. It was only replaced by the Arbeitszeitgesetz (Working Hours Act) of 6 June 1994. Its § 3 reads: "The working time of employees on working days must not exceed eight hours." (translated from the German) An extension to up to ten hours is permissible if, within six calendar months or 24 weeks, an average of eight hours per working day is not exceeded.

Under the Act, Saturdays also count as working days. Eight hours on six working days add up to 48 hours a week. This is exactly the limit also set by the European Union's Working Time Directive of 2003: it requires that average working time for each seven-day period, including overtime, does not exceed 48 hours.

Day or week

The difference between German and European law lies not in the total but in the unit. German law measures by the day, the Directive by the week. Limiting only the week allows individual days to become considerably longer, as long as others are shorter.

This is precisely what is currently being discussed. The Federal Government has set out to create, "in line with the European Working Time Directive, the possibility of a weekly instead of a daily maximum working time". The draft bill of the Federal Ministry of Labour of June 2026 ties this possibility to collective agreements or to works agreements based on them, and combines it with an obligation to record working time electronically. For businesses without a collective agreement, the daily maximum working time is in principle to remain. Employers' associations criticise precisely this restriction, while trade unions warn of longer working days. The legislative process has not been concluded.

What employees say

How employees view longer working days was surveyed in July 2025 by the Institute of Economic and Social Research (WSI) of the Hans-Böckler-Stiftung, in a weighted online survey of more than 2,000 employees. Of those who currently do not work more than ten hours a day, 72.5 per cent expect poorer recovery if longer working days became generally possible. 75 per cent expect difficulties in meeting family or private commitments. Twelve per cent already work more than ten hours on some days.

What this means for you

Your rights under current law

As long as the law has not been changed, the following applies: more than eight hours on a working day are only permitted if they are offset by shorter days within the reference period, and more than ten hours are in principle not permitted. Under § 5 of the Arbeitszeitgesetz, there must be at least eleven hours of rest between two working days. These limits apply even if an employment contract says otherwise. The Act allows deviations only within narrow limits, above all by collective agreement.

If you regularly work longer hours, you should record the hours yourself: start, end, breaks and who requested the additional work. This protects your health, because it makes visible what would otherwise become blurred, and it secures your pay for the hours that must be paid.

Why the unit matters

Whether the limit is drawn at the day or at the week sounds like a technical question. For the people who work, it is a question of when the working day ends. The eight-hour day was not won in 1918 as a rule of arithmetic, but as a promise that every day keeps a part for your own life.

Summary

The eight-hour day came to Germany in November 1918, first as an agreement between employers and trade unions in the Stinnes-Legien-Abkommen, then as an order of 23 November 1918. As early as 1923 it was hollowed out by a new working time decree, partly reinforced again in 1927 and largely suspended during the National Socialist period. Since 1994 it has been laid down in the Arbeitszeitgesetz: eight hours per working day, up to ten with compensation. Today there is discussion of replacing the daily limit with a weekly one. History shows that this limit has never held by itself, but only where employees have defended it together.

Cited as

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