

# Economist urges unions to press for 30-hour week

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San Francisco Examiner

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Organized labor — on the cusp of a revolution that could marginalize the majority of American workers — should campaign hard for the 30-hour workweek, argues economist Jeremy Rifkin.

Rifkin, better known as a critic of genetic engineering, has caught the attention of politicians and corporate leaders — as well as labor — with his new book, *The End of Work*.

In the book, he contends that the jobs eliminated by computers and robots are gone forever, with no alternative employment in sight.

"We have to rethink the entire basis of work as we move into the information age and come to grips with the fundamental transformation that's going on," Rifkin said in an interview.

"What's happening to both blue- and white-collar workers is as fundamental as what happened to farm workers a hundred years ago, when the majority were engaged in farming," he said. "Now they are less than 2 percent, because we have a very successful technology producing more than we can consume."

Organized labor has a bleak future, Rifkin said, unless two questions are answered — what to do with the millions of workers who will be displaced in the global economy of the information age, and how to share increased productivity.

"There must be a debate, but President Clinton hasn't joined it yet," he said. "For millions of Ameri-

cans, the revitalization of the labor movement depends on moving into the center ring and creating a new high-technology populist movement," he said. "A 30-hour workweek by 2000 should be phased in. ... Every major gain by labor has been based on a shorter workweek."

Rifkin said Hewlett-Packard and BMW have managed to increase productivity in some European factories while reducing the workweek from 37 to 31 hours and maintaining wages. He said management may eventually be forced to accept the 30-hour workweek, because "as more and more workers are marginalized, we shrink the consumer base. I think that's the dawning reality among business people. ... They can't expect the top 20 percent to absorb their own production."

Furthermore, he said, by eliminating such things as pensions, "they'll lose the only form of capital that keeps the capitalist system going. The deferred savings of millions of workers are worth \$5 trillion — the largest pool of capital that exists. It's ironic. The investment capital used to move us away from hiring is the workers' own money and is costing us jobs.

"So there needs to be some tough discussion of sharing productivity gains. Let the entire American work force benefit from it," he said. "That means unions and management have to come to the table and renegotiate their social arrangement."