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The politics of part-time work: Comparing the introduction of part-time retirement and parental part-time in Austria

Much of the academic literature on part-time employment as well as policy discourse represents part-time employment as one step towards modernised post-Fordist labour markets. Part-time work is often depicted primarily as a mother's issue which can be resolved through better public care policies which will allow women to avoid the 'part-time trap'. This 'modernisation' perspective on part-time work fails to consider that the governance of working-time and welfare has never been oriented towards solving problems but to mediate class interests in the context of stagnating service economies. Recent empirical research has pointed out that there is an increasing differentiation in the conditions of part-time employment, ranging from state-subsidised forms of life-phase working-time reduction to precarious marginal employment (Nicolaisen et al., 2019). This appears in line with welfare state responses to forms of non-standard employment more generally. As Rubery and colleagues (2018) found, new lines of segmentation in access to social and employment rights have appeared between and within groups of non-standard employees, and employers have found new evasion strategies.

Given the renewed debates on working-time reduction policies due to the COVID-19 pandemic, an understanding of the histories of conflict and compromise which have driven different models of working-time reduction is crucial. In the context of neoliberal welfare restructuring since the 1980s, two important trends in working-time governance have been identified: firstly, a political weakening of collective working-time bargaining in favour of employer-friendly labour market flexibilization (Hermann, 2014) and, secondly, a rise of different state-supported forms of life-phase models of individual working-time reduction such as for parenting or transitions to retirement (Anxo and Boulin, 2006). To make sense of this, this research builds on the Marxist insight that working-time is a crucial terrain of structural conflict between labour and capital and power resources theory which points to the role of power resources of collective actors in shaping policy outcomes of welfare reform.

This research aims to contribute to our understanding of collective actors' interests and strategies in relation to support for part-time working. It focuses on the case of Austria as a welfare state with a high part-time rate (27.2% in 2019) where not just women's but also men's part-time rates have risen significantly in the last four decades. Building on the institutionalist insight that the institutional context shapes political strategies over time, it will take two policy models as case studies: the part-time retirement model introduced in 2000 which combines working-time reduction with a public wage subsidy, and the parental part-time model introduced in 2003 without a public wage subsidy. It will closely interrogate and compare the political processes that led to their introduction and their policy designs, with particular attention to the role of trade unions and employers' associations. It will employ a qualitative research design primarily focused on documentary analysis complemented by elite interviews. It will critically analyse the power resources of different actors, the framing of the policy context, which groups within the collective actor formations of labour and capital were expected to benefit from these policies (i.e. sectoral and gender cleavages), and how this shaped their strategies.

The contributions of this paper are two-fold: Firstly, it will contribute to our understanding of the strategies of Austrian labour and capital in shaping welfare state support for part-time employment. Secondly, it will raise questions about the political impact of advancing individual working-time reduction models in the absence of broader collective strategies for universal working-time reduction which benefit all workers. This research forms part of a larger doctoral project investigating working-time and welfare politics in the Austrian welfare state.

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Nicolaisen, H., Kavli, H.C., Jensen, R.S., 2019. Dualisation of part-time work: the development of labour market insiders and outsiders.