



# Working hours in the European periphery: The length of the working day in Spain, 1885–1920 <sup>☆</sup>

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## Abstract

This paper studies the decline of the working day in Spain from 1885 to 1920. The decline was more continuous than previously thought. Differences in hours reinforce wage differentials, showing labor markets were not well integrated. Cross-sectional and time-series analysis suggests that hour reductions reflect a labor supply rather than a labor demand effect. Given the comparatively slow growth of real wages in Spain from 1870 to 1920, the Spanish case shows that international convergence in hours of work must have been stronger than convergence in wages.

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## 1. Introduction

Current wisdom is that annual hours of work followed an inverted U-shaped pattern over the course of the nineteenth century, increasing during industrialization with the

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erosion of the customary management of working time and declining thereafter (Voth, 2003). In this process, the Spanish case seems unusual: hours of work in Spain fell quickly despite the fact that real wages grew comparatively slowly and the shortening of the working day took place in a context in which there were no significant legal restrictions on maximum hours prior to 1919. One important empirical question is whether the “Eight Hours” decree of 1919 represented a fundamental discontinuity in the pattern of working time in the Spanish economy or whether it was a further step in the progressive shortening of the working day during the second half of the nineteenth century.

Economic historians generally attribute long-term reductions in working hours to three factors. The first invokes unions and legislation reducing hours of work (Douglas, 1930). A second hypothesis stresses the existence of a backward bending labor supply in which income effects outweigh substitution effects (Whaples, 1990).<sup>1</sup> Demand variables also play an important role: production function analysis using data from 19th century manufacturing establishments suggests productive efficiency improved by diminishing daily working hours and by increasing annual working days. Hour declines in this sense were a joint decision between workers and managers (Atack et al., 2003).

The paper will proceed as follows. In Section 2, I present the main stylized facts of Spanish urban labor markets. In Section 3, I describe the long run evolution of the standard workday in Spain from 1885 to 1919. Section 4 analyses cross-sectional variation in working hours in light of both labor supply and labor demand variables. Section 5 discusses changes over time of demand and supply. Section 6 concludes.

## **2. Stylized facts of the Spanish labor market**

The evolution of labor markets in Spain offers rich ground on which to examine the forces driving the reduction in working hours in the past. One important characteristic is that the Spanish case is virtually free of the effect of legislation until 1919. Legislation regulating hours of work for children and women was first passed in 1873 but was not enforced (Borràs Llop, 1995). A second law was passed in 1900 followed by yet another decree in 1902, but again these were poorly enforced until the effective organization of a body of labor inspectors in the late 1910s. Children faced a ceiling of 6 h and were prohibited from work at night (Martin Valverde, 1987, pp. 65–72). For women, hour-ceilings mandated a maximum 66 h per week or 11 h per day, which, even in manufacturing, exceeded scheduled hours and therefore had no impact.

The period also witnessed a growth in collective action. The Spanish branch of the First International was organized in 1869 and was especially active in the period 1871–1873. Unions affiliated to the Second International expanded in 1881–1883. An exceptionally successful first May Day calling for the 8-h day was organized in the main Spanish cities in 1890. The periods 1899–1903, 1910–1913 and especially 1918–1920 saw cycles of increasingly widespread strikes. Union membership figures are, however, difficult to assess since many Spanish unions had a policy of very low or zero union dues and did not keep accurate membership records. At the peak union density, the dues-paying Socialist General Workers’ Union included perhaps 3% of the male non-agricultural

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<sup>1</sup> With some reservations, supply forces also feature in Costa (2000), Rosenbloom and Sundstrom (1994), Atack and Bateman (1992), Shiells (1990).

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