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'Marketplace' Report: America's Work Force

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ALEX COHEN, host: From NPR News, it's DAY TO DAY.

And it is Labor Day, a holiday when, ironically, work is often the last thing on people's minds. But we are going to take this opportunity to see how Americans compare with the rest of the world when it comes to labor.

MARKETPLACE's Steve Tripoli has been toiling away on the topic and he joins us now. Hi, Steve.

STEVE TRIPOLI: Hi, Alex.

COHEN: Can you tell us a little bit about the American workforce and how we're doing?

TRIPOLI: Well, you know, Alex, drawing a picture of it is very easy but interpreting what's in the picture is a little harder. There is a new United Nations study out today. It shows that Americans work more than those in most other industrialized countries. That's several hundred hours a year more than Europeans. But we work quite a bit less than many Asians. We're also the world's most productive workers. Norwegians produced a bit more wealth per hour than Americans with those figures skewed by oil exports. But on the annual basis, Americans are far more productive than anyone else, almost \$8,000 a year ahead of second place Ireland in wealth produced per worker. So we're wealthy and we work for it.

COHEN: That sounds pretty good. Any bad news or dark side to this report that's come out, other than us just being a really hardworking bunch?

TRIPOLI: Well, you know, Americans aren't feeling as good about all this wealth because those numbers don't tell the whole story.

Labor economists have been telling me for some time that the most surprising statistic to them has to do with wage stagnation. Remember, we're in the fifth year of an economic expansion right now but 95 percent of all workers have seen little or no gain in their inflation-adjusted wages during this expansion. And that kind of wage stagnation this late and an expansion is unprecedented in American economic history.

So, for reasons that go even beyond wage stagnation, Americans are feeling a little bit anxious - American workers in surveys. Carl Van Horn at Rutgers University tells me that there are some reasons for that, especially as Americans compare themselves to other rich countries.

Dr. CARL VAN HORN (Public Policy, Rutgers University): We work more hours and we have less vacation, but we don't necessarily have greater pay. The other thing, of course, is almost every country in the industrialized world has universal health care system. And then, when it comes to minimum wage earners, we have the lowest minimum wage as a percentage of the median wage of any industrialized countries.

TRIPOLI: So, you know, Alex, low-paid workers in other rich countries do better than American low-paid workers, and we have a lot of low-paid workers in this country. So our safety net is less than the one our parents enjoyed, not only health care costs and availability but the erosion of pensions, and we're mostly not advancing wage wise. And now we're in economic cycle of uncertainty to boot. So it must be said, on the other hand, we are materially better off than our parents. So are workers better off, overall, if they have more material wealth but less safety net? That answer is kind of a highly individual one.

COHEN: Really quickly, Steve, besides wages, top concerns of American workers now.

TRIPOLI: Well, you know, they're working harder and more hours just to maintain their living standards. They're in debt. They're nervous about safety net issues, but also about being displaced by the global economy and not being prepared educationally for that. And they're

swimming in the sea of uncertainty and they don't like it.

COHEN: Thanks so much, Steve. Steve Tripoli of public radio's daily business show MARKETPLACE. It's produced by American Public Media.

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