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by Paul Hamilos

Adiós, siesta? Spain considers ending working hours anomaly

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It's 10.30am, and Fernando, a civil servant in his late 40s, sits down to a *café con leche*, the sports pages and a cigarette in Madrid's Plaza del Rey. At work since 9am, he is taking his routine morning break.

But such rituals may soon end, following a vote by a parliamentary commission yesterday recommending that Spain turn its clocks back an hour and introduce more regular 9-to-5-style working days.

Most Spanish workers suffer long and disjointed days. "I'm normally in the office until about 8pm," said Fernando. "I could take two hours for lunch, but mostly I just have an hour. I don't take a siesta."

In part, chaotic working hours come down to a historical anomaly. In 1942, Spain's dictator, General Franco, changed the country's time zone to coincide with Germany's in an act of solidarity with his fascist ally. And it has never gone back.

"Because of a great historical error, in Spain we eat at 2pm, and we don't have dinner until 9pm, but according to the position of the sun, we eat at the same time as the rest of Europe: 1pm and 8pm," explained Professor Nuria Chinchilla of the [IESE Business School](#).

"If we eat at 2pm, and dine at 9pm, then logically we ought to start work at 10am.

But we don't do that, we start earlier, so our mornings are far too long. That's why people need a coffee break, because they can't wait that long to eat. So we lose time and have to work longer in the evening."

At the head of the campaign to bring Madrid into line with London is Ignacio Buqueras, president of the Association for the Rationalisation of Spanish Working Hours. Productivity would increase, and civil society improve, he argues, because Spaniards don't have time to dedicate to organisations. It would allow parents to spend more time with their children.

"We should be starting between 7.30am and 9am and never finishing work later than 6pm," said Buqueras. "The siesta

has to end! At most, you might need 10 or 12 minutes rest after lunch." And, anyway, most Spaniards don't have a siesta.

Another thing that needs to change is late-night prime-time TV. "In England, the largest TV audience is at 7 or 8pm, but in Spain, it's 10pm. Because at 8pm in Spain, barely 50% of the population is at home, and you have to wait until 10pm to find that number of people at home, thus guaranteeing the viewing figures needed for prime time. Sometimes football matches don't kick off until 11pm!"

All of this means people go to bed late and get less sleep than they need - meaning more accidents at work, less efficiency, and more children missing school. They work longer hours than German and British counterparts, but are much less efficient, studies suggest.

The siesta may be seen as a Spanish tradition but it is part of a chaotic long-hours culture that needs reform, say campaigners

