

Labor's Struggle for the 8 hour work day in the United States – (1860s-1900s)

For more than a century, American workers struggled for a shorter workday. Throughout the nineteenth century and almost halfway through the twentieth, an absence of binding federal legislation had many employees dedicating almost the entirety of their waking hours to employers. It was not uncommon for workers to spend between 10 and 16 hours a day on the job without payment for overtime. Beginning in the 1860s, support for the eight-hour movement grew rapidly among average workers. Evolving from the fight for a 10-hour day in the mid-1800s, the demands of American workers had by the 1860s turned to eight hours. The fight for an eight-hour day was replete with labor demands, strikes, repression, and occasional victories. In a few cases, labor's demands were met with a corporate paternalism that established workday hour limits at the company level. More often than not, companies and local authorities quelled strikes for shorter hours with armed violence. Such was the case of the 1886 Haymarket Square incident in Chicago. Gradually, individual states began adopting limits on the workweek. At the national level, the demands of nearly a century of struggle were finally met in 1940, when Congress amended the Fair Labor Standards Act and reduced the federal workweek to 40 hours.

Early Struggles

The struggle toward an eight-hour day began early in the nineteenth century, when workers in both Europe and the United States began demanding a ceiling on the number of hours they had to work. In 1847 English women and children were granted a 10-hour day. In 1848 French workers won a 12-hour day. The first half of the century also saw the birth of the American 10-hour movement, which successfully achieved legislation establishing a 10-hour day in several states. In 1836, after workers in Philadelphia won a 10-hour day, the *National Laborer* declared, "We have no desire to perpetuate the 10-hour system, for we believe that eight hours' daily labor is more than enough for any man to perform." Nonetheless, given that even the 10-hour laws allowed employees to contract for longer hours should they wish, employers applied this "wish" to all workers, firing or blacklisting those who refused to cooperate. Given the pressure of a growing, needy immigrant labor force, leverage for bargaining was on the side of employers. From 1830 to 1860 the average workday in the United States went from 12 hours to 11 hours.

The fight for an eight-hour day in the United States gained force in the mid-nineteenth century. In the 1850s New York trade unions agreed at a mass meeting that "eight hours is a just and sufficient number of hours for any man to work." At the 1864 International Workingmen's Association convention in Europe, representatives stated that a limited workday was "the first step in the direction of the emancipation of the working class." That year, the first American eight-hour organization was formed.

The following decades brought a combination of strikes and occasional legislative victories. One early victory came in California, where the state legislature yielded to a series of labor actions to pass an eight-hour law on 22 February 1868. That same year, 25,000 mechanics, miners, and other laborers struck for the same right in Pennsylvania. An early legislative victory at the national level came when Congress approved an eight-hour day for federal workers; however, some department heads cut wages proportionally to match the cut in hours. A three-month strike by 100,000 workers in 1872 resulted in an eight-hour day for 10 labor unions. Strikes soon brought the eight-hour day to workers in Philadelphia, Chicago, Jersey City, Buffalo, and Albany. During the depression that followed the stock market crash of 1873, labor activists began to put forth the idea that a shorter workweek could reduce unemployment, with the work spread more equitably among workers. Unfortunately for eight-hour proponents, the dire economic straits facing the country temporarily slowed the momentum of their cause.

Labor Sets an Ultimatum

In October 1884 the national Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions approved a resolution calling for a workday of eight hours. Given the failure to date of legislative methods, trade unions and other worker associations set an ultimatum: Either workers would get their eight-hour workday limit by 1 May 1886 or they would defend their demands with a general strike. The epicenter of the eight-hour day movement (also known as the "May Day" movement), which claimed 250,000 laborers nationwide by 1886, was Chicago. Most involved in organizing workers was the anarchist-influenced Working People's Association. Numerous eight-hour strikes broke out prior to the 1 May deadline, and thousands of workers in numerous trades won hour limits. Striking workers nationwide united behind the words of J. G. Blanchard's "Eight-

Hour Song": "We're summoning our forces from / shipyard, shop, and mill; / Eight hours for work / eight hours for rest / Eight hours for what you will." Nonetheless, a great number of American workers were still working around 100 hours a week. What started out as a peaceful protest on 1 May became a pivotal moment in labor history.

On the 1 May deadline for a national general strike, thousands of workers in Chicago struck with mostly peaceful actions. As the protest continued over several days, tension between police and strikers intensified. On 3 May, when strikers attacked men who crossed a picket line at the McCormick Reaper Works, police opened fire and killed four demonstrators. That night hundreds of enraged protesters took to the streets, demonstrating at Haymarket Square. Just as the rally was concluding, a dynamite bomb exploded and killed a police officer. The police fired on the crowd, killing one protester and wounding others. Four of the eight demonstrators arrested for the bombing were hanged despite scant evidence against them. The Haymarket affair was a rallying cry for a new generation of activists. Lucy Parsons, on the death of her husband, Albert Parsons, called for direct action against the wealthy. Emma Goldman, a young Lithuanian immigrant and anarchist, cited Haymarket Square as her political birthplace. "If it weren't for what happened here in Chicago back in 1886, you'd be working 16 hours a day," writer Studs Terkel recalled telling a young antiunion couple a century later.

As the hysteria surrounding the Haymarket affair died down, demands for an eight-hour day resumed. In the Northwest, lumber workers of the Industrial Workers of the World enforced their eight-hour demands by simply walking off the job after eight hours of work. Advances toward an eight-hour day were nonetheless the exception to a larger trend: when the U.S. government began keeping track of workers' hours in 1890, it discovered that full-time workers in manufacturing spent an average of 100 hours per week on the job. The struggle continued.

On 12 May 1902 some 150,000 anthracite coal miners in Pennsylvania went on strike to demand better wages and shorter hours. Lasting five months, the strike required government intervention due to fears of a coal shortage. Under the leadership of John Mitchell, the United Mine Workers of America won an eight-hour day. In 1906 the eight-hour day was widely adopted in the printing industry. By 1910 the average U.S. workday had dropped to nine hours.

Over the following decade trade union membership doubled to four million, thus giving greater force to workday limit demands. In the 1910s the rising number of women entering the workforce brought improved legal protections. In states including Minnesota, Utah, Oregon, and Massachusetts, governments cut the 54-hour legal workweek limit to 48 hours. In 1916 the federal Adamson Act gave railroad workers a set 48-hour work-week. In 1918 workers in the nation's meat-packing plants were working 60-hour weeks; President Woodrow Wilson, after appointing a federal negotiator, ordered a workweek of 48 hours. Labor unions found friends in government; by 1919 some federal agencies were headed by union leaders.

International Labor Organization Calls for Eight Hours

With the 1919 founding of the International Labor Organization (ILO), the eight-hour movement took on an increasingly global character. At the ILO General Conference in Washington on 29 October, the first item on the agenda was the application of the principle of the eight-hour day (or of the 48-hour week). The Hours of Work (Industry) Convention of 1919 obliged ratifying states to limit working hours for public and private industrial enterprise to no more than eight in the day and 48 in the week. A similar workweek was set at the International Labor Convention in Geneva, Switzerland, on 28 November 1919. The convention made the following exceptions to the eight-hour day: exclusively family run businesses, supervisors, management, and "persons employed in a confidential capacity." In cases where shorter days were worked, lost hours could be made up on other days provided the daily eight-hour limit was not exceeded by more than one hour. Moreover, persons working in shifts could work over the limit provided "the average number of hours over a period of three weeks or less does not exceed eight per day and forty-eight per week." The convention entered into force on 13 June 1921. Given that the U.S. Senate refused to ratify the Treaty of Versailles, which created the ILO, the United States could not join the organization.

Corporate Paternalism

Despite sluggish advances by the U.S. government, so-called welfare capitalists within the American business community had been exercising a sort of corporate paternalism that coincided with some of labor's demands.

On 5 January 1914 the Ford Motor Company cut its work-day from nine hours to eight and raised workers' pay to \$5 a day (double the going rate at other auto plants). Henry Ford extended his industrial philosophy into the homes of his workers on the grounds that conditions at home had a direct influence on efficiency in the factory. Ford's Five-Dollar Day was available to all employees over age 22 who proved they were "sober, saving, steady, industrious" and that their earnings would not be "wasted in riotous living." The plan generated mobs of unemployed workers outside the Ford plant in Detroit; many men thereafter refused to work for less than \$5 a day. Ford's "profit-sharing plan" gave workers enough money to buy automobiles of their own, thus bringing money back to the company and dissolving efforts to unionize the Ford factory. Disciplined by overpayment, workers proved more accepting of speedups and other inconveniences. By 1926 Ford was experimenting with the five-day week.

In 1923 the U.S. Steel Corporation followed in Ford's footsteps to establish an eight-hour policy. Building directly on Ford's experiments, Paul Litchfield of Goodyear Tire and W. K. Kellogg of flaked cereal fame undertook six-hour workday initiatives.

Kellogg's was an American pioneer in what would come to be called *timesizing* (cutting hours instead of workers). Starting on 1 December 1930 the Battle Creek, Michigan, company offered a 30-hour workweek option. Company owner W. K. Kellogg, who championed the importance of rest and leisure in achieving productivity, was joined in his belief in a six-hour day by company president Lewis J. Brown, an Englishman highly influenced by Lord William Leverhulme, an English factory owner and the author of *The Six-Hour Day and Other Industrial Questions* (1919). Kellogg reportedly told Battle Creek mayor William Penty, "If we put in four six-hour shifts ... instead of three eight-hour shifts, this will give work and paychecks to the heads of three hundred more families in Battle Creek." Cutting the workday to six hours, Kellogg's eliminated breaks and abolished bonuses for working unpopular shifts. With a 12.5 percent hourly raise, standard daily pay fell by only 15 percent.

A true 30/40 plan emerged when the 40-hour wage was again reached with a third wage raise in 1935. That year Kellogg's claimed a 39 percent increase over 1929 employment and a 41 percent accident reduction. With the advent of the Great Depression and a growing unemployment rate, workers were happy to share the work and later recalled using their increased leisure time for family activities, sports, socializing, and general community-building. "You weren't all wore out when you got out of work," one Kellogg's worker said. "You had the energy to do something else." Both the business press and the U.S. government praised the experiment as a great success. On 14 April 1931 Kellogg's made the six-hour day permanent. That year President Herbert Hoover invited Kellogg to Washington to discuss the six-hour day.

The New Deal and the Shorter Workweek

In the United States, real change at the federal level came in 1933 with President Franklin D. Roosevelt's election and subsequent introduction of the New Deal. Given the despair facing American workers after years of economic depression, Roosevelt found support for his break with the capital-friendly policies of his laissez-faire predecessors and his introduction of sweeping economic and social policy changes. During this time labor leaders such as William Green of the American Federation of Labor were calling for the "six-hour day and the five-day week in industry." Some individual business were already experimenting with this formula. On 6 April 1933 the U.S. Senate approved a bill by Senator Hugo Black calling for a 30-hour week; anything over that limit was to be considered overtime. While the business community wasn't completely opposed to the bill, it did protest the wage and hour levels applied to their industries. After business interests convinced him to oppose the bill, Roosevelt argued that his New Deal was a better way of cutting unemployment. The bill was ultimately killed in the House of Representatives, where it lost by a few votes. According to Roosevelt's labor secretary, Frances Perkins, Roosevelt regretted not supporting the Black bill as early as 1935. Doing so, Perkins would write years later, would have brought decades of "tinkering in the right garage" instead of enshrining a 40-hour week.

The United States finally joined the ILO in 1934, and in 1935 former New Hampshire governor John G. Winant, as the organization's assistant director, convinced the ILO conference to commit

to the 40-hour workweek as an international standard. In 1938 the Fair Labor Standards Act, in addition to setting a minimum wage and prohibiting child labor, established a workweek limit of 44 hours, albeit with no overtime pay. A century of demand was finally met in 1940, when Congress amended the Fair Labor Standards Act to limit the federal work-week to 40 hours.

Nonetheless, an important but invisible part of the labor force, one virtually ignored throughout the eight-day struggle, was left out of the 40-hour equation. While men saw their work hours outside the home decrease over the last century, the hours women dedicated to unpaid household work remained steady. In 1912-1914 housewives worked an estimated average of 56 hours per week; in the 1970s this average remained around 52 hours.

By the end of the twentieth century, some labor movements and political parties were calling for a 35-hour workweek, an idea with which some center-left European governments experimented. In the United States, the downward trend in labor hours began to reverse in 1969. The eight-hour day was applied inconsistently; California, for example, repealed its state eight-in-a-day law requiring overtime pay for workdays exceeding eight hours. "Mandatory overtime has become a standard in most sectors of the working class," noted the *Worker's Voice* in 1997. "The fight for the eight-hour day has again become a demand for American workers."

Key Players

Black, Hugo LaFayette (1886-1971): As a member of the U.S. Senate, Black was a fervent supporter of New Deal policies. His depression-era bill calling for a 30-hour workweek was narrowly defeated in Congress. He went on to become an associate justice of the U.S. Supreme Court (1937-1971).

Ford, Henry (1863-1947): Ford, the leading American automaker of the early twentieth century, was a welfare capitalist who drew national attention to his Five-Dollar Day. In 1914 he paid workers double the industry wage for a shorter workday of eight hours. A staunch opponent of labor organizations, Ford vigorously opposed United Auto Worker unionization at his plants.

Kellogg, William Keith (1860-1951): Kellogg turned the Seventh-day Adventist Battle Creek Sanitarium into a food-processing empire based on flaked cereal production. A staunch advocate of rest and leisure as investments in productivity, he gained national attention with a successful 30-hour week option for his employees.

Parsons, Lucy (1853-1942): Parsons was an American anarchist and a key figure in the late nineteenth century revolutionary labor movement. A founder of the IPWA, she helped organized the general strike of 1 May 1866 calling for an eight-hour day. Following the hanging of her husband, Albert Parsons, after the Haymarket affair, she continued her militancy and helped found the IWW in 1905.

See also: *Fair Labor Standards Act*; *First International*; *Haymarket Riot*; *International Labor Organization*; *Ten-hour Day Movement*; *United Mine Workers of America*.

Bibliography

Periodicals

Camara, Musa T. "When Is the 'Real' Labor Day?" *Los Angeles Sentinel*, 6 September 1995.

Hunnicut, Benjamin Kline. "Kellogg's Six-Hour Day: A Capitalist Vision of Liberation Through Managed Work Reduction." *Business History Review* (autumn 1992).

Lowndes, Joe. "The Life of an Anarchist Labor Organizer." *Free Society* 2, no. 4, 1995.

Meeropol, Michael. "The Overworked American: The Unexpected Decline of Leisure." *Challenge* (July-August 1992).

Other

"American Business and the Beginning of the New Deal Era" [cited 28 January 2003]

<www.timen.com/history/newdealeconomics.html>

"Continue the Fight for the 8-Hour Day." *Workers' Voice* [cited 28 January 2003].
<home.earthlink.net/~workersvoice/8hour.html>

"A Curriculum of United States Labor History for Teachers." Go Union Now [cited 28 January 2003]. <www.gounionnow.com/labor_history_curriculum.htm>

"First of May: Remember the 8-hour Work-day Struggle." Think Centre, Singapore. 26 April 2002 [cited 28 January 2003]. <www.thinkcentre.org/article.cfm?ArticleID=708>

"How the Weekend Was Won: Studs Terkel Gives Us All Hell." *Livelyhood*. PBS [cited 28 January 2003]. <www.pbs.org/livelyhood/workday/weekend/studsterkel.html>

Hyde, Philip. "Bibliography of Worktime Economics." *Timesizing Wire*. 1998-2002 [cited 28 January 2003]. <www.timesizing.com/1bibliog.htm>

"International Labor Convention (No. 1) Limiting the Hours of Work in Industrial Undertakings to Eight in the Day and Forty-eight in the Week, 28 November 1919." University of Minnesota Human Rights Library [cited 28 January 2003]. <www1.umn.edu/humanrts/links/ilo1.html>

Miller, Arthur J. "What Ever Happened to the Eight-Hour Day?" *IWW Workers Literature* [cited 28 January 2003]. <www.iww.org>

Sanchez de Lozada, Boris, and Robert Armoush. "Henry Ford and the Five Dollar Day." 1999 [cited 28 January 2003]. <web.bryant.edu/~history/h364proj/summ_99/armoush/index.htm>

Whalen, Kelly. "History Lesson: How the 8-Hour Day Was Won." *Livelyhood*. PBS [cited 28 January 2003]. <www.pbs.org/livelyhood/workday/weekend/8hourday.html>

—Brett Alan King