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# Eight-Hour Day A Righteous Demand

by Eugene V. Debs

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The eight-hour question is up for debate, and the discussion will proceed until the demand that eight hours shall constitute a day's work will be granted. It is a righteous demand. There is not to be found in it, however severe the analysis, an element of injustice. By making eight hours a lawful day's work, no man, woman, nor child is wronged. This cannot be said of the demand for more than eight hours for a day's work.

No greater mistake, in connection with the subject, could be made than to assume and assert that only the well-being of the wage-worker is considered in demanding a less number of hours for a day's work. Such a view of the subject is narrow. It lacks breadth and depth. Upon investigation it will be found to be prompted by selfishness and parsimoniousness, totally destitute of generosity and that broad philanthropy which comprehends the public good — the welfare of all.

There are, doubtless, those who believe that the eight-hour movement is of mushroom growth; that it has come, as did Jonah's gourd, and will perish as quickly. Such persons are neither students nor philosophers. They reason badly, or, more properly, they do not reason at all. They assume that agitation is the work of cranks; that it is a vagary, which, like many other delusions, is to have its day, disappear and be forgotten. Such people are doomed to disappointment. The wish is father to the thought, and sire and offspring, at no distant day, will fill a common grave.

The question of reducing the hours of labor, if we may measure time by events, can boast of some antiquity. The seed has been germinating during the entire 19th Century. In a recent paper, prepared by Mr. Joseph Gruenhut, of Chicago, and published in *The Knights of*

*Labor*, of that city, the facts are brought into commanding prominence. It appears that prior to 1803, 14 hours constituted a day's work. At that date a movement was made by journeymen shipwrights and house carpenters to secure a reduction to ten hours, and were threatened with "blacklisting" for their temerity. As far back as 1832, the carpenters and calkers of Boston struck to secure ten hours for a day's work. They did not succeed, but their brethren in New York and Philadelphia were more successful, and did secure the boon. That was 56 years ago — more than half a century — but to secure this limited success, there had been constant agitation from 1803 to 1833 — 30 years.

From 1833, the demand for a reduction of the hours of labor became more and more emphatic. In 1840, Martin Van Buren, by proclamation, established the ten-hour day system in the Navy Yards of the government. The Governor of New Jersey recommended legislation favoring a reduction of hours. Workingmen took courage, and the agitation proceeded. In 1845-46 numerous strikes occurred to secure the ten-hour system. In 1847, the British Parliament passed a ten-hour law. This aroused fresh activity in the United States among working men. New Hampshire led off by making ten hours a legal day's work in 1847. The agitation was kept up; strikes were frequent; employers relaxed their grasp slowly, and in 1853 eleven hours were adopted in many parts of the country as the regular work day, as the result of strikes.

A number of states have adopted the ten-hour law.

In 1868 Congress passed an eight-hour law for all government workingmen. Then began strikes throughout the country for the eight-hour system, and eight-hour leagues were formed, and from that day to the present the agitation has been kept up, and is now more active than ever before.

In 1802-3, when the agitation began, there were two labor organizations engaged in the great work of trying to reduce the hours of labor from 14 to ten hours. Now, labor organizations are counted by scores. Then, workingmen were weak; now they are strong. Then, capital was arrogant, all powerful; it is arrogant still, but it is no longer all powerful; organized labor confronts it defiantly, and says, as did Moses to Pharaoh, "Let my people go."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Reference to *Exodus*, chapter 9, verse 1, which reads: "Then the LORD said unto Moses, Go in unto Pharaoh, and tell him, Thus saith the LORD God of the Hebrews, Let my people go, that they may serve me."

From 1802 to 1890 — 88 years — there has been ceaseless agitation for a reduction of the hours of labor, and it may be said that four hours a day have been gained to the toilers of the land — four hours a day for rest, for recreation, for study, for mind-improvement and physical recuperation. Without this agitation on the part of the workmen, without the strikes, the sacrifices and sufferings incident to strikes, the 14-hour day would still be in force, and yet there are men who deprecate agitation, and who have a holy horror for strikes. But the edict has gone forth — working hours must still further be reduced. Does some one ask what has been gained in 88 years of agitation? We answer, four hours a day to each workingman, or for 300 working days 1,200 hours, equal to 120 days of ten hours each. Are there those who begrudge these hours of rest and relaxation to the toiler? Yes. Find them, measure them, analyze them, and when the world knows what they are, humanity will blush crimson for their degeneracy.

The eight-hour demand to thoughtful men means much more than the gain of two hours from toil; it means opportunities for the idle to obtain work and wages; to become productive and self-supporting. Suppose, in round numbers, there are in the country, 6.25 million men willing to work, and that only 5 million of them can find employment at ten hours for a day's work. Five million men working ten hours a day is 50 million hours. It is seen that there are 6.25 million workingmen, or 1.25 million idle. If the hours of a day's work are reduced from ten to eight, it will be seen that the reduction affords the idle an opportunity for employment — 6.25 million men working eight hours a day is 50 million hours, the same as 5 million men working ten hours a day. For every four men working ten hours a day, by reducing the hours to eight, admits an idle man. Who are benefitted? We answer, society as a whole. No greater danger can menace society than idleness. It has been said, and it is true, that "idleness is the prolific parent of crime," and not only of crime, but of pauperism. Idleness destroys the home and wrecks the family. It is a scourge which leaves in its wake effects, compared with which, pestilence is a benediction. The eight-hour movement will prove to be a powerful aid in doing away with idleness.

The eight-hour question is scarcely less ethical than economical. It relates to morals as well as to money. If the idle can obtain employment, they are in the line of moral, physical, and financial advancement. If idleness leads to vice, employment is promotive of vir-

tue. If idleness wrecks homes, employment builds homes. If idleness results in poverty and degradation, employment is productive of competency and independence.

The eight-hour movement is not only designed to afford workmen more leisure, more rest, more opportunities for intellectual culture, but it is designed to afford men, in forced idleness, opportunities for employment and all those blessings it will confer.

The triumph of the eight-hour movement will not usher in the millennium. It will not chain the devil. It will not transform the earth into a paradise, but it will be moving things in the direction of many and great improvements. It will be scoring another victory for right, truth and justice. It will be a harbinger note of the good time coming, when labor shall enjoy more abundantly the wealth it creates.

During the next twelve months the eight-hour discussion is to be more aggressive than ever before. The press has long since begun its crusade. One paper leads off by saying that

The division, eight hours for rest and eight hours for recreation and improvement seems not unreasonable, though in a great many occupations, and in a vast number of individual cases, such a division could not be enforced. It is claimed that a shortening of hours would furnish relief for the unemployed by giving work and wages to a greater number of persons, but this argument is more fanciful than real.

We have shown that it is not fanciful; not a vagary. Mathematics never more clearly demonstrated a proposition than that by reducing the hours of labor more room is made for more laborers. Nor is it true that "in a vast number of individual cases" the eight-hour system "could not be enforced." The ten and eleven-hour system has been enforced as against the 14-hour system. But, says the paper from which we have quoted:

In this, as in other conflicts of interest, the trouble is to find a common standing-ground for employers and employees. The latter want ten hours' wages for eight hours' work, and the former insist they cannot pay it. Generally, except in the government or public service, a reduction of hours is accompanied by a corresponding reduction of pay. No law can prevent men from making special contracts, and the most that any enactment on the subject can do is to make eight hours a legal day's work in the absence of any contract or stipulation to the contrary. The result will

probably be that in most cases employers will scale down the wages two-tenths, and if the laborer or mechanic wants to earn the old wages, he will have to work the old hours.

In this we have the key-note of the opposition the eight-hour movement is to encounter from a subsidized press. The same old cry that was heard when 14 hours was a day's work is heard again in favor of ten hours and against the adoption of eight hours. The law, if laws are enacted, fixing eight hours as a day's work, is to be violated, and then we are told that employers, if the law cannot be abrogated by chicane, as a last resort, will "scale down prices." Workingmen should understand that the establishment of the eight-hour system is not to be inaugurated without a struggle.

If, the labor organizations of the country, acting as a unit, shall say, "eight hours shall constitute a day's work," the declaration will be the eight-hour law of the country. If employers determine they will not obey it, then, in that case, let silence brood over the land from ocean to ocean. One day will suffice. Let the fires go out in forge, and furnace, and firebox. Let the machine stand still. Give the horsepower a rest. If the ring of the anvil, the click of the shuttle, the whir and buzz of spindle and wheel can't be permitted to sing in concert the triumph of justice to labor, let them remain silent. Everything depends upon the united action of workingmen. If they are discordant, there will be no inauguration of the eight-hour movement but if united, harmonious and determined, they will succeed. In the meantime, let the work of agitation go forward with an increasing vigor.

*Edited with footnotes by Tim Davenport*

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