

## REPORT

# Melbourne Celebrates the 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of its Eight Hour Day

Peter Love

On 21 April 1856 stonemasons and other building workers downed tools on the Melbourne University site and marched through the city past other worksites to both proclaim victory and check on compliance with the new 'Eight Hours System' that they had negotiated with leading employers in the preceding few months. The march ended at the new Victorian Parliament where Cornish, one of the recalcitrant contractor, was holding out for a variation to his contract with the government that would allow him to complete the job under the new 'system'. A government enquiry eventually agreed to his claim and the reduction in hours of work without loss of pay won official approval, strengthening the claim of other workers to extend the 'system' to their industries. Although it was not the first Eight Hour Day victory for workers, as Sydney historians well know, it was one of the earliest to establish an officially sanctioned standard at leading sites for a whole industry across a specific region. All the main participants fully understood the significance of what had happened and marked the occasion with a celebratory dinner that night, which was attended by unionists, employers and civic leaders.

On 12 May 1856 a triumphal march moved through the city, behind the famous 'Eight Hours Labour, Eight Hours Recreation, Eight Hours Rest' banner, to the Cremorne Pleasure Gardens by the Yarra where workers and their families disported themselves in jollification and had the good sense to decline the prospect of official speeches. Although the



Photo courtesy of Peter Love

campaign for shorter hours across all industries was long and hard, the events of 1856 became a symbol of workers' aspirations for greater control over their daily lives through the regulation of working hours. For a century thereafter, an annual procession through the city was held on Eight Hours (later Labour) Day until, having steadily lost support, it was replaced by Moomba in 1955.

In 2006, facing the prospect of a return to nineteenth century working conditions, the Victorian labour movement, with state government sponsorship, organised an impressive range of activities to commemorate and contemplate the significance of the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary. The Melbourne Branch of the ASSLH was part of the planning process, with representatives on the co-ordinating committee. Beginning in March, a series of public events explored aspects of how working people in Victoria had campaigned to civilise the relationship between work and life.

## Exhibitions

During the March-May period there were enough exhibitions to keep the working class culture vulture out most nights of the week. The University of Melbourne's Ian Potter Museum of Art presented a collection of material from the University's Archives on the political and industrial origins of the Eight Hour Day movement entitled 'Under the Burning Sun of the Colony: The Eight Hour Movement'. The University's place in the movement was acknowledged earlier when the Vice-Chancellor presided over the official opening of the celebration program in the Old Law Quad, where workers downed tools in April 1856. The Melbourne Museum curated an impressive exhibition of trade union banners, many of which had been restored with the help of special grants made available by the Victorian Ministry for the Arts. There was added significance in this since a recent alteration to the State's Heritage legislation allowed artefacts, not just buildings or historic sites, to be listed on the Heritage Register, and the first such listing was of these trade union banners. Between February and November a travelling exhibition 'It's About Time! The 8 Hour Day 1856-2006', emphasising working time as an enduring issue, has appeared in major regional centres throughout Victoria. A related exhibition at the State Library of Victoria on 'Naked Democracy: Governing Victoria 1856-2006' established a connection between the Chartism inherent in the Eight Hours campaign and the events leading up to the granting of Self-Government for the Colony. There were several smaller, though no less engaging, exhibitions including Grant Hobson's photographic images of work during the 1990s recession at the Centre for Contemporary Photography. John Ellis' documentary photos of street demonstrations and labour activists, most of which are in the University of Melbourne Archives' collection, went on show at the Counihan Gallery under the title 'Speak Out'. The RMIT Gallery presented historical artefacts on the 'RMIT, the Working Men's College and the Eight Hour Day', while the Australian Centre for the Moving Image provided one of the more imaginative events with an interactive display '888: Work and Play' where visitors were able to manipulate animated characters into different rates of activity according to whether they were at work, rest or play. The trick was to achieve a sustainable balance.

## Performances

The theatrical performances were perhaps the most engaging of all the events in the program. 'We Built This City', presented by the Melbourne Workers Theatre at the Spotswood Pumping Station, featured a big cast of unionists on percussion, Mark Seymour (ex-Hunters and Collectors) leading a rock band with a massed ensemble of guitars and the Victorian Trade Union Choir. But perhaps the most startling element of the performance was the 'dance' of heavy earthmoving machinery to a heavy metal accompaniment. University of Melbourne students took Studs Terkel's stories of ordinary people's jobs and set them to music in a lively and moving show that reminded the audience of the simple satisfactions and everyday indignities of 'Working'. At the Trades Hall, Danny Spooner led a group of folk singers through a musical and visual exploration of 'The 8 Hour Day, Goldfields Management and Anti-Transportation: Reform by Protest in Early Melbourne'. Backed by the ubiquitous Trade Union Choir, it revived many half-forgotten political songs of working people and the labour movement.

## Public Events

The program of public events began with a formal opening ceremony in the cloisters of the Old Law Quad at the University of Melbourne where the building workers downed tools in 1856. Hosted by Glyn Davis, it was addressed by leading trade unionists and the Minister for the Arts. Descendants of the Eight Hour Day pioneers admired the restored union banner on display and listened to rousing songs from the Trade Union Choir. In association with the twin conferences referred to below, the City of Melbourne sponsored a special Melbourne Conversations event that put together several Australian experts on contemporary working life to consider 'Working in Melbourne 1856-2056: Certainty or Uncertainty'. It was subsequently broadcast on ABC Radio National. Other media events included a two-part series on the Radio National program 'Hindsight' about the 8 Hour Day and what has happened to it in recent times.

Perhaps the most prominent event was the re-enactment of the 21 April march from the University of Melbourne to Parliament House. The crowd assembled at the University where they heard a stirring performance of John Warner's 'Bring Out the Banners' from Danny Spooner, with songs from the students' 'Working' musical and the Trade Union Choir, briefly interrupted by speeches from a trade unionist and a labour

historian. They then marched through the city, music blaring from the CFMEU ute, and assembled on the steps of the Parliament where the speeches from Greg Combet and Brian Boyd were supported by Rob Hulls, the relevant Minister, denouncing the WorkChoices revolution in the working life of ordinary Australian families.

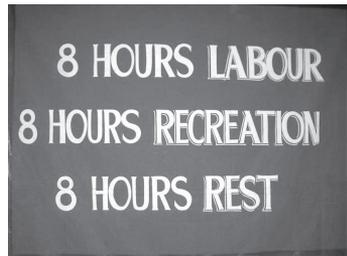


Photo courtesy of Peter Love

## Conferences

In late June the Melbourne Branch of the ASSLH, in conjunction with the Australian Centre at the University of Melbourne organised a conference on 'Working to Live: Histories of the Eight Hour Day and Working Life'. The keynote addresses and papers concentrated on the campaign for shorter hours, the complexities of agreeing on what constituted a fair and reasonable wage, how people managed their domestic and public working lives in specific communities and how justice for some workers has been long denied. There were also some international studies that provided an interesting comparative context to the Australian experience. There is no need for a detailed commentary on the proceedings here since a special issue of this journal, in addition to the normal two, will appear next year with most of the papers from the conference included. At the end of that conference Belinda Probert delivered a robust plenary address entitled 'Would you like choices with that?': Women, work and family under Howard. Copies can be downloaded from the University of Melbourne website as a .pdf. This was immediately followed by a more contemporary conference, *New Standards for New Times: The Eight Hour Day and Beyond*, organised by a team from RMIT associated with the *Labour and Industry* journal. Participants at that conference addressed a range of issues associated with how Australia and other countries define and manage working-time problems that confront us all. Those papers will also be published soon.

## **Publications**

In addition to the conference papers above, numerous individual pieces already published in journals and other periodicals, radio broadcasts and video productions, a book of essays on aspects of Victorian trade unionism is also being prepared for publication next year and may be available at the 10<sup>th</sup> National Labour History Conference that will be held at the University of Melbourne and the Melbourne Trades Hall on 4-6 July 2007.

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