

The Time of Their Lives

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There is much to celebrate in the history of the eight hour day and Australian working lives. And there is much to mourn. The struggle for shorter working hours organised around a division of the day into equal parts for labour, rest and recreation is a dramatic story; littered with tales of heroics, of joint partnership between capital and labour, of pageantry and ceremony. The initial cross-class support for the shorter working day, and the later proclamations of Eight Hour Day holidays are testimony of the labour movement's successes. But as the chapters in this book show, every gain has had to be guarded, complacency checked, and solidarity maintained. Cross-class support and the granting of the 'boon' of the eight hour day has been precarious, won in good times, lost in bad. The very premise of the eight hour day, as feminist historians remind us, makes the fallacious presumption that two-thirds of the day can be devoted to 'recreation' and 'rest'. The diverse perspectives that these chapters bring to their specific topics offer an implied challenge to the cosy certitudes of our celebrations by exploring some of the complexities embedded in the relationship between work, social and family life.

Kerry Taylor introduces us to the 'ambiguous legacy of Samuel Duncan Parnell', New Zealand's 'father of the Eight Hour Day'. In this, we see the development of myths surrounding labour's 'legends'. The ambiguity in the title reflects a theme that runs throughout this collection: that once won, the eight hour day proved difficult to defend. Jeff Rich, looks at the tradition of the 'day we celebrate', its values and meanings, and fights over the historical ownership of the legacy. The implications of these were central to a struggle for control of the Victorian Trades Hall Council and reflected the tensions between personal ambition and collective solidarity. Barbara Webster's discussion on the rise and demise of the eight-hour celebrations in Rockhampton provides insights into the colour and movement of Labour Day, and ultimately its corruption and eventual decline, as complacency, political machinations, commercialisation and deteriorating economic conditions took their toll.

Charles Fahey and John Lack take us into the lives of the 'Harvester men and women', the people behind the landmark decision that would entrench labour market divisions in the wage fixing system for much of the subsequent century. And we learn something of the experience of men and women associated with urban manufacturing. The arguments raised for the setting of a family wage stand in stark contrast to those in Mikael Ottosson and Calle Rosengren's discussion of the Working Time Committee, a body designed to examine the consequences of the introduction of shorter hours in Sweden. The committee did not hear arguments about the question of recreation and the opportunity for workers to become more actively engaged citizens, but simply issues affecting productivity. There is little evidence here of the cross-class support that Melbourne building workers enjoyed in 1856. Swedish workers were instead deemed to be extensions of the machine,

and besides too much free time could prove morally corruptive. The introduction of the eight-hour system in Sweden was hedged with significant exceptions from the beginning.

There are parallels with this in Lyn Beaton's chapter on four vignettes in the history of the furniture trade in Australia. By briefly examining early forms of solidarity, the gaining of the Eight Hour Day in 1883, the winning of a 44 hour week for women in the trade and the loss of the much celebrated 35-hour week at Pilkington's Glassworks in 1994, Beaton illustrates the dangers in complacency by workers about their trade unions and union officials' relationships with management.

In 'Babies, Agency and Waterfront Women' Margo Beasley takes us to the Sydney waterfront and examines why, in two industrial suburbs women were bucking trends in fertility within Australia and internationally, and in so doing were implicitly asserting a particular view of parenthood. Claire Higgins examines the evolution of the relationship women migrants had with their unions between the 1950s and 1980s. By tracing their working lives through the post-war boom until the dramatic tariff cuts in the 1970s, with an emphasis on the occupational health and safety issues developing for these women as they reached retirement in the 1980s, Higgins charts the increasing responsiveness of the clothing trades unions to migrant concerns.

Patricia Grimshaw, Nell Musgrove and Shurlee Swain look at the issue of shorter working hours for working mothers. They point to the 'double burden' faced by working mothers and the chimera of the eight hour day implicit in this. Focussing on the period coinciding with the United Nations' Decade for Women (1975 to 1985), the chapter discusses the optimism surrounding the adoption of the ACTU's Working Women's Charter compared with the pragmatism and disappointment of the Sexual Discrimination Act. Their chapter reminds us of the disjuncture between productive and reproductive spheres.

Bobbie Oliver's chapter poignantly illustrates the changing fortunes of workers in Australia since the 1980s with a close study of the Midland Government Railway Workshops. As a large government employer, the workshops were an exemplar in skill development through large apprenticeship intakes, and a site of identity associated with a trade. By 1994 the fiscal myopia of privatisation set in and the workshops were closed, devastating many workers and robbing Western Australia of a large skill base. As the 'status of certain trades changed with the change in technology' at the Midland Workshops so too did it in the printers' game. Val Noone reflects on his personal journey at the *Age*, first as a reader's assistant, and later as a reader, during a period of dramatic technological change for the newspaper, and the industry. Noone suggests that while there are limited opportunities for workers to arrest the development of technology, remembering past struggles can provide lessons on how to ameliorate the effects of its introduction.

The last three chapters in this text provide general overviews of the temporal and spatial aspects to our lives. Ben Maddison's chapter on the commons in Australia invites us into a world where workers attempted to maintain some independence from the 'iron yoke of the employer'. The commons, like the struggle for shorter working hours, highlight the 'antagonistic relationship between private property and common land'. Maddison claims that the use of the term 'boon' in relation to both the commons and the eight-hour system may represent 'a collective reclaiming

of previously appropriated time and space, of labour and land.’ Rob Hitchcock’s sweeping historical essay on the development of rest days suggests that working time, rather than money and other conditions, ‘provides one of the best measures of comparison of employment conditions between cultures’. His discursive examination of rest days highlights the contextual and contingent nature of time. Finally, the ‘Political Nature of Labour Time’, by Drew Cottle, Angela Keys and Helen Masterman-Smith provides a spirited appeal against the ‘appropriation of time by employers’. It is a fitting reminder of the need, once again, for a reappraisal of the working day and its relationship to those other parts of our lives.

As the following chapters are concerned with either the Eight Hour Day campaign, the shorter hours movement or, more broadly, attempts to exercise greater control over work, family and social life, it might be helpful to consider a short narrative interpretation of the campaign in Melbourne, the 150th anniversary of which was the occasion for our conference. The Melbourne Building workers of 1856 were not simply concerned with Eight Hours Labour, Eight Hours Recreation, Eight Hours Rest, as their banner proudly proclaimed. Those specific claims were impelled by more enduring aspirations; greater control over working life, recognition of their skills and respect for their role in a more democratic community. It is this underlying pursuit of a more egalitarian social citizenship that unites them in sesquicentennial common cause with working life activists today.

It should not be assumed, however, that the campaign’s explicit objectives and implicit aspirations were in any way original. Melbourne’s Eight Hour Day Pioneers, as the Trades Hall honour roll describes them, were part of a tradition that stretched back, as their British forebears were wont to say, ‘since time out of mind’. When James Galloway and James Stephens began agitating among their fellow stonemasons in early 1856 they looked to the Early Closing Movement for arguments to commend the familial and social benefits of shorter hours. At the inaugural meeting of the Collingwood Lodge of the Operative Masons’ Society of Victoria on 4 February Stephens read selected passages from Dr Cumming’s London lectures on the early closing movement and, with James Galloway, strongly urged a reduction of working hours in the building trades.¹ There was, in fact, an existing early closing movement in Melbourne. Ten years earlier drapers’ assistants had a short-lived victory when they persuaded the employers ‘to close their establishments at seven o’clock’.² They were also well aware that the Operative Stonemasons’ Society of New South Wales had won the Eight Hour Day

1 Victorian Operative Masons’ Society, *Report of the Committee Appointed by the Victorian Operative Masons’ Society to Inquire into the Origins of the Eight Hour Movement in Victoria: Adopted Annual Meeting, June 11, 1884*, Melbourne, Labor Call Print, 1912, p.10.

2 The agreement was reached in April 1846, but only appeared to last about three months. See Martin Sullivan, *Men and Women of Port Phillip*, Sydney, Hale & Iremonger, 1985, p. 244. See too, Geoffrey Serle, *The Golden Age: A History of the Colony of Victoria, 1851-1861*, Carlton, Melbourne University Press, 1963, p. 214. It was still a matter of public debate in 1856. Responding to a complaint by a Government clerk that early closing would be inconvenient, John G. Kinsman wrote a bitingly ironic letter to the Melbourne *Herald* on 4 January 1856 suggesting, in part, ‘He says he leaves his employment at six, and wishes the far more numerous class of shopmen to bow to his desires, and sacrifice their health and evening by becoming subservient to his convenience, by keeping retail establishments open until seven, and thus to please and serve him, frustrating the greatest physical, intellectual and moral good that can be conferred upon this numerous body of assistants.’ On 25 April 1856, immediately after the commencement of the Eight Hours system, the Eight Hours Labour League was formed and included representatives of the Early Closing Association.

on numerous sites in Sydney during the last quarter of 1855, although it did involve a reduction in wages.³ Some may have known about Samuel Parnell's campaign in Wellington or the Eight Hour Day as a guiding principle in the 1848 Articles of Association of the Otago Association in New Zealand.⁴ It is interesting, however, that none of the 1856 Melbourne activists seemed aware that the English utopian socialist Robert Owen had advocated an eight hour working day as early as 1817 and that it was he who is credited with coining the slogan 'Eight Hours Labour, Eight Hours Recreation, Eight Hours Rest', although Murphy later acknowledged it in his 1896 history of the movement and noted earlier precedents of enlightened attitudes to working life in English history.⁵ The most direct influence, however, came from the Chartist movement.

Chartism was a broad social reform movement, driven largely by working class discontent that sought to redress popular grievance through an expansion of political democracy. Growing out of local Workingmen's Associations and other, single-issue radical organizations from 1837, a loose federation mobilised around a six-point People's Charter. It called for electoral reform through manhood suffrage, annual parliaments, the secret ballot, the abolition of property qualifications for parliamentarians, payment of MPs and equal electoral districts. The objective was the democratisation of Parliament so that it could be transformed into an instrument for economic and social reform. Despite some tension between the moral suasion and direct action streams in Chartist thinking, expressed in the slogan 'peaceably if we can, forcibly if we must', the main tactic centred on huge petitions presented to the House of Commons, which promptly rejected them. W. E. Murphy claims that James Stephens was not only a dedicated Chartist but was actually working on the British Houses of Parliament as a mason and helped carry one of the petitions into the Commons.⁶ The petitions, however, were not just concerned with parliamentary reform. They sought redress for all manner of grievance, including oppressive hours and conditions of labour. The second Chartist Petition, signed by 3,315,752 people, was presented to the House of Commons on 3 May 1842 and quickly dismissed as an attack on property. It read in part:

... That your petitioners complain that the hours of labour, particularly of the factory workers, are protracted beyond the limits of human endurance, and that the wages earned, after unnatural application to toil in heated and unhealthy workshops, are inadequate to sustain the bodily strength, and supply those comforts which are so imperative after an excessive waste of physical energy. ...⁷

Despite its impressive mobilisation of popular support, the movement declined as

³ W. E. Murphy, *History of the Eight Hours' Movement*, Melbourne, Spectator Publishing Company Limited, 1896, pp. 40-42. See too, Labor Day Committee, *Souvenir Programme of the 100th Anniversary Annual Celebrations, 1855-1955*, Sydney, Labor Day Committee, 1955, pp.4-5. We are grateful to Neale Towart for providing a copy of this.

⁴ Murphy, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

⁵ The Operative Masons' *Report* credits Dr Embling as 'giving expression' to the slogan at a public meeting in the Queens Theatre. See pp. 18-19. Murphy's reference to it is on pp. 10-11 of his *History*. A very detailed account of the English movement is available in Gösta Langenfelt, *The Historic Origin of the Eight Hours Day: Studies in English Traditionalism*, Stockholm, Almqvist and Wiksell, 1954.

⁶ Murphy, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

⁷ Reprinted in Christopher Hampton (ed.), *A Radical Reader: The Struggle for Change in England, 1381-1914*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1984, p. 493.

the conjunction of regional differences, economic fluctuations and internal tensions undermined attempts to build a unifying national organization. By 1854 it was exhausted and effectively defunct. But Chartist ideas and the radical urge to agitate for them survived and spread to the furthest extremities of the Empire. In Victoria, just as the movement was collapsing in Britain, its six points were incorporated in the Ballarat Reform League's manifesto proclaimed on 11 November 1854 in the lead up to the Eureka Rebellion.⁸ The building industry activists of 1856 were well aware of the link in this radical tradition between political democracy, economic reform and social justice.

Recent fluctuations in the Melbourne labour market also had an influence on how the stonemasons' claim was constructed and the campaign conducted. In mid-1855 demand for labour was uneven. Coghlan suggests that while some workers were holding out for better pay, '... it is obvious also that employers were endeavouring to reduce wages below a standard which would enable a man with a family to maintain them in reasonable comfort, taking into consideration the high prices of commodities'.⁹ By August wages in the building trades had reached their lowest point, '... when stonemasons of the best class received 10s. a day and others only 8s.'. ¹⁰ From November onwards, however, conditions began to improve and it was then that Stephens, Galloway and their brother masons decided to act. Given their experience of hard times in 1854-55, they reasoned that '... regular employment was better than very high wages. They also felt that a reduction of one-fifth in the hours of labour would enable employment to be given to a larger number.'¹¹

After the 4 February meeting where Stephens talked about the early closing movement, the campaign gained momentum quickly. On 18 February the Melbourne and Collingwood lodges established a committee to organise the campaign and mobilise rank-and-file support. They were encouraged by the bricklayers' agreement to join the campaign on 1 March. The first general meeting was held in the Belvidere Hotel on 5 March where three motions were passed, the first two of which were the most significant.

1st That it is the opinion of this meeting that a reduction of the hours of labour would be greatly beneficial to the trade, and also tend to improve our social and moral condition, and that this meeting pledges itself to use every lawful endeavour to bring about so desirable a result.

2nd That it is the opinion of this meeting that, to carry the foregoing resolution into effect, it is indispensably necessary that we be in a perfectly organised condition.¹²

⁸ The political changes contemplated by the Ballarat Reform League were: A Full and fair representation; Manhood suffrage; No property qualifications for Members of the Legislative Council; Payment of Members; Short duration of Parliament. See John Molony, *Eureka*, Ringwood, Viking, 1984, p. 100.

⁹ T. A. Coghlan, *Labour and Industry in Australia from the First Settlement in 1788 to the establishment of the Commonwealth in 1901*, volume II, South Melbourne, Macmillan, 1969 (originally published by Oxford University Press 1918), p. 725.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.* p. 726.

¹² Victorian Operative Masons' Society, *Report into the Origins of the Eight Hour Movement in Victoria*, p. 10.

The assertion that the Eight Hours System, as they began to call it, would be beneficial to the trade signified a view that it was the trade that sustained them all, masters and men. There was a shared craft culture founded in the apprenticeship system, affirmed by pride in the daily exercise of their skills and nourished by friendships between many masons and some contractors, most of whom had so recently been operatives themselves. It also implied that there would be a benefit to the labour market in the available work being shared more equitably between artisans. The reference to improving their social and moral condition recalled the long-established moral economy of working people, which held that degrading toil was both socially injurious and morally iniquitous. The corollary was that decent wages and conditions offered the one true path to a robustly democratic and civilised community. The pledge ‘to use every lawful endeavour’ put them squarely in the moral suasion stream of labour activism, although there were a few militants who toyed with the opposing view that, ‘Moral suasion’s all humbug. Nothing persuades like a lick in the lug!’ The recognition that they needed to be ‘in a perfectly organised condition’ was not simply a reminder of past, hard-learned lessons but an acknowledgement that they would need to carry all the building trades with them, not just their own members.¹³

A well attended meeting of the trade was held in the Belvidere on 12 March where it was proposed that the Eight Hour System begin on 24 March but, after negotiations with employers who were meeting at Keely’s Hotel, it was agreed that a public meeting, paid for by the contractors, be held to discuss the details of the System and agree on a commencement date.¹⁴ That meeting took place in the Queens Theatre on 26 March, with Melbourne University contractor Abraham Linacre in the chair, and was attended by numerous employers, building workers and interested members of the public. The question was, ‘Shall the Eight Hours’ system of labour from henceforth prevail in the building trades of Victoria?’ James Galloway, Secretary of the Masons’ Society argued that the arduous working conditions during summer meant a ten hour day was not economically efficient. In building institutions for a new community there was a common civic purpose shared by employer and workman and that the conditions under which that was done were a matter for the community to decide, not the ‘... ethical absurdity, entitled the laws of supply and demand’. His peroration asked for generous public sympathy ‘... for the claims of the breadwinners to share in the delights which accrue from reasonable opportunities of recreation, mental culture and rest, and with one accord, by the seal of their votes, to lay the foundation of the charter of Australian workmen’s freedom’.¹⁵ The formal motion, however, made no reference to the underlying social and civic purposes of the campaign. It simply stated:

That this meeting is of opinion that the time has arrived when the system of eight hours per day should be introduced into the building trades, and that the laborious nature of the trade, and continued exposure to the excessive heat of the climate, loudly call for such a reform.¹⁶

¹³ At the next meeting John Gratton contemplated the possibility that not all the other trades would join them and persuaded the meeting to go it alone if necessary. *Ibid.* p. 11.

¹⁴ Two of the principal negotiators for the employers were Abraham Linacre, contractor on the University site and David Mitchell, Nellie Melba’s father. See *Ibid.* p. 11.

¹⁵ Murphy, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* p. 52.

Despite a little equivocation from some employers, the resolution was carried unanimously and the motion to commence the system on 21 April was moved and, after an amendment seeking a three month delay was over-ruled by Linacre from the chair, was passed amid general rejoicing and mutual congratulation.¹⁷ Emboldened by the decision, the other building trades moved quickly to embrace the new system. The carpenters resolved to follow the masons' lead on 2 April and established their own union on 16 April. The Plasterers' Society resolved to work the Eight Hour system on 7 April and a day later the bricklayers signed on and established their own society. On 11 April a public meeting, chaired by J. T. Smith, the Mayor of Melbourne who offered a £20 prize for an essay on the Eight Hours system, endorsed the new building industry agreement and applauded the civic vision it embodied. Master and operative slaters embraced it on 14 April and on 19 April, just two days before the commencement of the new regime; the Operative Slaters Society was formed. The painters, plumbers and coachbuilders followed suit on the same day.¹⁸ A committee was formed to organise the inauguration of the new system. Public notices announced it and specified the seasonal span of hours, with two hours included for meal breaks to be taken at different times in winter and summer.¹⁹ The day would be declared a holiday, a march would process through the city to be followed by a fete to mark the grand occasion, with any proceeds from the latter donated equally to the Melbourne Hospital and the Benevolent Asylum, according to customary principles of public-spirited mutuality. However, the demonstration and the fete had to be deferred because the only available venue, the Cremorne Gardens by the Yarra in Richmond, was already booked.

According to the committee's plan, on the morning of 21 April some seven to eight hundred artisans assembled near the University site and set off in orderly procession behind the masons, who carried just two flags, the union jack and a small 888 flag. The purpose was to celebrate the great 'boon' of the Eight Hour Day and, simultaneously, to ensure compliance by marching past all current building sites in the city. The point of this was that two contractors, Holmes on the Western Market and Cornish on the Parliament House site, had declined to join the other employers in the agreement and were still holding out. Both had said that they had no objection so long as the men accepted one fifth less wages, to which the workers replied that, in the present state of the labour market, they were 'fairly entitled to at least the present rates'.²⁰ The marchers moved down Elizabeth Street and via Flinders Street stopped at the Western Market where Holmes' workers downed tools and joined the growing procession, as did Cornish's when the demonstrators arrived at the Parliament House site. From there they moved on to the Belvidere Hotel where delegates reported that they had failed to meet Holmes and Cornish.²¹ A committee was formed that evening to raise money for the men thrown out of work by Cornish and Holmes. Spracklin, who chaired the meeting of bricklayers, denied that it was a strike, suggesting that 'it was very strange

¹⁷ *Ibid.* p. 53.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* pp. 56-58.

¹⁹ The span would be 7 am till 5 pm until 23 August each year and 6 am till 4 pm for the remaining months. Meals during winter would be breakfast from 9 am to 10 am and dinner 1 to 2 pm. In summer they would be taken from 8 to 9 and 12 to 1 respectively. See *Ibid.* p. 59.

²⁰ *Age*, 22 April 1856, p. 3

²¹ Murphy, *op. cit.*, pp. 60-63. Holmes conceded the issue later that evening. Reports of the march appeared in the *Herald*, 22 April 1856, n.p.; *Age*, 22 April 1856, p. 3; and *Argus*, 22 April 1856, p. 5.

indeed' if the whole of the trade could be 'compelled to succumb to one or two employers'. He reminded the meeting that the employers were just as dependent on the employees as the workers on their masters.²² It took a formal Board of Inquiry to resolve the Parliament House issue. The Government, anxious to have the building completed, subsequently varied Cornish's £50,000 contract by a further £1,700 to cover the additional wage costs of the eight rather than the ten-hour day.²³ Cornish's recalcitrance, in a perverse way, enhanced the significance of the unions' victory. It gave the official imprimatur to the Eight Hour system by approving it for the most prestigious of government contracts. Although it was not achieved on the day, it became part of the reason for union pride that they had established an industry-wide agreement which would not simply establish civilised working conditions by contemporary standards, but would become a beacon to workers everywhere that economic and social advancement could be won through intelligent and disciplined collective action. What the self-congratulation and associated civic pride did not acknowledge was the uncomfortable reality that the Eight Hour Day was built on the shifting sands of colonial prosperity. It is unlikely that many of the artisans or civic worthies who attended the celebration banquet at the Belvidere that night were much troubled by such doubts. The daily press, however, were not so sure.

On the morning of the march the *Argus* offered a discursive commentary on 'The Eight Hours Question'. Addressing the 'Demand and Supply Political Economist' and the rigid application of the natural laws of the market, it considered the position of the worker, his hours of labour and their effects on his body, the effective productivity of eight versus ten hours, and the alternative of extra recreation time for diversions and family life. Even if he worked fewer hours and received less pay for a shorter week, would he be worse off, the editorial asked. Not necessarily so, it suggested. He might spend time in domestic recreations such as cultivating a garden, thus lessening his food bills. He might enjoy his family and other amusements, to the ultimate benefit to his health, and consequent doctors' bills, especially when compared with prolonged toil in unhealthy conditions. In general, it thought that eight hours was sufficient time for a man to turn in as good a day's work as he might do in a longer time on the job. Commending the moderation of the workers' meetings and their campaign, it warned, however, that 'injudicious acts of a mere fraction of their number' might breach the delicate balance between the interests of capital and labour.

It behoves the *intelligent* artisan always to remember that, while he has a perfect right to say how many hours of the twenty-four he will devote to labour, *capital is a sensitive thing* – that capital upon the employment of which he necessarily subsists; and that if the sources from which it flows become once congealed by distrust, it is not a very easy matter to set them flowing again.²⁴

The *Herald* took a different view of 'The Procession and its Moral'. The essential message was that if the Eight Hours system was to work, it would be in circumstances

²² *Age*, 22 April 1856, p. 3

²³ John Maxwell, 'William Crocker Cornish' in Douglas Pike (ed.), *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol. 3, Carlton, Melbourne University Press, 1969, p. 464.

²⁴ *Argus*, 21 April 1856, p. 4.

dictated by supply and demand in the labour market, specifically with reference to immigration, a subject with which the *Herald* had been obsessed for some time. It began by speculating on the effect that news back in England about the Eight Hour Day would have on potential migrant artisans seeking a comfortable position in life. The events, it observed, bore some disturbing resemblances to rituals in the old country. It went on:

The proceedings, yesterday, in some respects, bore the aspect of intimidation; and, as such, will no doubt appear very shocking, in the eyes of all well-bred political economists, and all of those grave and enlightened persons who think that no class of men ought to import their follies and vices into a new country, except those who are in possession of a certain amount of capital and education. The merchant may improve upon the roguery of European trade, the lawyer upon the chicanery and veniality of his own antecedents, the physician on the quackery and empiricism that still darken the schools of science, and the Government may give new development to the arts of corruption and intrigue, and all this may be tolerated, and even eulogised as 'quite colonial', but let the working classes follow in the same wake, and there is no language too strong to denounce the depravity and the presumption of which they are guilty.

It continued by suggesting that, if intimidation was the objective of the march, then it ought to be condemned and warned that colonists had always resisted intimidation and threats, be it from trade unionists, the Government and the Courts at Eureka and its aftermath or, even, Russian cannon.

It conceded that the procession was basically peaceful and that the Eight Hour system, if all agree as seemed the case, was a benign enough matter. However,

Does it never occur to the working men that the only possible means they can have, of securing the reform in the hours of work, arise solely and exclusively out of the paucity of their numbers, as compared with the demand for labour?

It could merely stimulate another wave of immigration, which would inevitably lead to a surplus of labour and a reduction in standards.

Why, the procession must have been a scheme of the contractors – a deep trick, intended to advertise to the world that there is such a scarcity of workmen in Melbourne that those who are here have it all their own way; that the golden age has come at last, in which nobody shall do more than amounts to pleasant exercise; and that we are about to establish here a Utopian happiness, which all the strikes of Lancashire, and all the bloody barricades of Paris could never conquer.

Such announcements as these are perfectly suicidal, and the eight hour compact will infallibly break down under the first great influx of carpenters and masons, who will rush into the colony as soon as the real state of things becomes known.

People, it suggested, had lost their mania for immigration and now, advertisement of the Eight Hour system will revive the problem.

Wages were recovering themselves; provisions, clothing, fuel and rent, were becoming cheaper; and the working classes had a fair chance of getting on again, and keeping it all to themselves, when some stupid, mischievous blockhead – the worst enemy they ever had in this colony – set this agitation going; and the result will be that the whole fabric of their prosperity will be blown to the winds. Who will believe in any tale of distress or scarcity of labour, when he reads of processions first, and jollifications afterwards, to enforce a reduction of the day's work to eight hours, and without any diminution in the amount of wages?

It concluded by suggesting that the agitators keep their victory quiet and not parade about the street, lest they and their boon be swamped by a new wave of immigration.²⁵

The *Age* was more measured in its reflections on 'The Labor Question'. It claimed to have been the first journal to encourage the workers to push the question of 8 hours. It warned, however, that they must take heed of the 'natural laws' of trade and not seek advantage to the detriment of others, to be sure that the gains are economically sustainable. It warned the workers not to be encouraged to impulsive action by apparent friends and supporters, certainly not false leaders who are themselves not working men.²⁶

Anticipating some of this criticism about intimidation and economic vandalism, Galloway, writing as Chairman of the recently-established Eight Hours Labour League from the Belvidere Hotel on the night of 21 April, informed the editor of the *Argus* that:

As the procession of today may tend to lead the public to believe that a general strike had taken place for the obtainment of the Eight-Hour system, I beg to inform you that the procession was formed entirely of individuals who have obtained that great blessing: but as the contractors for the Market and the New Houses of Parliament have refused to accede to our request we considered that we were not justified in accepting the boon from our employers unless it could be universal in its operation, so that all contractors may have a fair chance. Hence the procession above alluded to, which have come to the resolution that they suspend work until the above employers concede the unanimous request to accept of eight hours as a day's work and pay the current wages as well as other employers.²⁷

Having obtained the 'great blessing' they turned their attention to consolidating and expanding the 'system', to building their movement, with a little fraternal sniping along the way, and to the deferred gratification of celebrations at the Cremorne Gardens.

²⁵ *Herald*, 22 April 1856, n.p.

²⁶ *Age*, 23 April 1856, p. 2. It is not clear whether this is a reference to the somewhat controversial Dr Embling who was, erroneously, credited with coining the slogan 'Eight Hours Labour, Eight Hours Recreation, Eight Hours Rest'.

²⁷ *Argus*, 22 April 1856, p. 5.

The first problem was to set a new date for the fete. They eventually decided on Whit Monday, which in 1856 fell on 12 May. Not only were the Cremorne Gardens available, it had resonances of a British popular cultural tradition that grew out of Pentecostal observance which, by the early 19th century, had been transformed into the Whit Walk where banners and bands joined in procession to a public place at which sports, eating, drinking and general merriment was had by all. After numerous committee meetings at the Belvidere an elaborate program for a grand procession and fete in celebration of the occasion was devised and advertised.²⁸ The Vine sisters, to their father's specifications, had fashioned the now famous blue, red and white banner proclaiming Eight Hours Labour, Eight Hours Recreation, Eight Hours Rest.²⁹ On the morning of 12 May a cheerfully expectant collection of 'substantial-looking fellows' assembled in the 'Carlton paddock' at the corner of Nicholson and Victoria streets dressed in their best clothes, carrying flags and other visual expressions of their exuberance. Members of the various trades that had so recently formed societies gathered around hastily painted banners symbolising their craft traditions, with the new Eight Hours banner taking pride of place. The Cremorne brass band competed with bagpipes and other instruments for musical supremacy until the marshals could persuade the twelve hundred or so cheery artisans to move in orderly procession through the city where thousands lined the streets to observe the spectacle.³⁰ The marchers reached the Cremorne Gardens at 1.30 pm where they were joined by other celebrants, mostly wives, children and friends who arrived by steamers, vehicles or on foot. Soon the grounds were 'filled with a very numerous assemblage of both sexes, who seemed to have made up their minds for a day of enjoyment'. Numbering between two and three thousand, they wandered about, taking in the pleasures of the gardens as threatening clouds gathered. At 3.00 pm many moved into the 700 seat dinner tent, which was filled to capacity, providing 'solid English fare, including plumb pudding'. Dr Embling MLC was supposed to chair the feast but when he did not arrive, Charles B. Vine, Chairman of the Committee assumed the role. He announced that there would be speeches by Councillor Findlay and Mr Burt, then launched into a speech of his own to propose a method of regulating skilled migration from Britain on the basis of advice from Victoria. The report recorded the jollifiers' response.

The tent having been voted unsuited to the display of oratory, and, indeed, a very marked indisposition to listen to any having been manifested, a general movement was made towards the music pavilion in the centre of the gardens; the band struck up, and there was soon a pretty general dance. It was evident the people had got the measure for which they had for some time been agitating, and were not disposed for a repetition of the old arguments at that time. As it was getting cold, the dance was still more sedulously engaged in, and though Messrs Findlay and Burt were now present, they and the committee very wisely determined upon giving the good folks

²⁸ A copy of the handbill advertising the occasion is reproduced in Michael Cannon, *Life in the Cities: Australia in the Victorian Age*: 3, South Melbourne, Thomas Nelson, 1975, p. 250.

²⁹ For an account of the banner's design and construction see Murphy, *op. cit.*, pp. 72-77.

³⁰ The following account of the procession and fete is drawn from *Ibid.* pp. 80-88; *Age*, 13 May 1856, p. 3; and *Argus*, 13 May 1856, p. 5.

their own way, and reserving themselves for the next occasion.³¹

They had paid 3/6 for the dinner and the day's diversions. Worthy speeches could be had for free at any time.

Ladies were served 'a sumptuous tea' in the refreshment tent and 'assiduously attended by the gentlemen of the party'. Dancing resumed with 'unabated vigor'. Later on, a pyrotechnic display, with artillery, re-enacted the bombardment of Sebastopol. The clouds finally dropped a little rain, sufficient, at least, to dampen excessive martial ardour for the Imperial cause, and the happy throng drifted homeward. After expenses, there was a surplus of £248, which the Committee, as promised, divided equally between the hospital and asylum, and pronounced themselves well pleased.

They had run and won an intelligent and unified campaign. They had successfully linked their common cause with the public good, celebrated it with collective conviviality, and directed the surplus to the mutual benefit of all. The Eight Hour Day victory symbolised more than a new regime of working life that enhanced the concurrent expansion of a rudimentary democratic citizenship. It affirmed an ongoing cultural tradition in the labour movement that expressed the intersecting themes of collectivism, mutuality and sociability. It asserted the self-respecting dignity of labour.

The campaign's success gave organised labour greater momentum in its efforts to organise workers. Tradesmen in numerous other occupations followed the building industry workers in setting up societies for their trade or Eight Hour Day Labour Leagues. A Trades Hall Committee was established and, in 1858 was given a Crown Land Grant of one acre on the corner of Victoria and Lygon streets Carlton South. A Trades Hall and Literary Institute building was erected on the site in 1859 and became the home of the Trades Hall Council. The original Hall was replaced, in stages, by the current buildings between 1875 and the 1960s. The THC served as the 'parliament of labour', albeit only for skilled craft labour in its earlier years. In co-ordinating collective activities, debating and resolving inter-union disputes and providing advocacy for the 'labour interest' in the public sphere, it was a continuing expression of the movement's determination to manage its own affairs, despite recurring scepticism about its capacity to do so effectively.³²

The Eight Hour Day was celebrated with an annual procession on 21 April and in 1879 the Berry government formally declared it a public holiday. The spectacle of workers marching proudly behind their elaborate trade union banners attracted tens of thousands of onlookers each year, although it began a slow decline after the First World War. The date of the holiday was twice altered in the twentieth century, in 1927 and 1949. In 1934 Eight Hours Day was renamed Labour Day. By the early 1950s it had become an empty ritual with declining support from union members and in 1955 was superseded by the Moomba march.³³ The monument that now stands opposite Trades Hall was unveiled in 1903 near Parliament House and was moved to its present location in 1924 where it still serves as an initial rallying point for demonstrations and marches.

³¹ *Age*, 13 May 1856, p. 3.

³² For a short outline of the Victorian Trades Hall Council's history see the relevant entry in Andrew Brown-May and Shurlee Swain (eds), *The Encyclopedia of Melbourne*, Port Melbourne, Cambridge University Press, 2005.

³³ *Ibid.* for entry on the Eight Hours' Day Movement.

The fate of the Eight Hour working day, however, is a much more complicated story that is beyond the scope of this introductory chapter. Once it had become the standard in Melbourne unions used it to organise workers in regional centres such as Geelong, Portland, Bendigo and Ballarat. Coghlan suggests that ‘... before the year 1856 had closed, eight hours was generally recognised as the length of the working day throughout Victoria’.³⁴ However, at the first signs of a weaker labour market in any trade, employers pressed for a return of the ten hour day. In 1858, for example, while some trades won the Eight Hour Day with a reduction in wages, the masons had several strikes over employers’ attempts to reduce wages, introduce sub-contracting and reintroduce the ten hour day. They sent £50 to England to pay a speaker to dissuade British masons from emigration.³⁵ In response, the employers simply shifted their focus. Coghlan observes:

The contractors sent an agent to Germany who engaged 450 men at 9s. 6d. per day of ten hours. The first batch of 200 German masons arrived in November 1859. They were met by the Melbourne masons who explained the cause of the dispute, from the point of view of the local union. The newcomers expressed their intention of taking no action inimical to their fellow-tradesmen in Victoria, and the Victorian masons became their hosts, until they could settle themselves in their new homes.³⁶

Despite them having signed contracts in Germany the masons refused to renew them in Melbourne and most took up agricultural work. ‘The employers prosecuted eight of them for breach of contract under the Master and Servants Act; these were all convicted and sentenced to the maximum penalty of three months’ imprisonment.’³⁷ The union had spent a considerable amount on the defence and maintenance of the German masons and by the time the second group arrived their funds had decreased ‘...and in the end the employers were practically victorious, except in regard to the hours of labour. On that question the opinion of the workers in Victoria was very strong.’³⁸ It was a salutary reminder that for all the sweet reason and ‘moral suasion’ of the Eight Hour Pioneers, workers had to sell their skills and energies in a labour market. Unless the invisible hand of market forces was constrained by a theory of moral sentiments to sustain community standards of common civic decency, employers like Holmes and Cornish would seek a competitive advantage through longer hours and lower wages. It was ever thus.

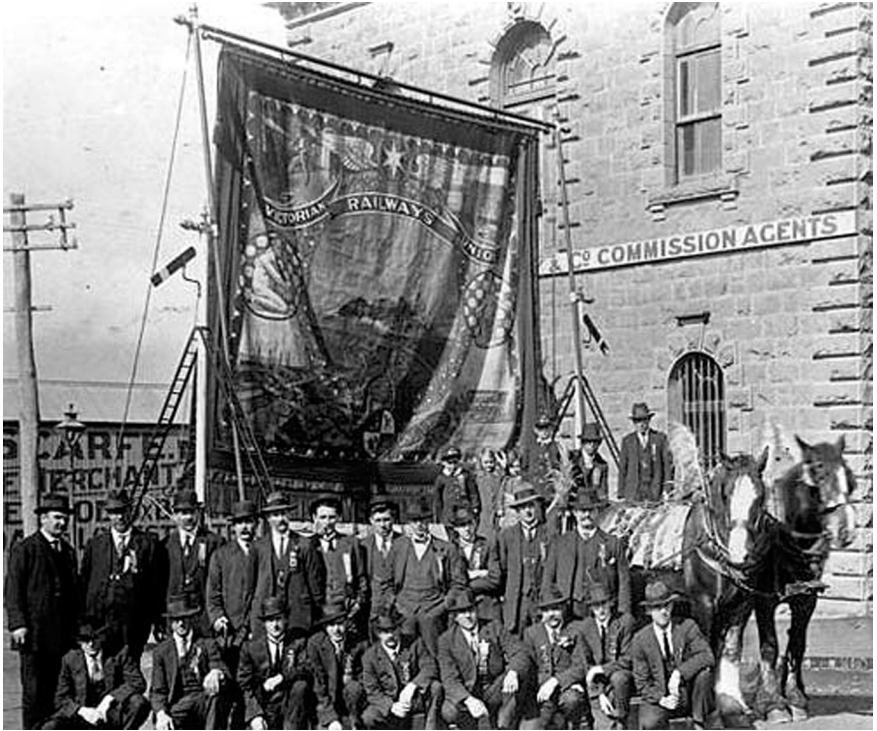
³⁴ Coghlan, *op. cit.*, p. 728.

³⁵ *Ibid.* p. 737.

³⁶ *Ibid.* p. 737-8.

³⁷ *Ibid.* p. 738.

³⁸ *Ibid.*



Members of the Ballarat Branch of the Victorian Railways Union, with their banner, assembled on Eight Hours Day. Photograph: Eden Studios Ballarat. Source: *Museum Victoria*



The Australian Bank Employees Union takes to the streets during the 'It's 9 for Mine' campaign in pursuit of a nine day fortnight, 1982. Source: *The Eight Hour Day 150th Anniversary Committee*