

Recorder

OFFICIAL ORGAN OF THE MELBOURNE BRANCH OF THE
SOCIETY FOR THE STUDY OF LABOUR HISTORY (INC)

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GENERAL MEETING: SUNDAY 27 AUGUST 2000, 2.00pm

**To be held in the meeting room
of the International Bookshop in the Trades Hall
(See map on back for location)**

The speaker will be:

JIM CLAVEN

**Industrial Relations Officer
Communications Electrical and Plumbers Organisation**

THE CENTRE IS MINE

The lesson from the Blair Government

RECORDER No 222 – TABLE OF CONTENTS

- 1. A Brief History of Australian Working Hours** p. 2
- 2. Interesting Information on Internet** p. 5

A Brief History of Working Hours in Australia

Jack Hutson

(This is the edited version of the Address given to the Melbourne Branch of the Society on 25 June)

The reductions in working hours are important episodes in labour history for they improved the quality of life by increasing the non-working part of the day. They also had the great virtue that they could never be devalued as wages could be by inflation and increases in income tax. There was also a small bonus in the increase in the hourly rate of pay because wages remained the same as before.

Over time there were five changes in the fixation of working hours.

The first change

was the reduction from 60 to 48 hours per week. That was obtained by the Operative Stonemasons Society established in Australia in 1850 by immigrants from Britain. They would have been familiar with the Chartist slogan there of "8 hours Work, 8 hours Recreation, 8 hours Rest"

In February 1856 the Society's Lodge in Sydney advertised that members would be working 8 hours a day in a 48 hour week. Their employers accepted this.

In March 1856 the Melbourne Lodge met with their employers where it was agreed that an 8 hour day in a 48 hour week would commence on 21 April. The introduction of the 8 hour day was a world first for Australia.

The 8 hour day spread quickly to other occupations in the building industry and then to other industries in the buoyant economy of the 1870's and 1880's. By 1890 the majority of industrial workers had the 8 hour day. Another big win from the 8 hour day victory was in a Public Holiday.

Starting in Melbourne, colourful parades began to be held each year in the capital cities of the colonies to celebrate the 8 hour day. In 1879 the Government of Victoria declared an 8 hour day public holiday which was followed in the other colonies. That again was another world first for Australia. Later, the name was changed to Labour Day because the 8 hours had been achieved.

By 1900 there were still some industrial workers on a 10 hour day, 60 hour week but the situation was changed by the introduction of industrial arbitration, for this made Federal and State Awards prescribing a 48 hour week with which employers had to comply.

The second change

in Federal Awards was the reduction from 48 to 40 hours in 1927, granted by the Commonwealth Conciliation and Arbitration Court on the application of the Amalgamated Engineering Union for this to be prescribed in the Metal Trades Award. It was prompted by a struggle by the AEU members in New South Wales where a problem about working hours had appeared.

The Government had legislated for the 44 hour week to be prescribed in all its State Awards. But in many workshops there was a mixture of employees with 44 hours under their State Award, others with 48 hours under their existing Federal Award, so the former left work four hours before the latter.

AEU members decided to also leave work at the same time whereupon their employers deducted four hours pay from their wages, which caused industrial unrest.

The national leadership of the AEU then applied to the Arbitration Court for a 44 hour week in the Federal Metal Trades Award. This was supported by the New South Wales Government. The Court granted the application and the 44 hour week soon spread to other Federal Awards.

The third change

in Federal Awards was the reduction from 44 to 40 hours in 1947. An application was made by the Printing Industries Employees Union for it to be prescribed in their Federal Award. But it was then agreed that the ACTU would use this as a test case for it to be prescribed in all Federal Awards.

The case opened on 1 May 1945 but dragged on for so long that the trade unions called it the 'forty years case'.

A Federal Unions Conference held on 6 February 1947 by the ACTU decided that members of the affiliated unions would, on 1 May 1947 hold a 24 hour stoppage as protest against the delay, and after that they would work the 40 hour week.

That sped up the hearing, for the Arbitration Court in its judgement in September 1947, granted the 40 hour week to operate from 1 January 1948. But a condition was that reasonable overtime would be worked, so as to give time for employers to make the change. This was to apply to all Federal Awards.

The fourth change

in Federal Awards was the reduction from 40 to 38 hours. This was obtained as part of the agreement between the metal unions and the metal employers for it to be prescribed in the Metal Industry Award. The metal unions got their members to agree to support the campaign by working the 38 hour week.

But soon after, feed back from members was that it would be simpler and better for them to work the 38 hours over a nine day fortnight, which would give them a three day week-end, every second weekend. This became part of the Agreement.

As such it would only apply to the Metal Industry Award but employers in other industries could not resist the demand by the unions for it to be prescribed in their Federal Awards.

The fifth change

in Federal Awards was not a general reduction in hours as before, but a complete change in how working hours were fixed. The change was the introduction of Enterprise Bargaining by the Keating Labor Government in its 1993 Industrial Relations Reform Act.

This changed the fixation of working hours from that of central general public fixation by the IRC to private Enterprise Bargaining Agreements at individual work places, which made them free if the parties wished to fix working hours to suit the particular production needs of the workplace.

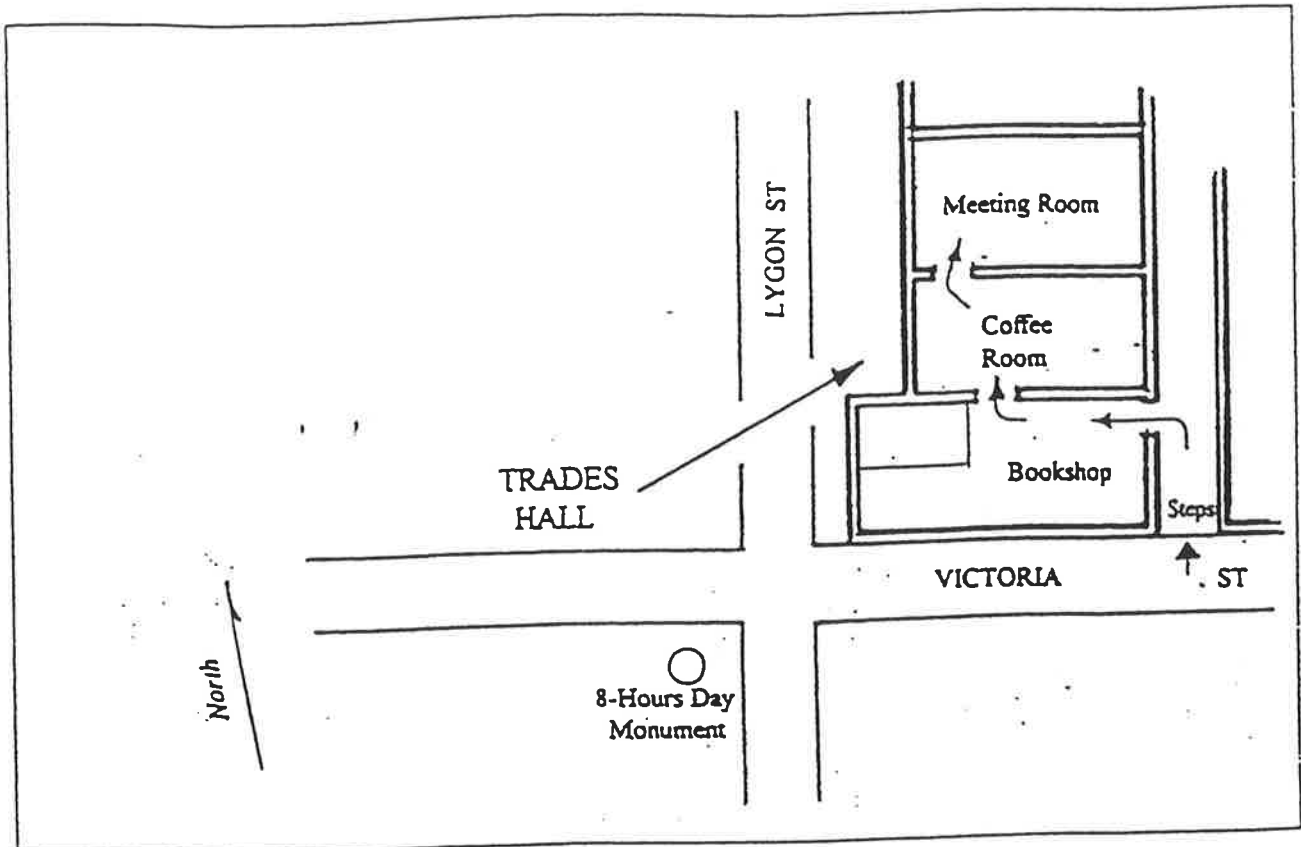
Those workers who had not obtained an Enterprise Agreement had the Award prescription of a nine day fortnight based on 38 hours.

Enterprise Agreements are privately certified and kept by the IRC so there is specific information available about their provisions for working hours. However, the general public perception is that there have been a variety of changes to working hours but no great change from the 38 hour week.

Meeting Place

Meetings of the History Society are held in the meeting room attached to the New International Bookshop in the Trades Hall

Enter the Trades Hall through the Victoria Street entrance.



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Meeting dates for the year 2000

Sundays... 15 October, 10 December

Interesting Information on the Internet

Workers Online is a weekly newspaper, published exclusively on the Internet

It was launched by the New South Wales Labor Premier, Bob Carr on 18 February 1999 at the Sydney Trades Hall. It is an initiative of the Labor Council of New South Wales.

Resurrecting the tradition of the workers press in the information age, Workers Online aims to provide a forum for unionists to explore issues that affect their working lives. With news, features and columns, it takes an irreverent approach to current issues, while seeking to push political debates onto a more interesting plane.

In particular, it seeks to draw on Labour History to illuminate current challenges faced by workers, their unions and political parties.

Workers Online is a thoughtful and irreverent Internet newspaper focusing on issues, activities and debates within the labour movement.

The official organ of LaborNet, it is published from Trades Hall every Friday and delivered by e-mail to a free subscription list.

In its first three months of publication it had regularly broken news stories, run interviews with leading Australian labour movement officials and has created a public furore over its pursuit of right-wing columnist Piers Akerman. Besides its history page, it runs a sports column, legal features and the latest from International Labour Affairs.

See and subscribe to Workers Online at

<http://www.labor.net.au/workers>