

A Plea for an Eight Hours Bill.



"Hitherto it is questionable if all the mechanical inventions yet made have lightened the day's toil of any human being. They have enabled a greater population to live the same life of drudgery and imprisonment, and an increased number of manufacturers and others to make fortunes. They have increased the comforts of the middle classes. But they have not yet begun to effect those great changes in human destiny which it is in their nature and in their futurity to accomplish."
 —J. S. MILL (Principles of Political Economy, Bk. iv., ch. vi., § ii., page 455 of 1865 edition).

THE NEW DEMAND FOR LEISURE.

What was it that brought 250,000 men into Hyde Park on May 4th, 1890? Why did the Trade Union Congress at Liverpool demand an eight hours day enforced by law? Why are the coal miners steadfastly refusing to vote for any candidate for Parliament who will not pledge himself to support an Eight Hours Bill?

Because the majority of working men and working women are coming every year to see more clearly that it is only by a shortening of their working day that they can share in the benefits of the civilization which they have toiled to create. They have been educated; but their work leaves them no time to read. They have been given the vote; but they have no time to think. Many of those with comfortable homes are unable, from Monday till Saturday, to see their children by daylight. If they were all the drunkards and gamblers that many rich people believe them to be, they would not be everywhere seeking shorter hours instead of merely higher wages. The new demand is, in fact, a demand for a new life. No class asks for leisure until it is conscious of wants which cannot be satisfied without leisure.

THE NEED FOR A SHORTER DAY.

Few persons now deny that the hours of labor in the majority of modern occupations are excessive. Tramway conductors are usually on duty for at least 15 hours, making, with meal-times, a day of 17 hours. Shop assistants, barmaids, and the women at work in laundries toil quite as long. The 400,000 railway servants work, on an average, at least 12 hours a day, and are often on duty for 16 or 18 hours out of the twenty-four. In the coal mines, where the men work only seven or eight hours, the boys are compelled to remain underground for ten hours at a stretch. But few even of the coal hewers have yet secured an eight hours day. Doctors and physiologists are urgent in declaring this continued strain to be seriously injuring the health of the community. Eight hours per day is enough for anyone to work.

WILL SHORTER HOURS RUIN OUR TRADE?

The masters and their newspapers say so; but they ignore, as they have always ignored, the industrial advantages of the improved

health and increased intelligence which follow upon the enjoyment of adequate daily leisure. Every one of our Factory Acts, imperfect as these have all been, has admittedly resulted in greater efficiency and therefore in increased production. In some industries there must no doubt be a larger staff to cope, at shorter hours, with the existing volume of business. Trains and trams will, however, not cease to run merely because their drivers work 48 hours per week; and the only result will be a possible reduction in the dividends paid to the idle shareholders, and a corresponding increase in the total wages paid.

SHALL WE LOSE OUR EXPORT TRADE ?

This is for the workers in each industry to consider for themselves. The same fear has been expressed about every previous Factory Act: yet the successive reductions of hours in the textile factories have been followed by a rapid increase of textile exports. But even if it were true that any branch of our export trade depended on the overwork and degradation of our working population, we could afford to let that branch go, with the certainty of finding in our home markets better employment for the workers engaged in it. However, we shall always find that the easiest way to get Greek currants and Jamaica sugar is to buy them with our own productions. The fear of foreign competition is used as a bogey to frighten the workers in every country. The French coal miners are told that unless they work themselves to death they must starve to death, because of "English competition." Will our coal miners let themselves be frightened by the same story ?

WILL SHORTER HOURS LOWER WAGES ?

No previous Factory Act has had this effect. The gas stokers know that their wages went up when they obtained the eight hours day. Wage-earners have been told often enough that when wages fall it is because two men are running after one master. When two masters are running after one man, wages rise. And in many industries it would happen that a reduction in the hours of labor would bring into regular work men who are now either unemployed or half employed. When the Huddersfield Town Council gave its tramway workers an eight hours day, the staff was nearly doubled. Is it good sense to make some men work 16 hours a day, whilst others out of work in the same trade have to be supported by them ?

BUT WILL NOT PRICES RISE AND DEMAND FALL OFF ?

Not unless the total national production falls off; and this, we have seen, is not likely to happen. As regards purchasing power, what the capitalists may lose in profits the workers will gain in wages. Even if it should happen that here and there three fashionable ladies spend less on their caprices while thirty artisans spend more on their comforts, the "market" would be none the worse for that; and the country would be much the better for it, whatever the three fashionable ladies might think. If, in the aggregate, production and demand are not altered, there is no reason why prices generally should rise or fall. Some prices may go up, while others go down, as they are doing every day from changes of fashion, commercial panics, and one cause or another.

- home movement.

We desire, then, the passing of an Eight Hours Bill with Trade Option*: that is to say, we propose that each trade should have the right to limit, by majority vote, its own working day; and that this decision should be enforced by law.

WHY NOT LET EACH MAN SETTLE HIS OWN HOURS ?

The ordinary journalist or Member of Parliament says : " I don't consult anyone except my doctor as to my hours of labor. That is a matter which each man must settle for himself." You never hear that said by a working man belonging to any trade more highly organized than chimney-sweeping. The modern artizan has learnt that he can no more fix for himself the time at which he shall begin and end his work than he can fix the time when the sun shall rise and set. When the carrier drove his own cart, and the weaver sat in his cottage at his own loom, they began and left off work at the hours that suited them, each man pleasing himself. Now the railway worker or the power-loom weaver knows that he must work the same hours as his mates. What he wants is a share in settling how long those hours shall be.

WHY CALL IN STATE ACTION ?

Many people say : " An eight hours day would do good if the Trade Unions won it, but harm if it were ordered by Parliament." Why so? The effect on wages and prices would be just the same in either case; and why are trade union methods better than the constitutional action of a democratic parliament? It is true that the Australian Unions won the eight hours day. But in England there are more than four times as many men out of the Trade Unions as in them; and our six-and-a-half million adult male non-unionists (not to mention the women) want the Eight Hours much more than the 1½ million unionists. Whilst agricultural laborers get eleven shillings a week, and are always ready (small blame to them) to become "blacklegs" at twenty-five shillings, the union leaders will tell you that an eight hours day would be almost impossible to win by striking, and very difficult to keep if won. Ask those gas-stokers who have not yet lost the eight hours shift they won in 1889 whether they feel sure about keeping it for another year.

HOW ABOUT PERSONAL INDEPENDENCE ?

Mr. Bradlaugh and Lord Salisbury say that an Eight Hours Bill would destroy the personal independence of the English working man. Yet they know that the Factory Acts, which nominally apply only to women and children, really limit the hours of every man who works in a cotton-mill. Have the Lancashire operatives less personal independence than they had when their masters fixed the hours of labor at fifteen per day? Are the East End tailors really freer than the men who work under the Factory Acts in the Yorkshire cloth mills? No! Personal independence is produced, not by over-work and fear and suspicion, but by bodily and mental health, by regularity of life, and by that feeling of security which comes when humane conditions of employment are guaranteed to the workers by the only power which they know to be stronger than their masters; and that is the Power of the Law.

* See Fabian Tract No. 9, "An Eight Hours Bill."

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