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The Eight Hour Day and the Holy Spirit

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The Eight Hour Day and the Holy Spirit: Rowan Cahill

Having just celebrated another Labour Day weekend we felt it might be time to reprint this excellent article by Rowan Cahill. It first appeared in Workers Online, February 2005.

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In Australia during the 1850s skilled workers in Sydney and Melbourne generally worked a 58 hour week; 10 hours per day Monday to Friday with 8 hours on Saturday. For other workers it was longer; shop assistants, for example, worked between 12-14 hours per day. Child labour was not uncommon; in 1876 in New South Wales, for example, the NSW Coal Mines Act was passed to limit the working week for boys aged 13-18 years to 50.5 hours per week and ban the employment of girls or boys in mines under the age of 13.

The idea that working people should work less hours, enjoy and improve their lives, and have some control over their working conditions were radical propositions, as was the idea the working day should be based on eight-hours of work. Eight hours of work per day was not only problematical for employers and the State because it was an attack on untrammeled wealth production, but problematical also in that it left working people with unaccounted for hours; if they were not producing wealth for employers and taxes for the State and getting tired and exhausted in the process, then they might be out doing other things like thinking, improving themselves with reading, education and discussion, socialising, enjoying life, and maybe organising and challenging the status quo.

Welsh born social reformer, factory owner and pioneer socialist, Robert Owen (1771-1858), envisaged a better world for working people other than the soul and body destroying grind of work, work, and more work. He formulated the goal of the eight-hour day as early as 1817, and coined the slogan 'Eight hours labour, Eight hours recreation, Eight hours rest', which became part of the rich cauldron of protest and agitation known as Chartism.

The eight-hour idea came to the Australian colonies during the 1850s as a legacy of Chartism, the great movement of popular political agitation and ferment in Britain during the late 1830s and the 1840s that mobilised working people for social, economic and political reform, where socialist, trade union, democratic and co-operative ideas and impulses variously mixed, clashed, combined and inspired, constituting political crimes when the established political order was threatened.

But literature and ideas have currency and appeal that cannot be easily or totally monitored or suppressed, and they cross borders and seas in many ways, unseen in the heads of believers, or secreted in luggage; Chartist sympathisers and movement personnel variously came to Australia as immigrants, refugees escaping prosecution and persecution, some disappointed by the movements apparent failures, others transported for political crimes. Chartist veterans were prominent in the early leadership of the struggle for the eight-hour day.

Inspiration also came from across the Tasman. The eight-hour idea took root in New Zealand beginning in 1840 when a carpenter from London, Samuel Parnell, refused to work more than eight-hours a day, successfully negotiated the working condition and campaigned for its general application in the infant Wellington community. Another early and notable contribution was the campaign for the eight-hour day in Otago, 1849, by Samuel Shaw, plumber, glazier, and house decorator.

Traditionally Melbourne claims Australian parentage of the Eight-Hour Day. Following agitation by Melbourne stonemasons in 1856 the eight-hour day was introduced in that city for workers employed on public works without loss of pay.

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EVENTS OF INTEREST

Sunday 22 April 2007
12 noon to 4pm

Myer Music Bowl, Alexandra Gardens

Unions and community groups will come together to call for equity and justice for working families. The day will feature music, comedy, kid's shows and short speeches. Most importantly it will be an opportunity to stand together against the Howard Government and demand a better deal for families.

WHAT'S NEW IN BOOKS

Tom Sheridan's new book Australia's Own Cold War: The Waterfront under Menzies has been released by MUP. It is 'a compelling story of strikes, lockouts, troop intervention, ASIO surveillance and secret plots and counter-plots, Sheridan vividly captures the drama of the waterfront under Menzies.'

Terry Irving's new book The Southern Tree of Liberty looks at the struggles for democracy in New South Wales. He examines the 'fierce political battles and street rallies' through which a mobilised working class and advocates of democracy 'fought hard to bring popular rule to the colony'.

The Eight Hour Day: Rowan Cahill (cont'd from p.1)

Masons were in the vanguard for a variety of reasons; they were skilled craftsmen, proud of their skills and trade, they were organised, doing a job that could not be done by the untrained and unskilled, and realised they were needed by employers and planners intent on erecting fine stone buildings. In the building boom of the 1850s associated with the discovery of gold in Australia, masons were in a strategic position with an essential role in the building industry that gave them considerable power should they decide to utilise it. The climate also contributed; working 10 hours a day exposed to the extremes and vicissitudes of the Australian climate, as masons did, sharpened the desire for a shorter working day.

Chartist veteran and mason James Stephens (1821-1889), who came to Melbourne in 1855, was prominent in the event that made the breakthrough, a downing of tools by masons on 21 April 1856, on the building of Melbourne University, and a march on to Parliament House with other members of the building trade. This demonstration came after meetings by Melbourne masons, led by former Chartist activists James Galloway and James Stephens, had decided to seek the eight-hour day, and the matter had been taken up with employers; to some, however, it seemed there was more talk than action, and prevarication was sensed on the part of employers.

The Melbourne success led to the decision to organise a movement, actively spread the eight-hour idea and secure the condition generally; as mason leader Galloway explained, he and others had come to the colony 'to better our condition, not to act as the mere part of machinery'. Subsequently and gradually the eight-hour idea, or 'short time' as it was also known, spread throughout Victoria, to other trades and industries, and to the other colonies; gains were made, but not without struggle.

In 1903 the iconic Eight-Hour Day monument funded by public subscription was completed on the corner of Victoria and Russell Streets, outside Melbourne Trades Hall. One thousand people gathered to hear veteran socialist Tom Mann speak at the unveiling ceremony.

The achievement of the eight-hour day was one of the great successes of the Australian working class during the nineteenth century, demonstrating to Australian workers that it was possible to successfully organise, mobilise, agitate and exercise significant control over working conditions and quality of life. The Australian trade union movement grew out of eight-hour campaigning and the movement that developed to promote the principle.

A less known aspect of the eight-hour day struggle is that the Melbourne workers were actually pipped, and inspired, by their brother colleagues in Sydney. Before the Melbourne stonemasons activated, stonemasons in Sydney successfully organised, agitated for, and gained, the eight-hour day.

On 18 August 1855 the Stonemasons, Society in Sydney issued an ultimatum to employers that in six months time, masons would only work an eight-hour day. However men working on the Holy Trinity Church in Argyle Cut, and on the Mariners Church (an evangelical mission to seafarers, now an art gallery and café) in Lower George Street (98-100 George Street), could not
contain their enthusiasm and decided not to wait. They pre-emptively went on strike, won the eight-hour day, and celebrated with a victory dinner on 1 October 1855.

In February 1856 the August (1855) ultimatum expired and six months to the day, Sydney stonemasons generally went after a reduction of hours on the eight-hour model. Their demand was opposed by employers, even though the masons made it clear they were prepared to take a reduction in wages proportionate to the reduced hours. The main opposition came from the builders engaged on construction of Tooths Brewery on Parramatta Road. Less than two weeks of strike action overcame that hindrance and the masons won in late February, early March, 1856.

A popular argument against granting the shorter working hours was that masons would use their free time to 'indulge to excess in intoxicating drink'; but as an anonymous mason correspondent wrote in a letter to the *Sydney Morning Herald* (11 February 1856):

‘masons are men of a different stamp, and if they had time, many, I doubt not, would have their names enrolled as members of that valuable Institution—the Mechanics, School of Arts; and their desire for mental improvement is another and a strong reason which urges them on to obtain a reduction in their present hours of labour’.

By 1871 in New South Wales, workers in four trades had won the eight-hour day, all of them part of the building industry. But it was not something everyone got to share; adoption of the eight-hour day was an ongoing and long industrial struggle, culminating in 1916 with the passing of the NSW Eight Hours Act granting the eight-hour day to all workers in the state. Nationally, the movement seeded in 1855 by masons working on two Sydney churches and in Melbourne by masons building Melbourne University in 1856, culminated with Commonwealth Arbitration Court approval of the 40-hour five-day working week beginning 1 January 1948.

**ROWAN CAHILL**