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The Eight Hours Movement in the United States

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lowering of wages in the textile industries. Plush-weaving is a comparatively new trade, and wages are naturally higher when one firm has a monopoly than later on when new rivals have come into the field. Women are taking the place of men, and hostile tariffs in foreign countries are limiting the output, and in some places perhaps stifling the demand.

In conclusion, let me say one word about the method in which many writers treat the question of wages in the working classes, I mean their method of regarding the family as the unit rather than the individuals who make up that family. It is often said that, while the individual wages are perhaps small, the aggregate is large. A family of six may amongst them earn three or four pounds a week, the father earning a pound, the wife fifteen shillings, and the children according to their ages. But there is no such thing as a common stock and fund from which the expenses of the family are paid out, as is often the case in France and Germany. The spirit of independence that is very common among the operatives, leads them in almost every instance to prefer to provide for themselves. They pay so much a week for living at home and for their cost of living, and keep the remainder for themselves, to spend as they think fit. The system has its disadvantages as well as its advantages. There might often be large savings if the foreign system were in practice, and less money might be expended on the 'finery' which undoubtedly exercises a large attraction over the factory-girls, and the amusements which are most popular with the young men. The family would then entirely depend on the personal character of the father and mother. But, inasmuch as this is not the custom in the English factory districts, it is idle to decide whether wages are high or low by looking at the aggregate earnings of the families employed.

J. B. FIRTH

## THE EIGHT HOURS MOVEMENT IN THE UNITED STATES.

AMERICAN working men claim to have been the pioneers in the eight hour movement which has now spread throughout the civilised world. The genesis of the movement is hidden in the unwritten records of industrial strife, but spasmodic efforts to create an eight hour agitation in the United States have been made since 1866. Then it was that the National Labour Union gave the first impulse to the agitation. In 1872 and 1873 eight hour leagues were formed in several States and cities. Eight hour strikes were numerous during the next ten years, but every advance was followed by reaction. Labour organisations on a large scale have had a more or less fitful existence in the United States, and it was not until after the establishment of the American Federation of Labour in 1886—an organised body which was ambitious of federating all the trade unions in the country—that an eight hour day was made a fundamental plank in the Labour plat-

form and that a systematic agitation was begun. At the Federation's annual meeting in 1888 a series of resolutions was passed calling upon the working classes to agitate, organise, and prepare for the enforcement of the eight hour day on 1st May, 1890. This is an explanation of the origin of 'May Day.' During 1889 a brisk agitation was kept up, and three hundred organisers sent out through the country to collect funds and strengthen trade unions. The Federation of Labour concentrated its forces on the Carpenters' Union, which was the one best able to bear the strain of a national strike. The direct result of that strike, when it took place on 1st May, 1890, was that about forty-five towns won the eight hours, and two hundred and forty towns accepted nine hours. After this the eight hour movement relapsed into a quieter groove. There has been no similar national effort. Isolated unions have won the eight hour day and lost it again, and here and there the victory has been maintained.

#### DEMANDS FOR A LEGAL EIGHT HOUR DAY.

In their attempts to secure an eight hour day the American trade unionists depend mainly on their organisations. There is less demand for legislative interference than among the organized workers in this country. The last report of the New York Bureau of Labour Statistics, which gives a history of the hours movement in America, and contains the results of an elaborate inquiry into the question among the workers in the State, has little to say on the legal aspect of the subject. In sending its questions to trade unions it did not occur to the Bureau to ask whether they preferred voluntary to State action. American workmen do not pin their faith to the State legislatures. The political 'bosses' will give them any number of eight hour laws in return for their votes, but these laws will never be enforced. There are now eight hour laws in thirteen States, and not one of them is enforced or attempted to be enforced. An eight hour law for men employed on Government work, passed by Congress in 1869, is a dead letter. Another Act of the same kind has been passed recently. Other laws affecting Labour, such as the Truck Acts, are very laxly administered in America. No wonder, therefore, that the working classes should not put their trust in Legislatures which are under the control of millionaire monopolists and their party henchmen, nor demand laws which would have to be administered by corrupt political hirelings.

Mr. Chas. F. Peck the Labour Commissioner for New York State, in the report above referred to, confirms the view that there is no demand among American working men for a legal eight hours day. He says :—' Numerous State Legislatures have passed Bills regulating the hours of labour, but they have been practically dead letters, so far as the great mass of the labourers in those States are concerned. It is only in those instances where the lessening of hours has been

conceded by employers at the enforced demand of organized labour that real and actual effect has been accomplished.' Mr. Peck also concludes that 'all the signs of the times indicate that through organisation, and organisation alone must Labour [in the United States] look for an advance, either in the rates of wages, or a lessening of the hours of daily toil. Legislatures may, by enactment, fix the number of hours constituting a legal day's work: it is possible that they may endeavour to fix the minimum rate of wages which any man in the employ of the State shall receive for a day's work, but that those things can, or ever will be done except through an aroused public sentiment, which alone can be created by organised Labour, goes without saying. It will never do for the labouring men of this country to expect that either the State or national Government will step in and assume paternal functions. All the substantial benefits gained by Labour in this country—and it must be admitted that they have been many and great—are almost wholly attributable to organisation.'

#### SHORTER HOURS AND AN INCREASE IN WAGES.

The investigation which Mr. Peck directed to the eight hours question sought to obtain by direct interrogation of trade societies—(1) what the hours and wages in trades had been in New York State during the last ten years? (2) Did they approve of eight hours as the standard working day? (3) What would be the effect of the establishment of an eight hour day—(a) on the unemployed and (b) on wages? This investigation refers only to New York State, which has a population of a six-and-a-half millions, and which has the most numerous and the best organised trade unions of any State in the Union. It is the State where wages are highest, and the hours shortest, notwithstanding the fact that the workers here are especially open to competition from immigrants landing at New York.

The comparison between the wages and hours in 1890 and former years all go to demonstrate that a shortening of hours has been accompanied by an increase in wages. The carpenters and joiners, for instance, in 1880 earned 13s. and 14s. per day in a week of fifty-eight hours; in 1890 they gained 14s. per day in a week of forty-eight hours. Another Carpenters' Union reports wages 12s. for nine hours in 1888, and 14s. for eight hours in 1890. Stonemasons who received 8s. per ten hours in 1880, received 12s. for nine hours in 1890. The Italian Stonemasons' Union reports 14s. for ten hours in 1884, and the same wages for an hour less in 1890. Labourers in the building trade successfully reduced their hours without diminishing their pay. Plasterers in New York received 16s. for a ten hour day in 1883 and 18s. for a 9 hour day in 1889. Plasterers in Brooklyn received 14s. for ten hours in 1883, 16s. for nine hours in 1884, and 16s. for eight hours in 1890. Wages and hours differ in different towns, but the tendency has been the same. If the workmen did not succeed in raising

their wages when they reduced their hours, they prevented them falling. Their aim seems to have been to get eleven hours' pay for nine hours work, as compared with former rates. The improved conditions may have been caused by general commercial prosperity, but the direct cause was action by the trade union—frequently a strike.

The Bureau's question, 'Do you approve of eight hours as the standard working day?' was answered by the great majority of the unions in the affirmative. A few of them added 'not in our trade, and some unions object to the eight hours' system entirely. Bakers and barbers said that eight hours would not be possible in their trades.

To the question 'Did the reduction in the number of hours result in the increase of the working force?' the invariable answer was that the increase was about one tenth.

'How will an eight hour law affect working men out of employment brought such answers as 'beneficially' 'decrease the numbers,' 'turn them into producers instead of non-producers.'

'How would the eight hours working day affect wages in your trade?' was answered variously. The majority of the unions were of opinion that it would raise wages. Others said it would have no effect when first established, but would ultimately lead to an increase. Men paid by the hour were not usually in favour of a restriction of the hours. All the evidence in this report goes to prove that, when Labour organisations have succeeded in reducing hours, they have in most cases succeeded also in raising wages. Their success, however, depends on the strength of their organisation and the state of the Labour market. They are subject to the usual fluctuations of trade.

ROBERT DONALD

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### THE LABOUR COMMISSION.

THE Labour Commission is now approaching the conclusion of its task. It has dealt with every branch of labour except agriculture; it has examined more than 430 witnesses, and it has published a useful digest of the evidence of the first 162, which treats, however, only of three classes of industries—mining, textile, and dock and shipping—and does not contain the complete evidence on any of the three. Since last quarter's report the Commission has been occupied in Section A, with the engineers, iron shipbuilders, shipwrights, pattern-makers, ironmoulders, blacksmiths, plumbers, nail-makers, cutlers, chain makers, brass founders; in Section B, with the omnibus and tram workers, cabdrivers, lorrymen, carters, and railway servants; and in Section C, with the gas-workers, compositors, printing machine-men, and bakers.

Perhaps the most interesting evidence was that of Mr. R. Knight, secretary of the Boiler-makers and Iron and Steel Shipbuilders'