
SECTION 4 - THE BATTLE FOR CIVILISED WORKING HOURS

"I often think that too little is known by the workers of the record of achievement of the trade union movement... Too often we hear, 'Parliament gave', 'the Arbitration Court granted', and 'the employer conceded' some improvement. They did not give - they were compelled by the pressure of the Unions." (Former leader of the Bricklayers Union, Jack Kilburn quoted in the Building Worker July 1960)

Before they organised into unions, building workers often worked 60 hours a week as a minimum. But by the mid 1850s they had had enough and the movement for the shorter working week began.

Firstly on two sites in Sydney, and then right across Melbourne, stonemasons struck and won the 8 hour day (48 hour week.) This victory is widely regarded as a world-first, and one of the Sydney sites on which it was fought for - the Garrison Church in the Rocks district - is still in existence.

In Queensland, a building worker who nicknamed himself 'Yacca' wrote a series of letters to the Moreton Bay Courier, between Nov 1, 1856 and August 22, 1857, calling for the introduction of an eight-hour day in that State. Yacca's letters obviously drew quite a deal of support from building workers because the following advertisement appeared in The Moreton Bay Courier in August 1857: A meeting of the working men of Brisbane and its vicinity connected with the building trade (not being employers) on the evening of Wednesday the 9th of September to take into consideration the adoption of the short time movement.

By the 1870s stonemasons had achieved the 44 hour week. The employers did not resist too strenuously because stonemasons died, on average, at 36 years of age, due to dust exposure. But for other building workers, the 44 hour week took another fifty years of struggle to win - the bricklayers in particular playing a prominent part in the campaign.

In Adelaide, in 1919, carpenters took direct action to win the 44 hour week. Many workers were prosecuted and penalties imposed by the court, but the campaign was successful and the 44 hour week was won in September 1919. A veteran of the 1920 bricklayers' campaign later wrote: "The employers used the press of the day to 'prove' if hours were shortened the economy would be disrupted, the public held to ransom and the country ruined."

Meanwhile, actions for civilised hours in the different States overlapped. While Sydney building workers were still fighting for the 44 hour week, their Queensland and Victorian counterparts were taking action to win the 40 hour week. One press report called them, "the apostles of laziness." Unions in South Australia and Western Australia were fined and in Queensland the carpenters, builders' labourers, bricklayers and painters unions were deregistered.

But in 1935 the Queensland building workers broke through, achieving the first industry award in Australia with a 40 hour week. The success had in large part been due to the painters who wanted to reduce the amount of time they were exposed to the toxic substances in the paint of those times.

The Queensland industry award also included a preference clause for unionists, a limit on the pick up of labour to between 8am and 10am daily. The 40-hour week had to be worked in five days - Monday to Friday, 8 hours a day. Agitation for a 40-hour week extended to the wider trade union movement after the end of World War II from 1946. Eventually the ACTU's threat of a national stoppage from all affiliated unions, resulted in the Federal Arbitration Court announcing that a 40-hour week would commence for all workers under Federal Awards from January 1, 1948.

With technology leaping ahead, the demand for a 35 hour week gained more and more support, particularly from the 1950s onwards. While victories were achieved by some government workers, private sector employers resisted the reform until the early 1980s. That was when all building workers won the 38 hour week - taken in the form of one Rostered Day Off a month - and builders' labourers won the 36 hour week on shopping centre sites.

Victorian building workers have recently campaigned successfully for the introduction of a 36 hour week on all building sites from 2001. In other states, this standard was introduced in the next round of enterprise bargaining 2003 – 2005. The close down weekends, which were a product of this campaign for quality leisure time, proved to be popular amongst NSW building workers and their families.

The struggle for civilised working hours in this hard, dangerous and dirty industry has never been easy, and has been resisted at every turn by employers, the press and conservative governments. Yet despite the forces against them, building workers have time and again led the way, winning improvements not only for themselves but that have ultimately flowed on to all Australian workers.