



'ANGUS BARKS'

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LABOR DAY 2007

Hours of Work

How many hours of work does it take for you to maintain an average standard of living? Each of us has individual considerations: spouse's income; number of kids; mortgage rate; child support payments; college tuition; medical expenses; retirement plans. Generations of working people fought to win the 8-hour day. Labor Day is a good time to review how we fit into that struggle.

LONG HISTORY

Prior to the labor movement, the required workday started at sun-up and ended at sun-down. In the 1830's, as the American Labor Movement was just beginning, the demand for a 10-hour day was advanced by Boston carpenters and Philadelphia dockworkers. By 1886, the Knights of Labor, and the newly-created A.F.L., organized a popular and peaceful general strike centered in Chicago to secure the 8-hour day. Employers retaliated harshly. Four of Labor's best leaders were arrested, and later hanged, on trumped-up murder charges in what became known as the Haymarket Riot. This strike is famous world-wide because it inspired labor movements in other countries to fight for the 8-hour day.

Workers favored a shorter workday for 2 reasons: to provide time to properly raise their family; and to create jobs for fellow workers. Employers favored longer workdays because they could maximize profits by working experienced employees from dawn to dusk, and more recently, avoid paying benefits to new-hires.

To mill owners in Lawrence Mass., shorter hours meant workers would fight for better wages. The 1912 'Bread & Roses' strike spotlighted conditions inside large factories, where children worked side by side with their parents to earn enough to feed their family. Wages were 16¢/hr and workweeks averaged 56 hours.

Not until the 1930's, when the majority of industrial workers joined unions, did Labor have enough strength to enforce child labor laws and get the 40-hour workweek written into State and Federal law. Unions negotiated overtime provisions to penalize companies who lengthened the workweek instead of hiring.

RIVERWORKS WORK SHARING

It's a little known fact that Lynn GE operated on a 36-hour workweek in the early 1930's. During the Great Depression, GE laid off half its workforce and cut wages for the other half. When Roosevelt enacted the National Recovery Act in 1932, the workweek for the electrical industry was fixed at 36 hours to save jobs.

Lynn workers, who unionized in 1933, supported this work-sharing effort. Some departments even went to a 32-hour week to avoid layoffs. Unemployment Insurance and Social Security did not exist. When a worker was laid off, his family could starve. Workers would forego some of their own earnings to keep a union brother working. Union leaders negotiated local language that required the Company to reduce the workweek back down to 36 hours before any member with more than 1 years service was laid off. This clause was used in 1937 and 1938, and eventually made it into the national contract for a ten year period.

OVERTIME INCREASES

After WW II, attitudes began to change. Gradually workers saw overtime as a means for individual advancement. More and more, both spouses in working families maintain full-time jobs to keep pace with prices. As the total work hours increase for the parents, kids pay the price. Our generation has achieved greater material wealth and better working conditions. But long hours of work do nothing to solve the two crises facing us today: the lack of manufacturing jobs, and the security of our children.

LABOR DAY 2007

Today in the Riverworks, GE's globalization has killed off as many jobs as did the Great Depression 75 years ago. With 2100 remaining union jobs, we are at a new lowpoint of manpower. *It's time we took a critical look at the hours of work we've been putting in.*

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