

The following article credited to Henry George was signed "Proletarian." This is one of a number of articles written by Henry George that appeared in the Sacramento Daily Union from 1866 to 1987. This article appeared in Volume 30, No. 4648, 14 February 1866]

[For the Union]  
THE EIGHT-HOUR BILL

Messrs. Editors: As the eight-hour bill seems to be meeting with considerable opposition, will you allow a workingman to state a few of the reasons which seem to him to favor its passage? Much may be said in favor of the reduction of working hours; and from wide fields arguments may be drawn in its support; but as the only objection which can be urged with reason or force is the economical one, it is this aspect of the question which I wish briefly to discuss. That production is none too great; that wages positively are none too high, we are probably all agreed—eight-hour men and ten-hour men, employers and employees; and that a decrease of production or positive decrease of wages could not take place without injury, is as evident. Whether a reduction of the hours of labor, even with such results, would or would not be productive of good enough to counterbalance this injury, is a question upon which much may be said, but of which it is hardly necessary to speak, as most minds will be influenced by the solution which they give to the question “Will the decrees of the day’s work lessen as well production and wages?”

It is evident to one who considers the matter, that the aggregate amount of work which is performed is not ten—is not even eight hours work per working day to each individual worker, even of those callings to which the seasons interpose no obstacle. Take any trade, and you will find that those who are employed steadily, year in and year out, are the exceptions rather than the rule; and that if the aggregate number of hours work done was divided by the number of men employed, the result would give to each man considerably less than eight hours work per day. Now, then, the result of the proposed change, in this view of the case, would be simply to equalize work between individuals, and to equalize the labor of individuals between the days of the year, leaving the same amount to be divided as wages, giving to the large majority as much in a year as they get now; to some more, and to but a few less. The moral, physical and mental advantages to the working class, and consequently to the State, which such equalization would cause, are too obvious to need comment. What should further be taken into consideration in this connection, is that the amount of work done by an individual in a day will not, in most cases, be reduced in the same proportion as are the working hours, but that increased energy and increased intelligence will go far to bring the result of eight hours labor under the new system up to that of ten under the present. As to the positive economical advantages which would ultimately result from a reduction of the hours of labor, they are immense. Even admitting that, for the present, productions would be somewhat curtailed, this proposition is simply to increase the brain of the nation at the expense of the muscle—to somewhat decrease the product of the hand that that of the mind may be vastly augmented. As a general rule, the intelligence of an individual, or a class, is in an inverse ratio to the amount of time employed in manual labor. As Buckle, in his “Introduction,” so clearly shows, leisure is the first essential—the parent of civilization—and that as leisure is monopolized by the few or shared by the many, so is civilization stationary or progressive. Great nations and peoples that have perished thousands of years ago, or that still

remain, like fossils of an elder world, have pushed to its farthest limit the civilization which labor alone could produce. The civilization which we now enjoy, the wonderful development of the modern Western nations, is due to the mind—it is brain not muscle, thought not sweat, that gives its superiority to that of Egypt or Peru, India or China, and the intelligence of the great mass of any nation is the exact measure of its power, wealth and comfort. In the adaptation of means to ends—in the boundless fields of discovery and invention, the increase of leisure, and consequently of intelligence, would be felt, and the stimulus which would be given to production and the accumulation of wealth, would be greater than any other which could possibly be applied. If one versed in the science can trace through statistical tables of marriages, births and crimes, the minutest variations in the prices of the necessities of life, would not the records of our Patent Office show clearly the results of time which had been given to so many thousands for purposes of information and thought? And it is in this direction we must look for all real improvement in the condition of mankind. The promise of the future is in our machine shops. It is only in the increase of the iron hands whose slavery is the corner-stone of our prosperity, that we can hope for the increase of wages, of wealth and of comfort. A few weeks ago you published in your paper an account of an invention the result of the half-hour's leisure of a workingman, which, if it be correct, is of greater value to the nation than the cancelation of the national debt—which will make aerial locomotion possible, the steam plow and wagon common facts, which will make a sail on the ocean a thing of the past and bring the giant arm of steam into every department of human industry.

But it is not only the increase of production which the increased intelligence of the working classes will cause, but the expenditure which it will save, which is worthy of consideration. The greatest tax we pay is the tax imposed by our ignorance. It is not the intelligence of the more cultivated, but that of the many which decides public questions. He who appeals to the prejudice of ignorance of the masses has them at his back; he whose views are too broad for their comprehension is powerless for the present, and must trust for fame to the future. A few millions for schoolmasters would have saved the billions of our debt; to the ignorance of provincial France must be laid the cost of a war for the Monroe doctrine, should one come; and I believe no one who has thought of the subject will deny that popular ignorance on great questions of economical policy annually costs us millions on millions. Increase of the intelligence of the working class means also a closer connection between capital and labor, between producer and consumer, greater facility in the distribution and adaptation of labor, and in a country like this it is certainly more to causes of this kind than those which ignorance often ascribes that any distress is owing.

From these general views of the subject. I for one wish to see the bill before the Senate passed, as the opening wedge for the new system. It cannot accomplish the change, but it can clear the way, and gradually the result may be attained, without injury to any one, by wise and moderate measures on the part of those most interested. The question is being agitated all over the Union, and our Legislature may as well alter the statute now as years hence, for certainly it is but a question of time and progress.

PROLETARIAN.

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