



EIGHT HOUR DAY

Celebrate 150 years of
work, rest and play

History of the Eight Hour Day

On 21 April 1856, stonemasons and building workers marched through the city of Melbourne. Gathering supporters on the way, they headed to Parliament to demand regulated working hours with no loss of pay.

Their demands were granted, and today, the eight-hour working day stands as a symbol of the democratic rights of workers.

The stonemasons and other building workers employed on the construction of the quadrangle at the University of Melbourne marched to the city, gathered others working on the Eastern Markets (later the site of the Southern Cross hotel and currently being redeveloped) and went to the site of Parliament House, which was then also under construction. All three construction projects involved public contracts.

The push for the eight-hour day originated in Britain, where the Industrial Revolution had transformed working life, replacing handcrafts by machinery, and taking men, women and children who had previously operated as outworkers in their homes into large factories where the hours and conditions of work were unregulated, with consequent effects on health, welfare and morale. The British socialist and factory owner, Robert Owen coined the slogan of 'eight hours labour, eight hours rest, eight hours recreation'.

Stonemasons' prize-winning float, 8 Hours Day Procession, Melbourne, 1906
Photograph: Arthur W. Burman



The demand was taken up in Melbourne, which as a result of the gold rush and the advent of self-government, had embarked on major building projects. As a result of the campaign initiated by the Stonemasons Society, the government agreed that workers employed on public works should enjoy an eight-hour day with no loss of pay. Stonemasons celebrated with a holiday and procession on Monday 12 May 1856.

The eight-hour movement spread to country districts and other colonies, though it was usually restricted to skilled workers and frequently had to be regained when economic recession and unemployment allowed employers to extend hours. It was a world first, and became emblematic of the rights of labour.

The intertwined numbers '888' adorned the pediment of many union buildings. Coming only 16 months after the Eureka Rebellion and four months after the Victorian Constitution became effective, the Eight Hour Day also became a symbol of the rights of workers to organise to achieve their rights not only as workers, but as citizens in a democratic society.

The Eight Hour Day Holiday

The achievement of the eight-hour day was celebrated annually and became a public holiday held on 21 April, the date of the first march of workers from the University of Melbourne to Parliament. The Eight Hour Day was in fact one of the earliest Victorian public holidays apart from those taken over from Britain for Christmas, Easter and the New Year.

For many decades, the Eight Hour Day (later renamed Labour Day) marches became the largest public processions and celebrations to be held in Melbourne and in country towns. Workers marched with banners and floats, watched by throngs of people from all parts of the community, and ended the day with large picnics and sporting events.

The 1930s Depression and Second World War brought about the decline of the marches, and the final march occurred in Melbourne in 1951. In 1955, Moomba was established on Labour Day as Melbourne's major annual procession.

The Eight Hour Monument

The Eight Hour monument was originally erected in Spring Street near Parliament House in 1903, after more than a decade of fund-raising and changes in the design. Funds were raised by public subscription, and contributors included not only working people, but also leading employers, the Chief Justice and the Governor. The building employers' association contributed 50 pounds.

The 888 symbolised the movement's slogan of 'eight hours labour, eight hours rest, eight hours recreation', while the globe represented the international character of the movement. In 1924, the monument was moved to its present site on the corner of Victoria and Lygon Streets opposite Trades Hall.

