

PREFACE.

THE following essay forms an attempt to recommend the adoption of an eight hours day by showing the necessity for it and the advantages of it, and by meeting the main objections urged against its adoption. The matter contained in these pages appeared originally in the columns of the *People's Journal* about a year ago, and was subsequently reprinted in the now defunct *Labour Elector*. Having been amplified, and the most noteworthy recent objections met, it is now published in collected form in the hope that it may serve to assist politicians and social reformers in making up their minds that the statutory limitation of the hours of labour is not only needful, but possible and desirable.

Those who read to the close will see that I regard the Eight Hours Day more as a means to an end than as anything like a permanently satisfactory adjustment of economic relationships. While as a Socialist I hold that this world will never be a tolerable place for the mass of mankind to live in so long as they allow the landlord and capitalist to monopolise the means of production, yet the Conservative forces in society are so strong—the working class is itself so strong a Conservative force—that the shortening of the working day seems the most beneficial instalment of social progress at all possible of more or less immediate realisation. Some of our friends tell us that in advocating State interference with the hours of labour we are “off the scent.” The Land Nationalizer says you must destroy private property in the soil; the Co-operator says working men must become their own capitalists; the uncompromising Socialist contends that no good can come out of the Individualistic System—that the only way to amend it is to end it. This is all so true that it seems a pity they should speak to a public which has neither the knowledge and penetration to see that they are right, nor the courage, confidence, and public-spiritedness to follow their advice. While the unemployed clamour for work and food and the employed for more rest and better pay, it seems like trying to fill their bellies with the east wind to tell them they must nationalise land or communise capital. It is indeed high time that we had made up our minds what good thing it is we want first.

The shortening of the working day is important (1) Because it will find work for the unemployed, with all the added comfort and happiness which that involves; (2) Because it will give the masses more leisure to read and think, and, by abating the tendency which their labour has to absorb their energy, both mental and physical, it will leave them the mental alertness necessary to an understanding of their position, and the courage, hope, and initiative—largely a matter of health—to set about improving it.

From a Socialist point of view the short-hours movement is specially important because of the effect which it would exercise on profits in all industries subject to foreign competition. Inasmuch as to pay the same rates of wages for the shorter hours would trench on the already vanishing margin, it would tend to hasten the end of the system of production for profit. Were the whole industrial world to simultaneously introduce the eight hours system, the capitalist could simply raise his prices, and Capital and Labour would still stand on the same relative footing. But although some continental countries are anxious for the shortening of the working day, it would be too much to expect that the whole world will introduce the eight hours system within measurable distance; and with even one or two countries working long hours at low wages, the British, French, and German bourgeoisie will not be able to command the higher prices which would be necessary to recoup them for the increase in cost of production. The consequence will be that trade will go more and more to the countries where the cheapest goods can be produced, until the bourgeoisie, working for low profits, and occasionally for none at all, will get as tired of the individualistic system of production and distribution as the workers are already; and they will make haste to clear out in favour of the community in its organised capacity. What will happen then is too long a story to tell here: I reserve it for another early occasion.

I ought to say, however, that the Eight Hours Day, as a positive amelioration of the lot of the worker, and quite apart from any ulterior effects which it would have, is a benefit to assist in obtaining which is worthy of the best powers ever devoted to the service of mankind. It is sometimes contended that to give the worker shorter hours or better wages is to make him contented. I contend, on the other hand, that the periods of prosperity are the periods of progress. “The outlook then takes the form of hope”; and hope is a better working stimulus than despair. A down-trodden people are a spiritless people: a more-prosperous people are comparatively high-spirited, and are jealous of their rights and aggressive for still greater benefits than they have ever before enjoyed. The more we get the more we want.