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# THE AGE

## Whatever happened to the eight-hour day?

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### FOCUS

In a world first, Victorian workers won the eight-hour day 150 years ago this week, but it has been eroded by time and technology. By Meaghan Shaw.

ON ANY week-day lunch time, workers and RMIT students sit on a patch of grass under the Eight- Hour Monument in Russell Street. Munching on sandwiches and pies, most seem oblivious of the historic gain commemorated by the orb-topped granite column.

The sphere, depicting the Earth, is inscribed with the words "labor, rest and recreation". It perches on three figure-8s, representing the eight hours of work, rest and play (to pinch a catchy advertising jingle) gained by workers in the building **industry** after stonemasons downed tools in 1856 and marched on State Parliament.

It was a world-first - never before had workers across an **industry** gained the right to a regulated eight-hour day.

But 150 years later, with the anniversary on Friday celebrated by a series of travelling exhibitions, the eight-hour day is itself becoming a historic relic as people's working lives become increasingly fragmented. Some are working longer than ever, while other part-time and casual workers can't find enough work. Yet research indicates what we actually hanker for is the eight-hour day."

A great divide has opened up," says Australia Institute executive director Clive Hamilton. "We have, in Australia, a society which paradoxically has a large part of the working population working too much, and another substantial part not working enough. And ideally, we would want to redistribute work to even it up."

Until the early 1980s, people's hours of work had been shrinking, says Sydney University's **Workplace** Research Centre acting director John Buchanan. Then, about half the workforce was working a standard week of

between 35 and 40 hours.

Now, it's about a third.

The change is due to an increasing number of people working part-time, and more people working extended hours."

The historic shift is profound," Buchanan says. He explains that the growth in part-time work has been driven by women and students wanting shorter hours, as well as employers demanding a more flexible workforce. The increase in extended hours has been driven again by employers and by increasing consumerism.

Data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics in 2000 shows the workforce roughly divided into thirds: 33.4 per cent of all employed people work a standard week of between 35 to 40 hours; 28.4 per cent work part-time and 38.3 per cent work more than 40 hours.

Those working standard hours tend to be from occupations with "stable" working arrangements, such as the public sector, middle-range income jobs and large workplaces and businesses.

Librarian Heather Arnold works a standard nine-to-five week as a local history officer, with some late-night and weekend shifts thrown in."

I suppose it's unusual," she admits, when comparing her working hours to other industries. "I know what (hours) I'm working every day ... so that's one of the benefits of it, that you can always plan something."

New teacher Katherine Heneghan also works fairly standard hours, but also does class-preparation work at home. "I feel like I can still find a balance and I really enjoy what I do," she says.

But Buchanan says not everyone is happy with their hours: between a quarter and a third of part-timers want more work, while more than half those working more than 50 hours a week want less."

The growth (of hours) is not a sign of everyone being free and choosing what they want to do," he says. "There's a major disenchantment both with part-time hours and with long hours."

Buchanan's colleague, Brigid van Wanrooy, has just finished a PhD that concludes most workers want to work a standard eight-hour day, regardless of paid overtime."

What I found was that people don't want to be working these long hours. They do still want to be working a standard-hour week or an eight-hour day," she says.

But Mark Wooden, deputy director of Melbourne University's Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research, says the change in working patterns has been driven more by the increase in people working part-time than by those working extended hours."

A lot of that growth in parttime working, you'd have to say, is consistent with people's preferences," he argues.

And Australia Institute's Clive Hamilton says much of society's overwork is also voluntary. "It's driven by consumerism and rising aspirations," says

the author of *Affluenza*, which looks at society's addiction to overconsumption."

(But) what many people have discovered is that they're sacrificing not only their leisure time but their marriages as well."

Those working parttime and casual hours tend to be low-skilled workers with limited bargaining power.

Until he quit last week, casual worker Sobhy Girgis worked 17 hours at a liquor store and was constantly pushing for more work."

How can anyone looking after a family survive or manage on such a low income?" he asks. "If the Government thinks casual work will create more jobs, they're wrong.

The Government thinks the new **industrial** laws will make the workforce more flexible - flexibility shouldn't mean you suck people's blood; flexibility shouldn't mean you get people working more for less."

Meanwhile, those working very long hours are mainly full-time professionals and the self-employed. The Australia Institute in 2004 found Australians work the longest hours in the developed world. Far from living in the land of the long weekend, the average Australian was working 1855 hours each year compared to an international average of 1643.

Timber flooring small businessman Anthony Aquilina worked more than 75 hours in a recent week. He attributes his horrendous workload to the myriad taxation, WorkCover, superannuation and occupational health and safety requirements placed on small business."

The compliance is killing us," Aquilina says.

It's staggering, but his present hours are fewer than he was working 18 months ago when his wife and business manager, Wendy, was diagnosed with breast cancer."

I just wonder how much all the stress of running this business had to do with me developing cancer," Wendy says.

On top of the hours Aquilina spends on site and at the warehouse, work follows him home via his mobile. "There's no letup," he says. "I just hate the phone. I don't speak to my family and friends at night time any more because I just can't stand the phone."

But not all are unhappy with long hours. Heart surgeon Chris Merry is also on call for emergencies, including heart and lung transplants. His long hours are typical for surgical registrars, who usually work a minimum of 60 hours a week. "Most people who are surgeons put up with the hassles of the lifestyle because they enjoy what they do," he says. "I'm sure that when I have kids, my priorities will probably change, but at the moment, it's an exciting job that I'm doing and I enjoy it."

The **union** movement and other critics argue that new Howard Government **industrial** relations laws, which further deregulate the **workplace**, will make it even harder for workers to have control over their working hours.

Construction Forestry Mining and Energy **Union** state secretary Martin Kingham, whose **industry** pioneered the eight-hour day 150 years ago,

says the laws undermine the basic tenet of a living wage for working a reasonable number of hours.

His **union** won a 36-hour week for the building **industry** in Victoria three years ago through paid rostered days off and now is like a vulnerable "island of resistance" as standards are eroded in other industries."

(**John Howard**) wants everything in the employers' hands," Kingham says. "To work excessive hours when the boss wants you, (to) work short hours when that suits the boss, not when it suits you or your family.

That's the challenge ahead of us."

But Melbourne Institute's Mark Wooden says it is wrong to think of the eight-hour day as the perfect arrangement. "You'd think some diversity would be good ...

Society's changed. The fact we have people working on the weekends is, in some sense, good for many others of us."

ONLINE [www.8hourday.org.au](http://www.8hourday.org.au)

#### THE FIGHT FOR THE EIGHT-HOUR DAY

On April 21, 1856, at the height of the gold rush, tradesmen working on the construction of the law quadrangle at the University of Melbourne downed tools and marched on the other great public building being constructed at the time - State Parliament.

Along the way, they gathered 700 building workers toiling on various private jobs, as well as on the other public construction project - the Eastern Markets, later the site of the Southern Cross hotel - demanding the right to an eight-hour day.

Most building bosses had agreed to an eight-hour day except the contractors for the markets and Parliament. While it was still usual for people to work a 12-hour day, six days a week, skilled tradesmen were in demand after many of their colleagues had left to strike it rich on the goldfields."

So the bargaining strength was very much on the workers' side," says Martin Kingham, state secretary of the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy **Union** and chairman of the Eight Hour Day 150th Anniversary committee. "They basically determined this principle of having a balance between work and leisure time, particularly in a physical **industry** where recovery time was important," he says.

In fact, the workers argued for a reduced working day not only for health reasons, but to improve their "social and moral condition".

The recalcitrant contractors folded to the builders' demands within a fortnight."

They were bold, they took the stand, they risked jail to do it," Kingham says. "They really did ignite a movement that went throughout the world."

The victory was celebrated on May 12, with a march from Carlton to Richmond, and then celebrated with a large march every year on April 21. The Eight-Hour Day was renamed Labour Day in 1934, and the last march

was held in 1951. The Eight-Hour Monument was erected in Spring Street, near Parliament, in 1903 and transferred to its present site, opposite Trades Hall, in 1924. -- MEAGHAN SHAW

#### THE VICTORIAN WORKING WEEK: A BRIEF HISTORY

##### 48-hour week

1856: Building tradesmen win the eight-hour day (six-day week) in Melbourne.

1873: The Victorian government grants women factory workers the eight-hour day.

1874: Victorian government contracts make the legal working day eight hours.

##### 44-hour week

1920: The 44-hour week awarded to timber workers and engineers.

1939: The 44-hour week applied to all industries.

##### 40-hour week

1948: Introduction of the five-day, 40-hour week for all workers.

##### 38-hour week

1981: Metal **industry** gains 38-hour week, which then become the national standard.

##### 36-hour week

2003: Adoption of rostered days off creates 36-hour week for the building **industry**.

#### A TYPICAL WORKING WEEK IN THE LIVES OF ...

The casual: Sobhy Girgis

M: 8am-4.30pm (30 mins break)

T: 3pm-8pm

W: 10am-4pm

TOTAL: 19 hours

Sobhy Girgis, 54, worked as a casual liquor store attendant until last week when he quit because a lack of hours meant he couldn't meet the financial needs of his wife and two children.

He believes the increasing casualisation of the workforce has taken away people's rights and job security, to the point where workers "must keep their heads down and mouths shut - or else". "Unfortunately, we are turning the clock back to the slavery age," he says.

The librarian: Heather Arnold

M: 9am-5pm (1 hour break)

T: 9am-5pm (1 hour break)

W: 9am-5pm (1 hour break)

T: 9am-5pm (1 hour break)

F: 9am-5pm (1 hour break)

TOTAL: 35 hours.

Heather Arnold, 47, works regular hours as a local history officer at the Narre Warren library, which allows her to attend meetings of the two historical societies with which she is involved after work, as well as visit family and go shopping. Her husband works long hours as a self-employed truck driver. She says some people may choose a career with long hours for the money. "I've traded off a more glamorous career, I suppose, for security and a 35-hour week," she says.

The teacher: Katherine Heneghan

S: Two hours class preparation

M: 8.40am-4.30pm (1 hour break)

T: 8.40am-4.30pm (30 mins break)

W: 8.45am-4.30pm (1 hour break)

T: 8.15am-5pm F: 8.30am-4pm

TOTAL: 39.2 hours

Katherine Heneghan, 32, is in her first year as a secondary school teacher at Braybrook College, after 12 years working in office jobs.

She spends at least one hour at home most evenings and more on weekends preparing for classes. "I find teaching a lot more demanding than any other job I've done," she says.

The heart surgeon: Chris Merry

S: 7am-9am/ 2pm-6pm

M: 6.30am-6pm

T: 6.30am-6pm

W: 6.30am-6pm

T: 12am-3.30pm

F: 6.30am-7pm

TOTAL: 68.5 hours

Chris Merry, 33, is in his second last year of training as a heart surgeon at The Alfred hospital. He puts up with his long hours because he loves his job, but finds the unpredictability of being on call the biggest strain on his married life. "It's an exciting job.

I'm at the cutting edge of surgery," he says.

The small businessman: Anthony Aquilina

S: 10am-1.30pm

M: 7am-8pm

T: 7am-7.30pm (45 mins break)

W: 7am-7pm

T: 7am-6pm (1 hour break)

F: 7am-10pm (30 mins break)

S: 7.30am-6.30pm (30 mins break)

TOTAL: 75.25 hours

Anthony Aquilina, 36, works six-day weeks at his Yarraville floor-polishing business and sometimes goes into his warehouse on Sunday to clean. Only half his day is spent doing his job, the rest of the time he's "putting out fires" and dealing with compliance issues and testing and tagging electrical equipment. His wife works alongside him, and also looks after their four children - two of whom are still at home. "My youngest son is six. Sunday is supposedly for him and the family but, sometimes I'm that tired, I tend not to want to do much," he says.

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