

The end of the 12-hour day in the steel industry

Fifty-four years ago, after pressure by the Harding Administration, the steel industry finally agreed to reduce the workday in the mills

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On an inside page, almost hidden behind the banner headlines announcing the death of President Warren Gamaliel Harding, *The New York Times* of August 3, 1923, carried a notice of historic importance to American labor: The directors of the American Iron and Steel Institute had adopted plans for the "total elimination" of the 12-hour day.¹ Harding's Administration, not known as a friend to labor, had achieved a breakthrough for the American workingman. The Secretary of Labor, James John Davis, in a Labor Day statement that year, proclaimed:²

It was through the untiring . . . devotion to the ideals of American labor of President Harding that this Labor Day finds that archaic institution, the 12-hour day and the 7-day week, practically eliminated from the great basic industry of our country—the steel industry.

The storm over the long day in steel had raged intermittently for three decades. Successive waves of criticism had beat upon the institution, building to a crest around 1912 and receding during World War I before breaking through in 1923. In the end, an aroused public opinion led by the President and his Administration swept the reluctant

steel magnates into reorganizing their work schedules.

The 12-hour day arose from the nature of the iron and steel industry. The basic process of the industry required continuous operation 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. The simplest method of achieving this was to operate two shifts of approximately 12 hours each, with workers alternating from daywork to nightwork every week or two, sometimes working through a "long shift" of up to 24 hours.

To the workers, the question of hours necessarily involved the issue of wages. Many workmen showed little enthusiasm for shorter hours as long as it carried with it the prospect of reduced earnings. To counter this attitude, advocates of the shorter day coined the jingle, "Whether you work by the piece or work by the day, Decreasing the hours increases the pay." From the 1890's on, union leaders in the industry pushed the need for reform.

The wage factor complicated the hours discussion, as employers claimed that the majority of workers wanted the longer hours and larger income and that the drive for shorter hours amounted to an indirect attempt to raise wages.⁴ Moreover, manufacturers objected to increased production costs. Although

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quick to slash wages and hours during a depression to "spread the work," employers returned to the long hours during boom times. Thus, shorter hours tended to result from slack times, not from long-term decisions by the steel bosses.

Large corporations vigorously fought efforts to unionize their employees. At the conclusion of the unsuccessful struggle of the Amalgamated Association of Iron and Steel Workers against the Carnegie Steel Co. at Homestead, Pa., in 1892, the Homestead Works continued using the 12-hour shifts. After the strike against U.S. Steel in 1901 failed, the corporation operated certain departments 12 hours a day, including Sunday. From 1890 to 1911, the average size of plants grew larger, and the percentage of unskilled labor increased. Almost without exception, employers chose the long day.⁵

Criticism of the long hours mounted as conditions reached their worst during the boom of 1906-07. In response, the finance committee [executive committee] of U.S. Steel, in April of 1907, passed a resolution that "Sunday labor be reduced to the minimum."⁶ That example was not followed by other manufacturers. A short depression hit the industry, which in itself resulted in shorter hours, but, by late 1909, every plant in the country was being operated to its full capacity and with longer hours. Seven-day work again became common in U.S. Steel plants, as elsewhere.

In February 1910, workers of the Bethlehem Steel Corp. went on strike, one of their major grievances being long hours. On March 20, the U.S. Senate ordered an investigation. The next day, Judge Elbert H. Gary, chairman of U.S. Steel, sent a telegram to the presidents of subsidiary companies instructing them to implement the "spirit" of the 1907 resolution.⁷

Stockholder opens drive

At this time, Charles M. Cabot, a Boston broker and stockholder in U.S. Steel, opened a campaign against the 12-hour day. Calling himself "only a damn fool small stockholder," Cabot urged the 1911 annual meeting of the corporation to establish a committee to investigate hours and conditions. Very graciously, Judge Gary voted the majority of stock and appointed the committee.⁸

At the annual meeting in April 1912, the committee reported, "We are of the opinion that a 12-hour day of labor, followed continuously by any group of men for any considerable number of years, means a decreasing of the efficiency and lessening of the vigor and virility of such men." The Committee recommended that "steps should be taken now" with a view to "reducing the long hours of labor," but it

expressed doubts as to the ability of one employer to effect the change without unanimity within the industry.⁹

The next month, the finance committee appointed a special committee to consider ways of reducing the 12-hour day. This second group produced a negative report, cementing the argument followed by the corporation for the next 10 years:¹⁰

It is believed that, unless competing iron and steel manufacturers will also enforce a less than 12-hour day, the effort to reduce the 12-hours per day at all our works will result in losing a large number of our employees.

Basically, then, U.S. Steel would not move unless the industry moved together, and besides, the workers themselves did not really want the shorter hours. The corporation publicized its welfare program as evidence of its good intentions and promised further action when conditions permitted.

Meanwhile, Congress probed conditions in the steel industry. The Senate had begun an investigation in 1910, and the House established a committee to investigate U.S. Steel the next year. Testifying before the House committee, Louis D. Brandeis, later a justice on the Supreme Court, pictured the steel worker as "a useless individual and a burden to his family at 40. . . transmitting through another generation, and perhaps through many generations, the evil weaknesses and the degeneration which have come to him through the life to which he has been subjected."¹¹

The Senate committee studying the issue asked the Commissioner of Labor to investigate. He reported that the steel workers faced "unusually long hours" and the alternation of daywork and nightwork. He noted that the 7-day week had been condemned and that the 12-hour day was regarded as undesirable.¹² For several years following 1907, efforts had been made to reduce days worked per week and hours worked by use of relief men. In 1907, 97 percent of *all* employees in blast furnaces surveyed by the Bureau of Labor worked 7 days regularly, but the figure had been cut to 82 percent in 1912. When the industry suffered a depression in 1914, the industrywide "average full-time hours per week" reached the lowest level up to that time.¹³

Thus, in the years preceding this country's entrance into World War I, agitation secured some reduction in hours. Both sides battled with pamphlet, speech, book, or article. Workers protested sporadically, but critics charged that the industry intentionally pursued labor policies designed to stifle internal dissent. While thousands of men in the steel mills toiled long hours under extreme conditions, management moved slowly and reluctantly toward

change, prodded to action by the glare of publicity, and generally in slack times.

The war halted this movement. The steel industry boomed, and other considerations disappeared in the "mad rush for production and profits." Computing from U.S. Steel's figures, an observer reported that the percentage of *manufacturing* employees working the 12-hour shift in 1919 stood higher than in 1911 and the actual number had almost doubled from 45,248 to about 85,000.¹⁴

After the Armistice, thousands of steel workers struck for union recognition with the shorter day one of their main demands. The strike and the various investigations prompted by it sparked a buildup of public concern. The most vehement criticism of the long day came "from outside the steel industry—from social workers, pastors, and other civic-minded citizens."¹⁵ In the years immediately following the strike, U.S. Senators, social investigators, preachers, and engineers attacked the industry's refusal to abolish the 12-hour day.

Before the Senate Committee on Education and Labor which was investigating the strike, John Fitzpatrick, chairman of the National Committee for Organizing Iron and Steel Workers, stated, "The home life of the entire family is destroyed where a 12-hour day obtains." He quoted some steelworkers' wives in Chicago, "It is not a question of money here; we do not want the money; what we want is happiness, and we cannot get happiness with the 12-hour day." Fitzpatrick went on to describe a father looking in on his sleeping children before going to the mill at 5 o'clock in the morning and returning home at 7 in the evening to find them asleep again. The worker was so tired he could do little more than fall into bed himself.¹⁶

The committee reported:¹⁷

The policy of working men 10 and 12 hours per day in the steel mills is, it seems to the committee, an unwise and un-American policy. . . . An 8-hour day with a living wage that will enable men to support their families and bring up their children according to the standards of American life ought to be a cardinal part of our industrial policy.

Judge Gary later issued a statement to stockholders of U.S. Steel and to presidents of its subsidiaries. Acknowledging the pressure of public opinion, he said, "Gentlemen, it will have to be done. The 12-hour day must go. Public opinion demands it."¹⁸ Nonetheless, he said he would not put the U.S. Steel Corp. too far out in front of its competitors. The steel manufacturers would have to move together.

"Civic-minded citizens" and social investigators, dissatisfied with the outcome of the unsuccessful

3½-month strike, intensified their efforts to arouse the public, encourage studies by engineers, and build support among politicians and financiers. The Cabot Fund, using monies from Charles Cabot's will, financed a number of studies by economists and engineers. Samuel McCune Lindsay of Columbia University helped enlist the crucial aid of Herbert Hoover, President Harding's Secretary of Commerce.¹⁹

Condemned by church panel

The single most important event in the campaign occurred in July 1920, when the Commission of Inquiry of the Interchurch World Movement released its *Report on the Steel Strike of 1919*. An immediate sensation, the report chastised the industry, and U.S. Steel in particular, saying, "The 12-hour day is the most iniquitous of the byproducts of the corporation's labor policy which is to get cheap labor and keep it cheap."²⁰

The *Report* further spotlighted the effects of the long day.

Americanism is a farce, night schools are worthless, Carnegie libraries on the hill-tops are a jest, churches and welfare institutions are ironic while the steel worker is held to the 12-hour day. . . . Not only has he no energy left, he has literally no time left after working such schedules. He has not even time for his own family.²¹

Americanization of the steel workers cannot take place while the 12-hour day persists. Human beings un-Americanized by the 12-hour day in such scores of thousands are a stiff price paid by America for the profits of steel companies.²²

With the issue before the public, opponents of the long day tried to press their advantage, pouring out articles undercutting the rationale for the policy. Significantly, Herbert Hoover took an increasingly strong personal interest in the question.

As Secretary of Commerce, Hoover undertook the lead in the Cabinet, with assistance from Secretary of Labor James J. Davis. Hoover thought the long hours in steel a "black spot on American industry" and ordered a Department of Commerce study.²³ Davis commented, "The 12-hour day and the 7-day week in American industry must go. . . . Society cannot afford to permit any industry to unmake men in order to manufacture any product."²⁴

With the public aroused and with facts from studies in hand, Hoover approached Harding. When Judge Gary again failed to recommend the 8-hour day at the annual meeting of U.S. Steel in April 1922, Hoover urged Harding to action. The Secretary drafted a letter for the President to send Gary, suggesting that Gary's "lead in this matter would have a tremendously helpful effect throughout the coun-

try" and offering "any consistent assistance in securing the acceptance of the same principle in other large establishments."²⁵

At a White House dinner on May 18, 1922, attended by some 40 steel industry executives, Harding took a cautious, deferential approach, not wanting to put the Administration in the position of forcing the steel industry. His goal was to persuade the steel men on social and economic grounds and to promote industrywide action.²⁶ At the dinner, Secretary of Labor Davis supported the move, and Secretary of Commerce Hoover presented reports and statistics.

Hoover later wrote of the "bitter discussion" as Judge Gary and Charles M. Schwab of Bethlehem Steel labeled his suggestions "unsocial and uneconomic." He left the dinner, Hoover wrote, "much disheartened, in less than a good humor, resolved to lay the matter before the public."²⁷ The Secretary and the President did, however, gain agreement from the steel barons to create a special committee to be headed by Gary to consider possibilities.

Several days later, Secretary Davis wrote a friend:²⁸

The President of the United States is trying to abolish the 12-hour system and I am sure he is going to accomplish it. He may not do it in a day or a week or a month, but I am sure that he will eventually accomplish it.

Hoover sought to keep the issue before the public, hoping to gain this important social benefit without resort to legislation. In his *Memoirs*, he wrote, "I held that the government could be an influence in bringing better relations about, not by compulsory laws or by fanning class hate, but by leadership."²⁹

He encouraged publication of a study sponsored by the Federated American Engineering Societies and wrote the forward to it which Harding signed:³⁰

It has seemed to me for a long time that the 12-hour day and the type of worker it produces have outlived their usefulness and their part in American life in the interests of good citizenship, of good business, and of economic stability. The old order of the 12-hour day must give way to a better and wiser form of organization of the productive forces of the Nation, so that proper family life and citizenship may be enjoyed suitably by all of our people.

Management unmoved

Despite the prodding of Hoover and the obvious wishes of the President, management held firm. In May 1923, at the annual meeting of the Iron and Steel Institute, Gary and Schwab read the report of the committee appointed the previous year. The committee held that the 12-hour day had not been "an injury to the employees, physically, mentally, or

morally." It claimed that shortening the workday would increase production costs by 15 percent and require some 60,000 additional workers, unavailable because of immigration restrictions. The report concluded, "The committee cannot, at this time, report in favor of the total abolition of the 12-hour day."³¹

John A. Fitch, longtime critic of conditions in the steel industry, called the report a "superficial trifling with a great social question."³² In a memorandum to the President dated June 1, Secretary Davis commented:³³

In the interest of the industries themselves; in the interest of the present form of ownership and operation of such industries; in the interest of economic and industrial peace; in the interest of family, home, and humanity, the 12-hour workday and the 7-day workweek must go. Clearly it is to the best interests of all concerned that this matter be taken up and settled by the industries themselves.

Herbert Hoover charged that the committee's report showed "an inability to grasp the great groundswell of social movements among our people,"³⁴ and he drafted a letter for Harding to send Judge Gary. Meanwhile, as one observer noted, "The white heat of public disapproval beat without respite upon the steel heads."³⁵

On June 6, the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America joined with the National Catholic Welfare Council and the Central Conference of American Rabbis to condemn management intransigence.³⁶

The public has waited long for the fulfillment of a virtual promise from the industry that the 12-hour day would be abandoned. . . . The forces of organized religion in America are now warranted in declaring that this morally indefensible regime of the 12-hour day must come to an end.

Gary maintained that the industry's decision to retain the long day was not a final one. Moreover, the report contained something of a loophole. The committee would support abolishing the long day if, among other conditions, "labor should become sufficient to permit it."³⁷

In his letter to the judge, dated June 18, Harding expressed his disappointment in the committee report and asked if the steel barons could pledge to make the change instead of laying off workers during a recession or "at any time when there is a surplus of labor available." He also implied the threat of further public action, saying, "I still entertain the hope that these questions of social importance should be solved by action inside the industries themselves."³⁸

Because Harding had scheduled an extensive

speaking tour in connection with a trip to Alaska, it appeared that he might mount a public campaign on the issue and that the steel leaders inferred as much.³⁹ The steel committee held another meeting.

In a letter to Harding dated June 27, the directors of the American Iron and Steel Institute stated, "We are determined to exert every effort at our command to secure in the iron and steel industry of this country a total abolition of the 12-hour day at the earliest time practicable." Furthermore, "We think it can be brought about without undue delay when, as you state it, 'there is a surplus of labor available.'"⁴⁰

Speaking in Tacoma, Wash., on July 5, the President congratulated the steel industry on its action:⁴¹

It will heal a sore in American industrial life which has been the cause of infinite struggle and bitterness for over a generation, and it marks an accomplishment from the conscience of industry itself, a recognition of responsibility from employer to employee.

That same day, to keep the pressure on, Hoover released to the press, copies of the correspondence between Harding and Gary. The next day, commenting to the press about the pledge, Gary promised the industry would "commence to act in that direction very soon and be very diligent in their efforts."⁴² It appears that the Harding-Hoover strategy, especially the letter of June 18, was instrumental in securing these assurances from the spokesman for the steel industry.⁴³

On August 2, the Iron and Steel Institute adopted plans for the "total elimination" of the long day "as rapidly as the supply of labor will permit." The Institute also agreed on a rate increase for the affected workers equivalent to a 25-percent rise in the hourly and base rates.⁴⁴ On August 9, officials announced that, on August 16, some of the 12-hour departments would go on the 8-hour shift system. The long struggle had finally wrung the vital concession from the steel manufacturers. By early 1924, the number of men on the 12-hour shift had been greatly reduced, and the long day was on the way to becoming a footnote in American industrial history.

"We went over without a ripple. The striking thing about it was how easily it was done," said a high official of a large steel company in the Pittsburgh

district.⁴⁵ Even critics admitted that U.S. Steel undertook the change "in an energetic and thorough-going fashion." A "decided diminution in the amount of new business offered" during mid-1923 caused a slackening in the labor market and facilitated the move. Furthermore, the industry was employing increasing numbers of Southern blacks and Mexican immigrants.⁴⁶

Complicating factors had delayed implementation of the reform and colored the arguments on both sides. Indeed, hours had never constituted a unique concern for the industry, since other questions always intruded. Wages were closely interrelated with hours, and both figured prominently in unionization controversies. By the 1920's, the immigration issue permeated all aspects of labor relations. In the end, presidential politics played a major role in ending the 12-hour day in steel. Public pressure had proved irresistible. At a time of violent conflict in other major industries, the Administration achieved a significant social benefit in steel without a bloody confrontation.

When finally made, the change apparently proved profitable to U.S. Steel and its stockholders. Increased costs initially ran in the 3.5 to 5.5-percent range, but the ratio of operating costs to gross revenue fell, increasing net earnings. Perhaps coincidentally, the company declared extra, increased, or special dividends in 1924, 1925, and 1926.⁴⁷

Thousands of workers had more leisure time, although some still toiled 12 hours a day, and more labored 7 days a week. The percentage of blast furnace employees in all occupations working 72 and 84 hours a week plummeted from 1922 to 1926, and the average full-time hours per week dropped from 72.3 to 59.8 in the same period. In 1926, the average full-time hours for *all* employees in *all* occupations stood at 54.4, down from 63.2 in 1922.⁴⁸

"Reckon that's how I spend my time now—findin' out what's goin' on in the world," commented a steelworker. No longer was he so tired at the end of the shift that food and sleep constituted his only desires. He was glad of the change, saying he would not go back to the long day "for anything in the world." He might like more money, but in his view, "The rest makes up for the money."⁴⁹ □

—FOOTNOTES—

¹ *The New York Times*, Aug. 3, 1923, pp. 1, 8.

² James J. Davis Papers, Library of Congress, Articles and Speeches.

³ Foster Rhea Dulles, *Labor in America* (New York, Thomas Y. Crowell, 1949), p. 107.

⁴ U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Education and Labor, 66th Cong., 1st Sess., *Investigation of Strike in Steel Industries*, p. 240.

⁵ Jesse Squibb Robinson, *The Amalgamated Association of Iron, Steel*

and Tin Workers. Johns Hopkins University Studies in Historical and Political Science (Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins Press, 1920), p. 109n; Marion Cotter Cahill, *Shorter Hours* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1932), p. 208.

⁶ U.S. Congress, Senate, 62d Cong., 1st Sess., Commissioner of Labor, *Report on Conditions of Employment in the Iron and Steel Industry in the United States*, vol. III, *Working Conditions and the Relations of Employers and Employees*, p. 165.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 165-66; Charles A. Gulick, Jr., *Labor Policy of the United States Steel Corporation* (New York, Columbia University, 1924), p. 26.

⁸ Paul Kellogg, "Shapers of Things," *Survey Graphic*, Jan., 1938, p. 18; Harvey O'Connor, *Steel-Dictator* (New York, The John Day Co., 1935), pp. 110-11.

⁹ Senate, *Investigation*, pp. 231-32.

¹⁰ "Havoc Wrought by the Shorter Work Day in Steel," *Survey*, Jan. 1, 1927, p. 465.

¹¹ U.S. Congress, House, Committee on Investigation of U.S. Steel Corp., *United States Steel Corporation*, vol. IV, *Hearings* (Washington, GPO, 1912), p. 2841

¹² Senate, Commissioner of Labor, *Report*, pp. 159-60.

¹³ U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Wages and Hours of Labor in the Iron and Steel Industry: 1907 to 1915*, Bulletin 218, pp. 17, 68; Gulick, *Labor Policy*, p. 31.

¹⁴ Gulick, *Labor Policy*, pp. 31, 32, 39, 40.

¹⁵ Douglas Alan Fisher, *Steel Serves the Nation* (U.S. Steel Corp. 1951), p. 74.

¹⁶ Senate, *Investigation*, p. 40.

¹⁷ U. S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Education and Labor, *Investigating Strike in Steel Industries: Report, 1919*, p. 15.

¹⁸ Ida M. Tarbell, *The Life of Elbert H. Gary* (New York, D. Appleton and Co., 1925), p. 292.

¹⁹ Kellogg, "Shapers," p. 18; Robert H. Zieger, *Republicans and Labor, 1919-1929* (Lexington, University of Kentucky Press, 1969), p. 99.

²⁰ The Commission of Inquiry, The Interchurch World Movement, *Report on the Steel Strike of 1919* (New York, Harcourt, Brace and Howe, 1920), p. 81.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 84.

²³ Herbert Hoover, *The Memoirs of Herbert Hoover: The Cabinet and the Presidency, 1920-1933* (New York, The Macmillan Co., 1952), p. 103.

²⁴ "Industrial Relations and Labor Conditions," *Monthly Labor Review*, May, 1923, p. 923.

²⁵ Zeiger, *Republicans*, p. 100; Tarbell, *Gary*, p. 293.

²⁶ Samuel Hopkins Adams, *Incredible Era* (Boston, Houghton Mifflin Co., 1939), pp. 267-68.

²⁷ Hoover, *Memoirs*, p. 103.

²⁸ Department of Labor Records, National Archives, 163/127-B, Secretary to Mr. J. A. Bowers, May 28, 1922.

²⁹ Hoover, *Memoirs*, pp. 101-02; Zeiger, *Republicans*, p. 100.

³⁰ The Committee on Work-Periods in Continuous Industry of the Federated American Engineering Societies, *The Twelve-Hour Shift in Industry* (New York, E. P. Dutton & Co., 1922), p. ix.

³¹ Gulick, *Labor Policy*, pp. 43-45.

³² John A. Fitch, "A Confession of Helplessness," *Survey*, June 15, 1923, p. 321.

³³ James J. Davis Papers, Library of Congress, Articles and Speeches.

³⁴ Zeiger, *Republicans*, p. 104.

³⁵ Frederick W. MacKenzie, "Steel Abandons the Twelve-Hour Day," *American Labor Legislation Review*, Sept., 1923, p. 180.

³⁶ Gulick, *Labor Policy*, p. 47.

³⁷ Tarbell, *Gary*, pp. 294-95.

³⁸ *Twelve-Hour Day: Letters between the President of the United States and American Iron and Steel Institute, also Interview with Elbert H. Gary, Chairman* (July 6, 1923), p. 3.

³⁹ Kellogg, "Shapers," p. 19; Adams, *Incredible Era*, p. 370.

⁴⁰ *Twelve-Hour Day*, p. 4.

⁴¹ *The New York Times*, July 6, 1923, p. 2.

⁴² *Twelve-Hour Day*, p. 8.

⁴³ David Brody, *Steelworkers in America: The Nonunion Era* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1960), p. 274n.

⁴⁴ *The New York Times*, Aug. 3, 1923, p. 8.

⁴⁵ S. Adele Shaw, "Now that Jerry Has Time to Live," *Survey*, Sept. 1, 1924, p. 568.

⁴⁶ Gulick, *Labor Policy*, pp. 51-52; *Twenty-second Annual Report of the United States Steel Corporation* (1923), p. 25; Brody, *Steelworkers*, p. 266.

⁴⁷ Cahill, *Shorter Hours*, pp. 215-216; O'Connor, *Steel-Dictator*, p. 115; "Havoc," *Survey*, p. 465.

⁴⁸ U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Wages and Hours of Labor in the Iron and Steel Industry: 1907 to 1926*, Bulletin 442, pp. 3, 6.

⁴⁹ Shaw, "Now that Jerry," p. 568.