

# 8hr Day: a celebration and a sober reflection

**O**n 21 April, Victorian workers will celebrate the 150th anniversary of Melbourne building workers' victory in their campaign for the Eight Hour Day, reports Peter Love.

At the beginning of 1856, the Melbourne Stonemasons' Society revived an ancient claim for the division of the day into three equal parts for Labour, Recreation and Rest. Informed by the claims of the Chartist movement in England and encouraged by the Early Closing movement there and in Australia, James Galloway and James Stephens persuaded fellow masons that an '8 Hour System' would 'be greatly beneficial to the trade, and also tend to improve our social and moral condition'.

After a series of public meetings and intense negotiations with employers, it was agreed with the building contractors that the system would commence on 21 April 1856. In an early example of what we now call pattern bargaining, Linacre, the contractor on the Melbourne University site, only agreed on condition that the other employers accepted the new system. On that morning workers downed tools at the University and commenced a march to all major building sites in the city, finishing at the Parliament House, then under construction, to proclaim their victory and ensure compliance with the agreement.

Cornish, the Parliament House contractor, was one of the recalcitrants who eventually signed on to the new industry standard. On 12 May the unionists and their families celebrated the victory, walking proudly behind a new banner in triumphant procession from

the 'Carlton paddock' to the Cremorne Gardens by the Yarra in Richmond. The money collected during these celebrations was donated to the hospital and the asylum.

In dividing the day between Labour, Recreation and Rest they were asserting that they were not simply 'operatives' or 'hands' in a labour market, but members of families and a civilised community that could sustain an equitable balance between work, family and a social life that allowed time for civic engagement. Although some workers in New Zealand and Sydney had won an Eight Hour Day earlier, the industry-wide application of the Melbourne agreement was seen as a beacon to workers around the world, and was widely applauded.

No sooner had the system been introduced than it was roundly denounced by the usual suspects. The Melbourne *Herald* declared that it would destroy the Colony's precarious prosperity and some employers began, almost immediately, to plot its demise. Within two years contractors recruited masons in Ger-

many who, unaware of the Eight Hour System in Australia, agreed to work under the previous Ten Hour Day arrangements.

One hundred and fifty years later we are now fighting to regain the right to pattern bargain and make industry-wide agreements. The very idea of collective bargaining is under sustained attack, with one of our universities in the front line of that conflict. NTEU is asking members to join in the 150th anniversary celebrations to express their support for collective bargaining, an equitable work/life balance and the return of the Eight Hour Day as the practical and symbolic expression of civilised community standards. Let us all join with University of Melbourne Vice-Chancellor Glyn Davis who presided over the official launch of the Eight Hour Day anniversary program on the very site where workers downed tools in 1856.

For information on the April 21 celebrations phone (03) 9659 3583 or visit our website.

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



**EIGHT HOUR DAY**  
Celebrate 150 years  
of work, rest & play