

“Eight Hours of Work” (1928)

Abstract

The eight-hour day had been one of the fundamental demands of the labor unions since the nineteenth century. In 1918, it was initially introduced in the heavy and armaments industries by the Stinnes-Legien Agreement and shortly thereafter it was made law for all workers with full pay. However, at the end of 1923, this legal provision was undermined at the instigation of the employers' associations, so that ten-hour work days were again allowed. This account by a female textile worker describes her typical workday in 1928, which consisted of nine hours of work at a weaving loom in the factory, six days a week. Her account conveys not only the monotony of factory work, but also the added workload for women, who had to care for their households and families in addition to their paid employment.

Source

Eight hours of work, eight hours of rest, eight hours of sleep ... the sweet triad of life!

A summer morning! The sun is shining in my face. I wake up, jump out of bed and to the window. It's a glorious summer morning. The smell of flowers wafts up from the garden below and the golden-yellow fields of grain undulate in the distance. The birds are singing their morning songs. It's so solemn, so still. I stand there, as if in a dream. Suddenly I hear a voice: "Don't you want to go to work today?" *What? Work in the gloomy factory halls on a day such as this? It's much too beautiful for that. But it's not for you to enjoy, proletarian girl, go to the foul-smelling factory halls and toil, so that the factory owners can spend their summers somewhere on the seashore.* I eat my breakfast and set out for work. On the way I meet all my fellow sufferers. They're in a hurry and it seems to me that they are fleeing the splendor of the summer day. No sooner have I arrived in the factory than the siren howls, piercing body and soul. Now I will stand at the loom, with all its mind-numbing clatter, for nine long hours. If only it were noon already! For variation I sometimes go out to the privy and like a prisoner watch the dancing rays of sunlight through the grid. But, oh, dear, when I return, it turns out I was outside three minutes too long and I am once again scolded by our foreman, who stands at the door the whole day long and is probably training to be the privy director. Finally it's noon and we rush home, eat and quickly return to work. Once again the siren howls and once again I stand at the loom, where I will remain this long afternoon. It's very hot. My thoughts are already confused and drift off. If only the weather were this nice on a Sunday! *One Sunday is far too little free time and nine hours far too much time spent in the factory each day. Yes, eight hours of work, eight hours of rest, eight hours of sleep, the sweet triad of life. If only we had an eight-hour day.* But even eight hours would be too long for most women, who must also attend to the household. Thus pass the days, the years, the sweetest hours of our lives, and we lose track of what has become of them. Once again I look at the clock. It's four p.m. Well, one more hour and this torture will be over. Finally, it's time to stop work. I rush out, but I feel no joy. I am too exhausted.

Source of original German text: *“Mein Arbeitstag—mein Wochenende”*: Arbeiterinnen berichten von ihrem Alltag 1928, new edition by Alf Luedtke (Hamburg: Ergebnisse Verlag GmbH, 1991), 17–18.

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