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The longest working day.

You may have seen a reference in the fine news-print that President Hugo Chavez and his Venezuelan cabinet are bringing down legislation which will reduce the Venezuelan working day to 6 hours. If the Western press has commented on this at all, it was to say that this will mean a reduction of the hourly wage which will bring misery to Venezuelan workers. Such a claim is based on the presumption that, in order to reduce the working week you have to also reduce the hourly wage by a proportionate amount. If you don't accept this dogma then the capitalist system places you firmly beyond the pale. After all, at the beginning of the 19th century there was already a respected economist by name of Senior who proved conclusively that if the then common working day was reduced from 11 ½ hours to 10 ½ hours, the entire profit of industry would disappear. This "proof" was based on the notion that the labourer spent the first 10 ½ hours of the day reproducing the costs of running the factory and buying the raw materials, and only the last hour in producing its profit, then obviously if that last hour were eliminated, there would be no profit, and the sky would fall in.

Clearly, if the working day were now reduced to 6 hours by a Venezuelan rabble-rouser, the economy would go up in a puff of smoke. You don't need to be a mathematical genius to show up the fallacy of such arguments; there are quite a few Australian jobs such as slaughtermen, some miners and some teachers whose current working day is around 6 hours, with no obvious damage to the sky, or even the bosses' profits. Mind you, if it's the last hour which we can't do without, why not get to work an hour later each day to shorten the working week instead of knocking off an hour earlier?

If you think this last suggestion is ridiculous, bear in mind that it is no stranger than the repeated demand by bosses that the working day should be lengthened. This is not just an empty demand; since the advent of the Howard government an indefinite lengthening of the working week has become the norm. In fact, with a few exceptions, Australians now work the world's longest hours.

Now it is quite obvious to anyone except some of the idiots who run most enterprises that lengthening hours indefinitely doesn't necessarily improve profits. You wouldn't, for instance, want to ride in a bus or a plane where the controls are operated by a driver or pilot who has been on the job continuously for more than six hours, although this is not unusual. As Robert Owen, the most successful textile mill-owner in the early 18th century, pointed out to his peers, the materials that went into his products were much more expensive than the labour and to risk spoiling the product by allowing inattentive workers near his machines would not only put the workers at risk, but would jeopardise the product. Simply, it was not very clever.

Why, then, do the bosses insist on working their labourers into the ground, not only in Owen's day, but at this very moment in Australia? The answer is, simply, because they are allowed to do it. The parallels between what happened in Owen's day and what is happening now are in no way uncanny, because the bosses' motivation doesn't change

There may be listeners or readers who feel that to-day's workers don't work as hard as they did in their day. I don't think that, in general, the sort of work done to-day by wage-slaves is any easier, although it is certainly different. For one thing, there is little physical exercise in most of to-day's jobs. This means that unless people go in for sport, which relatively few do, more and more of us are physically unfit, . This also means that we get little mental stimulus, because sitting in front of the telly watching endless crime serials is not very stimulating.

Speaking from personal experience, I have never found repetitive manual work stressful. What is often stressful is the environment in which all paid work is carried out. Indeed, nowadays the stress involved rarely comes from the task, but tends to come from the structures of the work situation. It is important to note that apart from shortening working hours, the changes in progress in Latin America include the large-scale taking over of enterprises by workers. This move towards worker's control of enterprises has been on the agenda at various times and in various places ever since the industrial system was inflicted on humanity of the western persuasion. And while the capitalist system, as its name implies, is based on financial domination, it uses this domination to extend its control into every aspect of the lives and the thinking of the people in its thrall. Today this means nearly everybody on this planet.

Which gets me back to the endless working day, as proposed and practiced in this benighted country at this very moment. There is absolutely nothing new in this imposition. Already in the 18th century Adam Smith, the paragon of free enterprise ideology, had to admit that some curbs had to be placed on the freedom to exploit if workers as a class were not to die out. For this reason, rather than for any reasons of humanity or ethical behaviour, the early 19th century saw the introduction of factory acts in Britain. The same thinking entered into the 1914 Basic Wage Higgins determination which says somewhere that "if a man lend his horse... he would expect it to be given food and water" etc. In other words in return for the state allowing the exploitation of workers the state should, if reluctantly, make sure the worker doesn't get killed or maimed too quickly and can still provide offspring for future exploiters to use. Mind you, it was all dressed up in pious Methodist verbiage.

The limitations on the working day simply continue this philosophy. While the eight hour day in Victoria and later Australia was the result of industrial action by stone masons, helped by a labour shortage due to the Gold Rush, there were people on both sides of the class divide who helped the extension of working hours. Once people have been persuaded as I said earlier, that the only way to earn more is by working longer hours, they will co-operate with bosses to agree to an endless extension of the working day, even at the expense of their health, as long as it comes with extra pay.

For the bosses and their organisations any such extension is seen as a victory, regardless of whether or not it results in improved profits, as was already shown up by Robert Owen's rebuff by his fellow manufacturers 200 years ago. Indeed, if workers can be brainwashed into thinking that the only way to get more money is to work harder and/or longer than this is indeed a victory for the bosses and for unreason, because reason tells you that the cost of labour has little relation to the cost of goods.

Previously I mentioned how in some Latin American countries workers are once again taking over and running work-places. This is the way the realities of the system can become clear to its producers and in which the inherent alienation of wage labour can be exposed. Unfortunately, it is an uphill battle because it is generally limited to workplaces which have already been sent broke by inept and greedy managements. There has been one exception to this in Australia, and I shall talk about this some other time. Meanwhile, to paraphrase Bertolt Brecht's poem about the water-wheel, and thinking of the coming election, our slogan should be "We don't need different bosses, we need none".