

AMERICAN POLITICAL THOUGHT
Keith E. Whittington

Supplementary Material

Chapter 6: Civil War and Reconstruction – Political Economy

*Ira Steward, The Eight Hour Movement (1865)*¹

Ira Steward was raised in Jacksonian-era Boston, where he was drawn into radical political circles. He trained as a machinist, and by the Civil War he was a leading figure in the New England labor movement. Unlike most labor leaders of the period, Steward embraced a political strategy to improving the conditions of workers and dedicated much of his life to building a movement for imposing legal limits on the length of the work day. A single worker or a single employer could not reduce working hours without being undercut by others, but a legal limit on the work day would force a general readjustment of wages. The effort bore fruit first in Massachusetts, which adopted a ten-hour law for women and children in 1874. At the core of Steward's argument for shorter hours was the belief that workers needed more free time to develop better tastes and habits (and to better appreciate their own collective interest) and needed to be paid more to become effective consumers of manufactured goods

“Well,” says a workingman, “I should certainly be very glad to work less hours, but I can scarce’y earn enough by working ten to make myself and family comfortable.”

Sir, as strange as it may seem to you at first blush, it is a fact that your wages will never be permanently increased until the hours of labor are reduced. Have you never observed that those who work the hardest and longest are paid the least, especially if the employment is very disagreeable, while those whose employment is more agreeable usually receive more, and many who do nothing receive more than either?

You are receiving your scanty pay precisely *because* you work so many hours in a day, and . . . reducing the Hours for the masses will eventually *increase* their Wages.

. . .

Think then of the difference which will soon be observed in a man or woman emancipated by the Eight Hour system from Excessive Toil! Not the first day nor the first week, perhaps, but in a very little while.

The first feeling may be one merely of simple relief; and the time for a while may be spent, as are many of the Sabbaths, by the overworked, in sleeping and eating, and frequently in the most debasing amusements. The use which a man makes of his *leisure*, depends largely upon the use which has been made of *him*. If *he* has been abused, he will be pretty sure to abuse his first opportunities.

. . .

Leisure, however, is neither positively good, or bad. Leisure, or Time is a blank—a negative—a piece of white paper upon which we stamp, picture, or write our past characters.

. . .

John Stuart Mill says: “The secret for developing man, is to give him many duties to perform and many inducements to perform them.”

¹ Excerpt taken from Ira Steward, *The Eight Hour Movement: A Reduction of Hours is an Increase of Wages* (Boston: Boston Labor Reform Association, 1865).

Mankind will be virtuous and happy when they have *full power* to choose between good and evil, with plenty of motives for deciding right.

...

My theory is, 1st, That *more leisure*, will create *motives* and *temptations* for the common people to ask for more Wages.

2d. That where *all* ask for more Wages, there will be no motive for refusing, since Employers will all fare alike.

3d. That where all demand more Wages, the demand cannot be resisted.

4th. That resistance would amount to the folly of a "strike" by *Employers themselves*, against the strongest power in the world, viz., the *habits, customs, and opinions*, of the *masses*.

5th. That the change in the habits and opinions of the people through more leisure will be too gradual to disturb or jar the Commerce and enterprise of Capital.

6th. That the increase in Wages will fall upon the wastes of Society, in its Crimes, Idleness, Fashions, and Monopolies, as well as the more legitimate and honorable profits of Capital, in the production and distribution of Wealth, and

7th. In the mechanical fact, that the *cost* of making an article depends almost entirely upon the *number manufactured*, is a practical increase of Wages, by tempting the Workers through their new leisure to unite in buying luxuries now confined to the Wealthy, and which are costly *because* bought only by the Wealthy.

...

Without attempting to settle, definitely, how much common labor is *worth*—for it is a broad question—I will make the claim that no man's compensation should be so low, that it will not secure for himself and family a comfortable home—education for his children, and all of the influence to which he is entitled by his capacity, virtue and industry. As the present system of labor does not pay a majority of workers enough, we may conclude that *something* is wrong; and whatever our speculations upon the system, it must be clear that the *masses* will not insist upon more pay, without additional motives and temptations; and that all who do the work of the masses must receive *their* pay. . . . Change and improve the *daily habits* of the Laborers and they will raise their own pay in spite of any power in the Universe; and this can only be done by furnishing them with more leisure, or time!

...

A reduction of Hours means more than an *Increase* in Wages. It means a more equal and just Distribution of Wealth. For, to increase Wages, without increasing the cost of Production, is more equal Distribution of Wealth.

A better Distribution of Wealth, means, at the same time, the gradual eradication of Speculation, Idleness, Public Debts, Interest, Fashionable extravagance, Woman's endless Drudgery and Low wages, Prostitution, Intemperance, Corrupt Legislation, Land Monopoly, Polygamy and War.

Human life will be lengthened, less time will be lost in attending the sick, woman will become far more healthy, as well as beautiful, and men, as well as women, will be placed more upon their good behavior.

...

We are sometimes asked "whether we think a man ought to have as much pay for Eight as for Ten hours' Labor?"

It would be fair to ask this if we had been paid all we have really earned in the Ten hour system; or if those wages would pay us all we shall actually earn in Eight Hours; even admitting, for the sake of argument (what we do not believe), that two hours' less time would result in one fifth less production.

...

Capitalists tell us that they will not employ Labor unless *they* can make satisfactory profits. Our space is too limited to expose the absurdity of such remarks. The next generation will laugh at them. We

shall content ourselves now, by matching them with other statements. Unless the working classes are *paid* sufficient wages, they will not be able to *buy* certain articles which manufacturers and merchants are so eager to sell Capitalists remember us as *Producers*, to be paid as little as possible; but not as *Consumers*, to be *paid enough* to enable us to *buy* their commodities. . . .

. . .

We have decided that *THEY* are making too much money!

They cut down *OUR* Prices!

We shall cut down THEIR Hours!

We submit to their “cut down” because there are enough to take our places if we resign them but whenever we are united enough to try the Eight Hour experiment, in spite of the opposition of the Employers, *they* will submit by paying the regular Ten hour wages, simply because they cannot hire men if they have not.

. . .

We have learned that we cannot bring the *Wages up* to the Hours that we labor; we purpose, therefore, to bring down our Hours—nearer, at least, to our limited *Wages*.

. . .

Our decision is that we don't care whether we can do as much or not!—that we can do *enough*—that the world has grown rich, and that the time has come to set in motion the great natural causes which will secure a better Distribution of Wealth. We shall treat the Wealthy classes as tenderly and considerately as a young man should treat his grandmother. We shall remember their habits, and their prejudices even; but we are going to take possession—we, or our children to come after us—of the vast Wealth our industry has created. Peacefully—without armed resistance or the spilling of blood, or the destruction of property—as the ruling classes have always done before us—when they could not dominate—following, loyally, established principles and precedents, we shall accomplish our purpose so gradually and acceptably that men will wonder why they ever opposed us. . . .

. . .