

The Eight-hour Day Men

- 1 Last summer we had to work ten hours a day. We got up at six, ate breakfast and walked to work, starting at seven. We had a 15-minute 'smoko' at ten, and another at two o'clock. By then we were hot and dusty, and the stones and tools were burning hot. We knocked off work at about half past five, and walked home. After tea we were too tired to do anything but sleep. We work six days a week and go to church on Sunday. We had no time for recreation, or to go to the working men's college to improve our education. We hardly had the energy to play sport.
- 2 James and I are members of the Stonemasons' Society, a union of stonemasons who work together to improve our working conditions. I'm the president and he's the secretary. We called a meeting of members and decided that eight hours should be the maximum day's work. We visited the employers to persuade them to agree to shorter working hours. All but three employers agreed.
- 3 To persuade the other employers to agree, I decided to use strike action. I was working on the building of Melbourne University. One burning hot day at morning 'smoko' I called the other men to put down their tools and follow me. Seven hundred men marched through the streets of Melbourne to all the major building sites and called on the men at each place to join us. They dropped their tools and joined our procession. This was the first demonstration of the unity and power of the Stonemasons' Society.
- 4 Next we had a general meeting of all the stonemasons, carpenters and bricklayers and most of the employers, to discuss hours of work. James Galloway spoke very strongly in support of the eight-hour day. We clapped and cheered his speech. Then the meeting voted to introduce the eight-hour day. One Melbourne newspaper supported our action, but another editor attacked our movement, saying shorter working hours add to the cost of wages.
- 5 Mr Cornish, who has the government contract to build Parliament House, refused to agree to shorter working hours. He said he would have to employ more workers if we worked for only eight hours. So his workers still had to work ten hours. Members of our Stonemasons' Society persuaded the government that our demand for shorter hours was fair. We offered to take a cut in wages. The government told Mr Cornish to agree to the eight-hour day or it would cancel his contract. He agreed.

Handout 5 cont

- 6 So now we work eight hours a day for six days. That's 48 hours a week instead of 60. We are not so tired, and we have more time and energy for recreation.

Yesterday was a holiday. We had a procession and party to celebrate the first victory of working men in this country. Twelve hundred men marched proudly through the streets of Melbourne behind a banner made by the daughters of one of our members. It said:



We went to our favourite recreation place beside the Yarra River where we had sports, music, dancing and a meal. Then the fireworks began. Fiery dragons and sky rockets lit up the sky over the river.