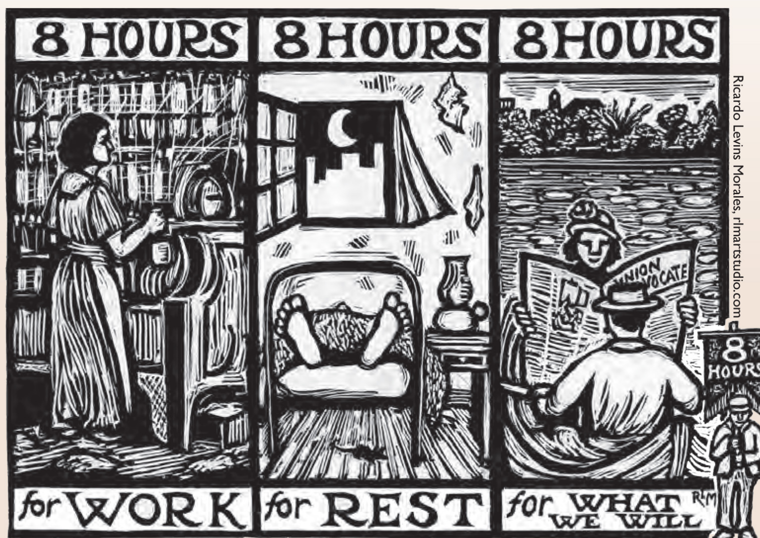
# Fighting for the Eight-Hour Day

"There must be something fearfully wrong," wrote a "workingman's wife" in a letter to the editor in the *Detroit Evening News* March 24, 1886, when a few Detroiters "can accumulate millions in so few years, during which time the workingman has become a serf."

Like a 19th Century version of the "we are the 99 percent" slogan of the 21st Century Occupy movement, the letter-writer was clearly upset with the inequality between those who owned the city's industries and those who toiled in them. In the weeks after the letter was published, that issue took hold among thousands of Michigan workers who struck for shorter hours and higher pay.

Unions in many parts of the U.S. had long been campaigning for shorter hours. In 1884 in Chicago unions passed a resolution declaring that as of May 1, 1886, the eight-hour day should become the legal workplace standard. The eight-hour movement quickly spread across the country.



Ricardo Levins Morales, rlmartstudio.com

Unions in Michigan joined the effort and began making plans for May 1. "This, The Fearful Day" was the headline in the *Detroit Evening News* on that date. "Looked For With Anxiety by Employers and Employed," it continued.

Some Detroit workers had already made partial advances. Stove workers had gotten 10-percent raises, shipyards had agreed to an eight-hour day after a strike, six breweries had set eight-hour days, and carpenters and joiners had won a one-year contract to reduce the workday to nine hours at 10 hours pay. Painters, bakers, and school janitors were joining the campaign. Months earlier, in the Saginaw area, lumber mill workers had gone on strike to reduce their workday to 10 hours, under the slogan "10 Hours or No Sawdust."

May 1 was a half-day at many Detroit factories because it was a Saturday. At the Michigan Car Works, workers who built railroad cars, showed up only to find that the company had laid off 125 workers. On Monday, they learned that the company had fired Knights of Labor organizer P.J. Clair. These two actions led even the *Evening News* to complain that the company had shown a "lack of spirit and conciliation" in dealing with workers.

Organizer Clair went from department to department to tell workers of his firing, picking up support and ending at the plant manager's office where a growing crowd demanded Clair's reinstatement, shorter hours, and a pay raise.

When management said no, 1,500 workers struck and went to the Car Works foundry and spring works, with a demand to lower the workday from 10 to nine hours with no cut in pay. The next day, May 4, a crowd of 3,000 assembled for a solidarity rally.

Within the week, over 5,100 workers in Detroit were on strike, including 3,400 from Michigan Car, Peninsular Car, and three other rail-car companies.

Although the newspapers had predicted that workers would be forced to return to work because their families were hurting, a benefit dance raised $900 for relief and the strikes continued. On one day alone, the *Evening News* published a "box score" showing 3,780 workers on strike — among them workers at Pullman's rail-car factory, sewer laborers, the Diamond Match factory, cracker bakers, and more.

On May 5, three thousand workers gathered at Michigan and Trumbull, the site that would later become Tiger Stadium, for a rally. A leader of the cigar workers union, George Vonberger, warned, "When the workingmen become intelligent they would turn the rich man out of the palaces and live there themselves."

At some of the targeted companies, management locked out workers; at others they tried to break the strikes — in one case, management at a screen and pail factory hired 12- and 13-year-old boys as replacements for striking workers.

The strike at the Michigan Car Works failed after three weeks as workers returned to their jobs. But their decision to challenge management for as long as they did generated a new spirit among Detroit's workers. Over a four-month period, an estimated 9,000 Detroit-area workers had either gone on strike for shorter hours or had negotiated shorter hours with their employers.

On Labor Day, Monday, September 6, not a legal holiday, spirits were so high among workers that thousands defied their employers by leaving their jobs to join a three-mile long parade from Grand Circus Park to a park on Jefferson Ave., where they heard speeches and picnicked with their families. An estimated 10,000 people

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participated with floats and banners—in effect, a one-day general strike.

It would take several decades before the eight-hour day became a universal standard. While five-day, 40-hour weeks took hold in some industries (at Ford Motor Co. in 1926, for example), it wasn't until the Fair Labor Standards Act was introduced by the New Deal in 1937 that a 40-hour week with overtime pay above that became the law of the land in many industries.

Yet, even then there were workers not covered by the law (see the story, page 13 about the Woolworth's workers who worked 54-hour weeks). It would take organizing and bargaining by many different unions before a standard 40-hour week became widely implemented.

*— UAW retiree Dianne Feeley and Dr. Thomas Klug of Marygrove College researched material for this story for the* **Southwest Detroit Auto Heritage Guide**, *a website under development.*

Michigan Labor Legacy Landmark photo: Shawn D. Ellis