PRIMARY SOURCE from Report on the Steel Strike of 1919

A Commission of Inquiry appointed at the request of the Interchurch World Movement of North America prepared a report on the steel strike of 1919. The report included affidavits from more than 500 striking and nonstriking steel workers. As you read this portion of the report, consider why investigators recommended that the 12-hour day and 7-day week be eliminated.

Section 1

It is an epigram of the industry that “steel is a man killer.” Steel workers are chiefly attendants of gigantic machines. The steel business tends to become, in the owners’ eyes, mainly the machines. Steel jobs are not easily characterized by chilly scientific terms. Blast furnaces over a hundred feet high, blast “stoves” a hundred feet high, coke ovens miles long, volcanic bessemer converters, furnaces with hundreds of tons of molten steel in their bellies, trains of hot blooms, miles of rolls end to end—these masters are attended by sweating servants whose job is to get close enough to work but to keep clear enough to save limb and life. It is concededly not an ideal industry for men fatigued by long hours. . . .

First, what exactly is the schedule of the twelve-hour worker? Here is the transcript of the diary of an American worker, the observations of a keen man on how his fellows regard the job, the exact record of his own job and hours made in the spring of 1919, before the strike or this Inquiry, and selected here because no charge of exaggeration could be made concerning it. It begins:

“Calendar of one day from the life of a Carnegie steel workman at Homestead on the open hearth, common labor:

“5:30 to 12 (midnight)—Six and one-half hours of shoveling, throwing and carrying bricks and cinder out of bottom of old furnace. Very hot.

“12:30—Back to the shovel and cinder, within few feet of pneumatic shovel drilling slag, for three and one-half hours.

“4 o’clock—Sleeping is pretty general, including boss.

“5 o’clock—Everybody quits, sleeps, sings, swears, sighs for 6 o’clock.

“6 o’clock—Start home.

“6:45 o’clock—Bathed, breakfast.

“7:45 o’clock—Asleep.

“4 P.M.—Wake up, put on dirty clothes, go to boarding house, eat supper, get pack of lunch.

“5:30 P.M.—Report for work.”

This is the record of the night shift; a record of inevitable waste, inefficiency and protest against “arbitrary” hours. Next week this laborer will work the day shift. What is his schedule per week? Quoting again from the diary:

“Hours on night shift begin at 5:30; work for twelve hours through the night except Saturday, when it is seventeen hours, until 12 Sunday noon, with one hour out for breakfast; the following Monday ten hours; total from 5:30 Monday to 5:30 Monday 87 hours, the normal week.

“The Carnegie Steel worker works 87 hours out of the 168 hours in the week. Of the remaining 81 he sleeps seven hours per day; total of 49 hours. He eats in another fourteen; walks or travels in the street car four hours; dresses, shaves, tends furnace, undresses, etc., seven hours. His one reaction is ‘What the Hell!’—the universal text accompanying the twelve-hour day.”


Activity Options

1. Imagine that you are either a steel worker or a steel mill official. Write a letter to the editor of a newspaper stating your opinion on the 12-hour day. Share your letter with the class.

2. Interview someone you know who works full time—a family member, a neighbor, a teacher—about his or her typical work day. Then compare this person’s schedule with that of the steel worker in this excerpt.