

Matilda Fraser

It would probably not be very difficult to find in many parts of the world records of men who have at one time or another looked forward hopefully to the days when labour would be brought within a reasonable limit.

– H. W. Potter, *Evening Post*, 3 March 1891²

8 FEBRUARY, 1840: A man named Samuel Duncan Parnell alighted from the *Duke of Roxborough* onto Petone beach, after nearly five months at sea. Among the other passengers was George Hunter, a shipping agent, who had struck up a friendship with Parnell during the voyage. Shortly after their arrival in the settlement of Wellington, Hunter approached Parnell to build him a shop – at which Parnell declared he would do so, but that he would work no more than eight hours a day. “There are,” he said, “twenty-four hours per day given us; eight of these should be for work, eight for sleep, and the remaining eight for recreation and in which for men to do what little things they want for themselves. I am ready to start to-morrow morning at eight o’clock, but it must be on these terms or none at all.”³ Hunter said, “You know, Mr. Parnell, that in London the bell rang at six o’clock, and if a man was not there ready to turn to he lost a quarter of a day.” Parnell responded, “We are not in London anymore.”

As a city in its infancy, it was possible to set one’s terms, and Hunter was forced to agree – helped by an acute labour shortage, given that there were only three other carpenters in the entire settlement. As Parnell said, “the first strike for eight hours a-day the world has ever seen, was settled on the spot.”⁴

The origin of the eight-hour working day is disputed, with many around the world claiming it; but it appears Parnell was one of the very first to put it into action. It is said that he would meet the incoming ships carrying new settlers at the port and inform prospective workers that they must agree to an eight-hour working day, or else be ducked in the harbour. These terms were gladly accepted by the men from these ships. Only a few years later, the labourers constructing the Hutt Road, which connects Petone to the modern city of Wellington, threw down their tools, and refused to return to work until promised a stable eight-hour day.⁵ It did not take long before their conditions were accepted.

THESE DAYS, WORKERS can count themselves lucky if they get something so archaic as an eight-hour working day. Zero-hour contracts are increasingly common, particularly in minimum-wage jobs. A competitive economy on a global stage relies on the depression of wages, the lowest possible

outgoing costs and the highest possible profits that theoretically ‘trickle down’ to the individuals on the bottom tiers, that is, workers and their dependents; but in real terms, these profits are in the main simply removed from the general economy and left to stagnate.

The modern labour system is highly emotional, which can be most clearly seen by observing the treatment of those who opt out, whether by choice or by circumstance. The prevailing opinion of social-welfare recipients assumes not that they can’t work, but that they won’t. This attitude speaks volumes about the Judeo-Christian roots of contemporary New Zealand society, where hard work was thought to be the best means for success, and all one needs to do is ‘pull yourself up by your bootstraps’. The onus is on the individual, with little or no regard for extenuating circumstances that might help or hinder the path to economic security. Poor ‘economic decisions’ might also include the failure to begin saving for a mortgage⁶ during childhood,⁷ neglecting to ‘just walk up and ask’ for a job,⁸ studying something stupid like liberal arts, going to university, not going to university, having a name that sounds ‘foreign’,⁹ speaking with an accent,¹⁰ not being white,^{11,12} being or becoming sick¹³ or disabled,¹⁴ having children,¹⁵ being female,¹⁶ having a partner leave or die,¹⁷ or wanting to work for money.¹⁸ Workers prone to fits of guilt are seen as a good investment, because they ‘hate to disappoint’ and are less likely to ask for bonuses or pay rises.¹⁹

None of this should be new information, particularly to anyone who follows the news, or retains natural empathy. Our labour, our productivity and our worth do not amount to the same thing, and the emphasis on the individual’s need to step up belies the market forces at work. In Wellington, I have known a number of people edged out of a job when the business owners decided it would be more profitable to shift production to a developing country with a minimum wage that is orders of magnitude smaller. An Australian company, iSentia (formerly known as Media Monitors), shifted their broadcast transcription team to Manila, where native Filipino workers were given Anglicised names for all outgoing reports.²⁰ The irony here is that the Wellington office itself was an exercise in outsourcing labour to a lower-wage economy. It’s important to be competitive.

When I go to the supermarket, there is a long line to the self-checkouts, while the workers – fewer and fewer all the time – are not engaged by customers to the same degree. Where, in the past, one would go to the grocery store with a list, hand it to someone behind the counter, and an employee

would fetch everything on the list, pack it and total the price – now, all of this labour is transferred to the individual, by way of the illusion of providing greater choice, our own micro free-market economy. It is economically advantageous to set out a supermarket with bulk products on the shelves and direct consumers to retrieve their own goods; this ensures more viewing-time of products, many conveniently located at eye-level, or better, at a child's eye-level. The increasingly sprawling architecture of these places fosters the Gruen transfer, or intentional spatial confusion, all the better to hold customers' fractured attention and presence for longer.

Self-service is supposed to provide us with more options – as if more options was a good idea. Increasingly paralysed by choice and availability, our attention becomes fractured and disoriented. An attention economy runs on scarcity. So too is our global economy founded upon scarcity – and now, increasingly, the uneven distribution of labour, leaning heavily on the developing world. This is exacerbated locally with a bloated and ageing workforce, as many continue to work beyond retirement age as a way to make ends meet.

One might think that the increased automation of basic and mundane tasks frees up more of the worker's time, whether for leisure or for different kinds of work that cannot be carried out by machines. The trouble is that the jobs taken by machines are not replaced by higher-level jobs – at least, not enough of them: as an example, where Kodak employed 145,000 workers at the height of its power, Instagram had thirteen employees in 2012.²¹ Machines don't need subsidised reading glasses, or wellness leave, or weekends off. We do. Many systems are already top-heavy, especially when we consider the imbalanced proportions of proceeds and how these are distributed between workers and the elite. The question becomes: who benefits from the time, and money, saved by automation?

Regardless of the answer to these questions, the rest of us are paying for it. The shift to a 'self-service' system means that much of the labour involved has been transferred to the user, known in economic terms as 'externality'. The casualisation of the workforce can be seen most succinctly in the rise of economic systems like Uber, wherein the costs and risks of doing business – start-up costs, real wages, road charges, wear and tear, oil prices, health insurance, pension, overtime, leave and so forth – are shouldered by the individual service provider. All of this will probably be superseded within a decade by the rise of self-driving cars, with little thought as to where this will leave the worker. What none of these systems take into account is a significant levy for carbon emissions or the infrastructural effects of a higher number of road users. The sharing economy furthermore forces individuals to leverage the dwindling and depreciating assets they own, as evinced by Uber, Airbnb and others. The 'flexibility' offered by these kinds of self-service income streams

becomes more and more gymnastic all the time, and ever more one-sided.

What did Samuel Parnell do with his time, when it became his own? He took up painting and exhibited his carpentry at trade fairs both in New Zealand and internationally. What people do with their increased time does not tend to be things that primarily support the economy. Things like: spending more time with their family. Going for walks in nature. Studying. Hobbies. In short, all of the things that we all do before work, after work, or on the weekend – if we have time. While it's true that increased leisure time feeds the economy, for example by dining out, going to the movies, shopping and so on, the 'convenience' offered by solutions to a lack of time are expensive and seductive – fast food, fast debt. The commodification of leisure, notably in the self-care industry, means that those short on time can turn to false alternatives to claw back the shortfall. A good consumer is a distracted consumer, and one that feeds the economy, frequently beyond their means.

IN 1890, WITH THE 'EMPIRE CITY' of Wellington about to mark its 50-year jubilee, workers began to look to the past as a way of envisioning their future, and an initiative to recognise the origins of trade unions was discussed through the letters in the *Evening Post*. A Demonstration Day parade was held on 28 October, with a horse-drawn carriage conveying a now-frail Samuel Parnell at the head of the march to Newtown Park. Asked to address the crowd, he said;

I feel happy to-day, because the seed sown so many years ago is bearing such abundant fruit and the chord struck at Petone fifty years ago is vibrating round the world, and I hope I shall live to see eight hours a day as a day's work universally acknowledged and become the law of every nation of the world.²²

Only a few weeks later, on 17 December, 1890, Samuel Duncan Parnell died of a short illness in his cottage on Cambridge Terrace.²³ Three-thousand people accompanied his coffin through the heavy rain to 'God's Acre' on Sydney Street, now known as the Bolton Street Cemetery. A memorial poem was published in the *Sydney Bulletin*, saying in part:

*His Home Rule was to rule the time
For us to work—and rest;
To give fair play in every clime
To all with toil oppressed,
To all the victims of the greed
Of those who buy and sell
The starving workers in their need—
True king was our Parnell!*²⁴

The Demonstration Day parade was held again in late October of 1891, and the next year, and the

year after that, until in 1899 it became an official public holiday by act of Parliament, and was named: Labour Day. Many a worker each year looks forward to Labour Day, not just because of the inevitable Briscoes sale (a convenient way to burn off all that disposable income), but because it permits a paid day off work, clawed back from the public or private purse, after a long cold winter without holidays since the Queen's Birthday in June. If there are other reasons, they are no longer at the forefront of the collective imagination.

I go to work every day on the same street where Samuel Parnell died, and I love my job – fondling ancient papers for eight hours a day. For how much longer will my job, or your job, continue to exist?

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