

'The blood-sucking aristocracy stood aghast'



Director of Education
Jamie Lumm

That was how John Ferral, a labor leader in Philadelphia, described the reaction of politicians and business owners to the 1835 general strike in that city, adding, adding, "They were terror-stricken and thought the day of retribution had come."

In the early 1800s, prior to electric lighting, workdays were often dictated by sunlight. During the late spring through early fall, they were 14 hours long, consisting of 12 hours of work and two one-hour unpaid breaks for breakfast and lunch, six days a week. Such was the lot of the Schuylkill coal-heavers, hired to unload coal from barges for a dollar a day, dawn to dark, six days a week.

The seeds for the Philadelphia strike were sown over the preceding 10 years in Boston, where the Carpenter's Union had unsuccessfully gone on strike in 1825, 1832 and 1835 for a 10-hour workday. In Philadelphia, workers were encouraged by an "Appeal to the Public" flyer circulated by the Boston carpenters in 1835, which read: "We have been too long subjected to the odious, cruel, unjust and tyrannical system which compels the operative mechanic to exhaust his physical and mental powers. We have rights and duties to perform as American citizens and members of society, which forbid us to dispose of more than ten hours for a day's work."

As Philadelphia's population grew, so did its appetite for anthracite: 6,500 tons of coal passed through the docks in 1825; nine years later, coal-heavers moved 227,000 tons. After several unsuccessful appeals to the coal yard owners for a shorter workday, the coal-heavers had enough. In the spring of 1835, as barges pregnant with coal lined up along the Schuylkill docks, the workers seized their moment to strike and all 300 coal-heavers walked off the job. Marching along the riverbank, the strikers threatened anyone who dared replace them. Mayor John Swift visited the strikers as many as four times and found the strikers "quiet but determined"—and absolutely unwilling to back down.

The "Working Men of Schuylkill," as they called themselves, had an evolving, two-pronged strategy. As they marched, especially at the start of their strike, their leader brandished a sword. When they spoke, their words were impassioned, yet reasonable. They said they wished "for nothing but peace, quietness and good order." But under the current system that required work from daylight to dark, the coal-heavers claimed to be worse off than galley slaves. In what became known as the "Six to Six" campaign, they asked not for more pay, only the guarantee of a 12-hour day—a 10-hour workday—with one-hour breaks for breakfast and lunch. The coal merchants mulled over the strikers' demand and presented their counter offer. The dawn-to-dark working hours would remain but laborers would be granted a third hour-long break.

As the strike continued into the second week, the coal-

heavers had the entire city's attention and an increasing amount of sympathy. The humane logic of the "Six to Six" campaign had found a broader following. The coal-heavers rejected their bosses' counter offer and on Saturday, June 6, marched from the Schuylkill into the very heart of the city—to Independence Square.

Led by fifes and drums, the coal-heavers chanted "From Six to Six," a slogan seen and heard in headlines, on broadsides in store windows, and scrawled in chalk on fences. As the procession closed in on Independence Square, workers from other trades dropped their tools to join in. Still others carried tools as they marched. In the shadow of the Statehouse, speeches called for a 10-hour day in all trades. Philadelphians heard a fiery reading of the "Ten-Hour Circular" from Boston, which argued that the current "tyrannical system leaves workers unable to do anything but to eat and sleep. We cannot, we will not, be mere slaves to inhuman, insatiable and un pitying avarice."

"The effect was electric," wrote John Ferral, and in the following days, coal-heavers were joined by bricklayers, plasterers, carpenters, smiths, sheet iron workers, lamp-makers, plumbers, painters, leather-dressers and city employees—20,000 workers from 20 trades. What started as a strike on the Schuylkill had grown into the first general strike in the city—the first of its kind in American history.

The hum of commerce was hushed; the coal yards were deserted and shut; and most businesses were at a complete standstill. "The militia looks on; the sheriff stands with folded arms," observed a visitor from France. "The times," according to editors at the *Philadelphia Gazette*, "are completely out of joint." The *Germantown Telegraph* patronizingly fretted for the well-being of the workers, writing that the brevity of only a 60-hour week would be harmful to workers, that all the extra time would be "applied to useless and unworthy purposes."

But the public had aligned with the strikers. By June 8, the *Inquirer* reported that "the opinion is almost universal that the term of ten hours per day during the summer season, is long enough for any industrious man, whether mechanic or otherwise..." Historians Scharf and Westcott later wrote of the "strong feeling that the demand was just...that the concession ought to be made to toiling men."

The city government caved first. On June 22, the city announced: "Hours of labour of the working men employed under the authority of the city corporation would be from 'six to six' during the summers season, allowing one hour for breakfast, and one for dinner." The factory owners of Philadelphia followed suit.

The success of the general strike electrified the labor movement, and a wave of strikes swept the East Coast and beyond. By the following year, the 10-hour day was the standard for skilled workers. In 1840, President Martin Van Buren instituted the 10-hour day for federal employees. The coal-heavers, and thousands of other advocates of "Six to Six," had won a quick and bloodless victory.