The eight-hour day movement had its origins in Great Britain at the start of the Industrial Revolution. In early factories, the workday ranged from 10 to 16 hours depending on available light. Robert Owen, a socialist reformer and founder of the utopian New Lanark community instituted a ten-hour workday in his factories. In 1817 he set the goal of an eight-hour workday and coined the slogan “Eight hours labor, Eight hours recreation, Eight hours rest.” In Great Britain a ten-hour workday maximum was established for women and children in 1847. French workers won a 12-hour workday in 1848. A shorter workday was a major demand of the early European trade unions.

During the late 19th and early 20th centuries American workers also fought for the eight-hour workday. In 1890, when the government first began tracking workers’ hours, the average workweek for full-time manufacturing employees was 100 hours. It was 102 hours for building tradesmen.

In 1866, the newly organized National Labor Union called on Congress to mandate an eight-hour workday. Unfortunately, it dissolved in 1873 after involvement in support of third-party political candidates. In the 1870s and 1880s the Knights of labor spearheaded the campaign for the eight-hour workday. In 1886, the American Federation of Labor officially declared that eight hours should constitute a legal day's work.

In 1886, the movement was set back by the Haymarket Riot in Chicago. Radicals were accused of setting off a bomb and attacking police at a May Day rally demanding the eight-hour day. Big business used the riot to charge that the eight-hour workday was a radical demand.

Peter McGuire of the Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners in New York City was an early campaigner for the eight-hour workday. McGuire wrote “We want an enactment by the workingmen themselves that on a given day, eight hours should constitute a day's work, and they ought to enforce it themselves.” As part of their campaign, American workers sang the “Eight-Hour Song.” “We mean to make things over; we’re tired of toil for naught; but bare enough to live on; never an hour for thought.
We want to feel the sunshine; we want to smell the flowers; we’re sure that God has willed it, and we mean to have eight hours. We’re summoning our forces from shipyard, shop and mill: Eight hours for work, eight hours for rest, eight hours for what we will.”

The Industrial Workers of the World led a campaign for the eight-hour workday among agricultural workers during World War I. An IWW organizer charged that in wheat-growing states the “eight-hour work day” prevailed because farm workers were forced to work “eight hours in the forenoon” and “eight hours in the afternoon.”

Despite these efforts it was not until 1916 that the Adamson Act created an eight-hour workday for railroad workers. Progress toward an eight-hour day was minimal until June 1933 when Congress enacted the National Industrial Recovery Act, an emergency measure taken by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt in response to the Great Depression. It provided for the establishment of maximum hours, minimum wages, and the right to collective bargaining. However it was declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court in 1935. It was replaced by the Wagner Act that assured workers the right to unionize and in 1938 the Fair Labor Standards Act finally established a legal workday as eight hours.

Questions

1. Why did workers in Europe and the United States demand an eight-hour workday?

2. Why was it so difficult to win the eight-hour workday in the United States?

3. In your opinion, should the government support workers as they try to improve their wages and working conditions? Explain.