

2. Investigator John Fitch Describes Steel's Long Shift, 1912

There is a very large class of workmen in the steel industry, many thousands of them throughout the country, who work consecutively either eighteen hours or twenty-four hours regularly every two weeks. This is so because the two shifts alternate working nights, the day shift of one week becoming the night shift of

From *Hours of Labor in the Steel Industry: A Communication to 15,000 Stockholders of the United States Steel Corporation* (Boston: privately printed, 1912), 6-8, 11-14.

the next and so on. When the plant works only six days, this can be accomplished without difficulty, but in a seven-day plant it is made possible only through the institution known as the "long turn." The night crew can change to the day shift by working through Saturday night until Sunday noon, an eighteen-hour period. The former day crew then relieves them and works until Monday morning, thus putting in another eighteen-hour period and getting itself on to the night shift for the week. The more general custom, however, is for the day shift to get in line for night work by working a full twenty-four-hour period, Sunday and Sunday night, finishing Monday morning. That puts the night crew on to Monday's day shift and allows them twenty-four hours off duty. Where the change is made every week, each crew works six days in one week and eight in the next.* In some plants the change is made only each two weeks. In that case, each man works the long turn once a month.

It is in the blast furnaces that the long turn comes with regularity. Federal census figures in 1910 show that there were 28,429 wage-earners employed in blast furnaces in the United States in 1909. The Federal Bureau of Labor investigators found that in a blast furnace plant nine-tenths of the employes [sic] work seven days a week. Nine-tenths of 28,429 is 25,586, which is the number of men in the blast furnaces who work either eighteen or twenty-four hours once or twice each month in 1909. But that isn't all. There were 647 open-hearth furnaces in 1909 with over 15,000 men tending them. Many of them work a part of every Sunday, and a considerable proportion are regular twelve-hour, seven-day workmen. And that isn't all. The number of mill wrights, engineers, yard laborers, furnace tenders, and guards in steel mills throughout the United States who have been regularly working twelve hours a day and seven days a week cannot be conjectured from data in my possession. It is a positive fact, however, that there is an enormous number of them. If we could ascertain the total number of seven-day workmen in 1910, we should find it to have been, I think, well over 50,000. A great majority of these worked twenty-four twice each month. . . .

Social Effects of a 12-Hour Day

But all these things are more or less beside the point. Supposing it were true that the twelve-hour work is easy and that there were no physical indications of overstrain. The big fact, the only really vital and significant fact, remains that a twelve-hour schedule denies a man all true leisure. It isn't leisure for a man to sit on a bench in a steel mill waiting for his turn any more than it is for [a] motorman at a street crossing, waiting for the signal to proceed, or a machinist at his lathe, between times of increasing the tension. I have yet to hear of a steel company official choosing to spend his rest periods sitting on a bench beside a blooming mill, or picking out a blast furnace yard as a place to sleep. On the other hand, I am not recommending automobiles or golf as the necessary forms of recreation for the

*There are fourteen working days in one week—unless you think that a man who works twelve hours each twenty-four is doing only a half day's work at a time.

steel workers, but I do insist that it is the workman's right to spend his leisure hours outside the mill yard, and that is something that the twelve-hour day denies him.

In October, 1910, I talked with an employe of the Cambria Steel Company, an independent concern, who had one week a ten-hour day and next week a fourteen-hour night, and who every other Saturday night went out and worked through until Sunday night, a twenty-four-hour shift. It took him an hour to get from his home to the mill and another hour to go back. So his actual time away from home was twelve hours on day shift and sixteen hours at night.

"It's pretty hard to get rested in summer when you're on the night turn," he told me, "It's too hot to sleep well daytimes. But in the winter you can drop down and go to sleep anywheres, you're so tired. The day shift isn't so bad—ten hours long—but after you've worked the Sunday long turn, you're used up pretty bad. It takes several days to get over it." . . .

In November, 1910, I was in Lackawanna, N.Y., the home of the Lackawanna Steel Company, which is also an independent concern. It was there that I met the man . . . who worked fifty-six hours out of a possible seventy-two, at one time last fall. I called upon him in his home.

"Of course," he told me, "such a schedule is pretty hard on a man; I'm dead for a week after working the long shift. And then, you know, if you're a church man, it makes it pretty hard to attend services; I can't ever go Sunday morning. And Sunday night it's hard to go because I go to work extra early Monday morning. I get out to prayer-meeting only every other week, when I am on the day shift, and it's absolutely impossible to have a full meeting of the church at any time because the men work on different shifts." . . .

It was this man's wife who gave me a little insight into the burden of the long shift upon the housekeeper. "It's just about as hard for me as it is for him," she said. "He has to be at work at seven o'clock in the morning, so I have to get up at half past five to get his breakfast; and then he doesn't get home until after six and so it's pretty late before I get the work done. And on Monday mornings, when he goes to work earlier, I get up at half past four. But the worst thing about it all is that it's terribly uncertain. Sometimes he works a long turn when I don't expect it and sometimes he doesn't when I thought he was going to. If we plan for an evening out together, like as not he will come home early for supper and tell me that he has got to go back to the mill and work all night. We don't ever plan things any more; we just take an evening's pleasure together whenever we happen to have it."

"It's a great strain on a man," another at Lackawanna told me. "I could stand eight hours all right, but the twelve-hour schedule is a terribly nerve racking thing. I am only twenty-seven years old and my nerves are getting pretty bad. It's simply a killing pace in the steel works, and no pleasure in it. Most of the skilled men that I know are just trying to save their money until they get a stake and go out into something else before the industry kills them."