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Karl Marx, [*The Influence of Machinery in the Hands of Capitalists*]¹²

Marx [...] said what strikes us most is that all the consequences which were expected as the inevitable result of machinery have been reversed. Instead of diminishing the hours of labour, the working day was prolonged to 16 and 18 hours. Formerly, the normal working day was 10 hours, during the last century the hours of labour were increased by law here as well as on the Continent. The whole of the trade legislation of the last century turns upon compelling the working people by law to work longer hours.

It was not until 1833 that the hours of labour for children were limited to 12. In consequence of overwork there was no time left whatever for mental culture. They also became physically deteriorated; contagious fevers broke out amongst them, and this induced a portion of the upper class to take the matter up. The first Sir Robert Peel was one of the foremost in calling attention to the crying evil, and Robert Owen was the first mill-owner who limited the hours of labour in his factory. The 10 hours' bill was the first law which limited the hours of labour to ten and a half per day for women and children, but it applied only to certain factories.

This was a step of progress, in so far as it afforded more leisure time to the work-people. With regard to production, the limitation has long since been overtaken. By improved machinery and increased intensity of the labour of individuals there is now more work done in the short day than formerly in the long day. People are again overworked, and it will soon become necessary to limit the working day to 8 hours.

¹² This text is a synopsis of a speech made by Marx (see note 1) on 28 July 1868 in a session of the GC. It is located in the GC, II: 231–3. A comprehensive discussion of this issue can be found in the thirteenth chapter of *Capital*, published less than a year earlier.

[...] Another consequence of the use of machinery was that it entirely changed the relations of the capital of the country. Formerly there were wealthy employers of labour, and poor labourers who worked with their own tools. They were to a certain extent free agents, who had it in their power effectually to resist their employers. For the modern factory operative, for the women and children, such freedom does not exist, they are slaves of capital.

There was a constant cry for some invention that might render the capitalist independent of the working man; the spinning machine and power-loom has rendered him independent, it has transferred the motive power of production into his hands. By this the power of the capitalist has been immensely increased. The factory lord has become a penal legislator within his own establishment, inflicting fines at will, frequently for his own aggrandisement. The feudal baron in his dealings with his serfs was bound by traditions and subject to certain definite rules; the factory lord is subject to no controlling agency of any kind.

One of the great results of machinery is organized labour which must bear fruit sooner or later. The influence of machinery upon those with whose labour it enters into competition is directly hostile. Many, hand-loom weavers were positively killed by the introduction of the power-loom both here and in India.

We are frequently told that the hardships resulting from machinery are only temporary, but the development of machinery is constant, and if it attracts and gives employment to large numbers at one time it constantly throws large numbers out of employment. There is a continual surplus of displaced population, not as the Malthusian asserts a surplus population in relation to the produce of the country, but a surplus whose labour has been superseded by more productive agencies.

Employed on land machinery produces a constantly increasing surplus population whose employment is not fluctuating. This surplus flocks to the towns and exercises a constant pressure, a wage lowering pressure upon the labour market. [...]