

“An eight-hour day for women workers”: negotiating working time in the Bulgarian textile industry between international labour politics and the shop floor, 1890s to 1930s

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ABSTRACT

The article investigates the issue of the eight-hour workday and its application from the early 1890s – when it first appeared on the Bulgarian organized labour movement’s agenda following the decisions of the Second International – to its adoption in national legislation as well as by the International Labour Organization in 1919, and finally, the enforcement of the eight-hour day in the Bulgarian textile industry between the two world wars. This article explores continuities and changes in the struggle to adopt and enforce the eight-hour day, conceptualizing them as parts of a single negotiated social process. The article employs a gendered and multi-scale approach to explore how working time limits were negotiated on and between the shop floor, the national political stage, and in international labour organizations by diverse social groups such as (un)organized (women) workers, trade unions and labour activists with various political affiliations, the state through its labour inspectorate, as well as the International Labour Organization. The article goes beyond the gender-neutral language of legal documents, instead arguing that the eight-hour day was conceptualized differently – with some variations depending on women’s life-course stage and social circumstances – and held particular importance for women workers.

KEYWORDS

Eight-hour day; protective legislation; gendered working time; labour inspection; Bulgarian textile industry; ILO

The regulation of hours of work, which is one of the most important points in labour legislation, is certainly of special interest in the case of women workers (ILO 1932, 94).

In the summer of 1931, textile workers in Gabrovo demanded that factories comply with the law on the eight-hour workday. Workers’ unrest prompted a government order for employers to shorten working hours in accordance with the law without cutting wages. As neither the workers’ action nor the state’s response produced the desired effect, a general strike of all textile workers in the city broke out in September 1931 (Vasilev et al. 1970, 247–250). In the autumn of 1931, after the strike’s failure, the Free General Federation of Trade Unions (Svoboden obsht rabotnicheski sindikalen suyuz,

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affiliated with the Social Democratic Party and the International Federation of Trade Unions, IFTU) examined the application of the eight-hour workday in the textile centre of Gabrovo (Krenev 1931). The results were published in the press organ of the social democratic party *Narod* in December 1931, and in February 1932, a summary of the inquiry's results was published in the International Labour Organization's (ILO) periodical *Industrial and Labour Information* (ILI). The investigation found out that "out of 16 textile factories employing 2,800 workers, only one, with 120 workers, was complying with the [Eight-Hour Day] Act. The other 15 were working 10 hours in the day. Out of twelve knitting factories with 700 workers, not one conformed to the Act, and hours of work in these factories were from ten to twelve in the day" (ILI 1932, 104–105). The survey resulted in a follow-up inquiry by social democratic MPs in the National Assembly and in the press, which requested the government's accountability regarding the systemic violation of the eight-hour day in Gabrovo (ILI 1932, 104–105). The issue was also raised during the 1932 International Labour Conference, where the Bulgarian government reported the measures taken to sanction enterprises at fault and communicated steps towards regulatory changes that would give the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Labour (MCIL) the power to close enterprises that violated labour laws (ILC 1932, 677–678).

As the above-mentioned case illustrates, the issue of the eight-hour day was far from resolved even with its adoption in national and international legislation in 1919. On the contrary, it clearly continued to be of utmost importance to workers, labour activists, the state, and the ILO; moreover, actions pertaining to the issue in these dramatically different arenas were, nevertheless, intrinsically linked. In order to address the issue of the eight-hour day in a comprehensive and integrative manner, this article adopts several methodological and conceptual premises. First, I argue that it is necessary to go beyond the notion of labour laws as normative texts and to conceive of the adoption and enforcement of the labour laws as a single negotiated social process. The article's findings confirm that in the Bulgarian case, the struggle for the eight-hour day continued well beyond its formal adoption in national legislation and lasted throughout the interwar period. Indeed, I show that there was a pronounced continuity between the pre- and post-World War One periods in the case of Bulgaria in terms of the relevance of the issue of the eight-hour day. At the same time, the codification of the norm opened new paths for individual and collective action, particularly by the end of the period, which was marked by the strengthened position of the labour inspectorate and the ILO's increased oversight of the application of the conventions. Thus, the article goes beyond existing scholarship that has explored the labour movement's repertoires of action preceding the adoption of the eight-hour day (Cross 1984, 1985; Mirola 2015), as well as those works that discuss the specific conjunctures at the end of World War One that enabled the passage of international and national regulations (Cross 1985, Stegmann 2020; Rasmussen and Knutsen 2022), offering a study of the law's application, which has been severely under-researched.

Second, the article adopts a multi-scale approach as well as an inclusive understanding of actors and repertoires of action to explore how working time limits were negotiated on and between the shop floor, the national political stage, and international organizations. This article addresses the layered forms of governance produced by the intertwined and entangled interactions between diverse stakeholders: workers, employers, labour experts and/or activists, the state – through its labour inspections, and the ILO. It investigates

a large variety of repertoires, starting with the most militant and highly visible form of labour activism, namely strikes. Strikes have been one of the best-researched forms of labour activism in Bulgaria, and they held a particularly privileged place in scholarship produced during the state-socialist period (Hadzhinikolov et al. 1960; Vasilev et al. 1970). Since labour history has not attracted much scholarly interest since the 1980s, the state-of-the-art is still biased towards militant and communist-led forms of labour activism. The actions of other political groups such as the social democrats or centre-right parties were often misrepresented and/or marginalized, while histories focused on the role of the state or the ILO are still largely unwritten.

Third, the article employs a gender-sensitive perspective in order to provide a glimpse into the specific meanings universal labour standards such as the eight-hour day held for women workers. Using a variety of sources – including leaflets, books, press articles, and archival documents produced by trade unions, left-wing political parties, and social reformers with various ideological leanings; labour inspections' reports; and ILO archival sources – I argue that although the sources often use gender-neutral, formal language, the evidence suggests that the eight-hour day was conceptualized differently and held particular importance when it was linked to women workers. Furthermore, the application of the eight-hour day in the Bulgarian textile industry met with specific problems directly related to the high percentage of women and underage workers employed in it.

In the existing scholarship, the eight-hour day is usually framed as a universal standard that applied equally to men and women, and it is often equated with workers' "quest for leisure" (Cross 1984, 1985; Mirola 2015, 117–154). As such, scholarship has tended to marginalize the specific implications the eight-hour day held for women workers, e.g. within the context of women's double and triple burden of housework and care responsibilities (for an exception, see [Boris 2021]). In contrast, works concerned with earlier periods and the ten-hour movement highlight to a much greater extent the tight connection between campaigns for shorter working hours and shifting concepts of working-class family, child-rearing, and domesticity (Canning 1996; Mirola 2015, 44–45; Creighton 2021). While gendered working time is a central topic in feminist labour history, this body of scholarship tends to focus on gender-specific protective legislation such as the prohibition of night work for women and the contested debates between different currents of the women's movement it provoked (Boris 2019; Natchkova and Schoeni 2008; van Goethem 2011; Zimmermann 2017) rather than on gender-neutral labour standards. Thus, this article makes a significant contribution to this scholarship through its inclusive, gendered, and multi-scale analysis of the struggle to implement a "universal" labour standard.

Bulgarian textile labour between the 1890s and the late 1930s

Several characteristics of the Bulgarian textile industry make it a suitable case study for an exploration not only of the entangled and multi-scale nature of the struggles to adopt and enforce the eight-hour day in Bulgaria but also its gendered meanings and particular importance for women workers. The first – and rather obvious – characteristic is its overwhelmingly female work force. A number of works confirm the large number of (predominantly home-based) women textile workers in the second half of the nineteenth century (Ivanov 2021, 96; Ianeva 2016). In the 1880s and 1890s, the Bulgarian textile

industry underwent a structural change with the percentage of home-based work – which was associated with extremely long working hours (often “from dark to dark”) and low piece-rate remunerations – falling from above 50 percent to under 10 percent in the decade before World War One. This process ran parallel to women’s revolts against mechanization, high unemployment among previously employed home-based workers, and the decrease in the overall number of textile workers: in 1912, the Bulgarian textile industry employed only 58 percent of the number of workers employed in the industry in the early 1870s (Bradinska 1968; Ivanov 2021, 96).

For earlier periods, the exact numbers and gender composition of the workforce are difficult to ascertain, but in the beginning of twentieth century, activists and experts consistently claimed that women and underage workers made up approximately 80 percent of the textile industry workforce. In 1929, there were 16,368 textile factory workers (66.8 percent women, and 33.2 percent men), whereas in 1939, the number had increased to 29,772 (71.1 percent women, and 28.9 percent men) (Vasilev et al. 1970, 356–357). Furthermore, the textile industry employed a large number of underage workers: in 1927, 40 percent of workers were under eighteen years old. Women were disproportionately represented, constituting 91.9 percent of all underage workers (Rafailović 2018, 265).

The co-constituent factors of gender, age, and skill resulted in segregated labour markets that clustered women and underage workers in lower-paid positions such as spinners, contributing to a serious (but decreasing over time) gender- and age-based pay gap. Women industrial workers received 43 percent of men’s wages in 1909; 66 percent in 1922; and 75 percent in 1939. The wage gap between underage and adult workers also decreased, but to a much lesser extent when compared to the gender wage gap. In 1909, underage workers received 42 percent of an adult wage; 47 percent in 1927; and 56 percent in 1941 (Berov 1968, 34).

The textile industry also enjoyed special status on the international level. In connection to the adoption of the C047 Forty-Hour Week Convention (1935), the head of the International Federation of Textile Workers claimed that it was one of the industries most suitable for reducing working hours through international standards due to the high percent of women and children, the high degree of mechanization, and intense international competition (Shaw 1935).

Struggles over the eight-hour day and gendered working time (1890s to 1910s)

Gender and the eight-hour day campaigns (1890s–1910s)

The struggle for shorter working hours and the implementation of the eight-hour day emerged in the early 1890s as central aims of the organized labour movement in Bulgaria following decisions of the Second International, which had singled out the eight-hour day as a central issue during its inaugural Paris Congress in 1889 (Taber 2021). Since the early 1890s, in compliance with the decisions of the Second International, the demand for the eight-hour day took centre stage at May Day demonstrations in Bulgaria (Anev et al. 1976, 23, 34–35). The travel and translation of repertoires and agendas is evident in articles in favour of the eight-hour day published in the Bulgarian trade-union and left-wing press, which outlined the advantages of this policy in terms of society (the reduction of

unemployment, increasing consumption, limiting child labour), class (strengthening labour's bargaining power vis-à-vis employers, providing additional time for organizing and trade union work), and the individual (the improvement of workers' physical and mental well-being through leisure, time for intellectual development, and civic engagement) (Vesti 1900).

Analysing discourse on the eight-hour day in fin-de-siecle Europe from a gendered perspective, it is evident that arguments in favour of its implementation, particularly those highlighting the benefits of shorter working hours for the individual worker mentioned above, were constructed by envisioning a gender-neutral, yet ontologically male working class. Similar to debates that took place in other countries and in international settings (Cross 1984, 265; Boris 2021, 94–95), when the debate in Bulgaria centred on women workers, it shifted from economic, social, and personal benefits to women's family responsibilities and the gendered division of household work. In Bulgarian socialist publications from the early 1910s, arguments were made that long working hours put a particular strain on women workers because they were expected to perform the lion's share of domestic and care work, in addition to the time they spent in gainful employment:

The eight-hour day is the greatest boon for women workers. Working women are factory but also household slaves, whose condition is worse than that of the slaves of old. After finishing an eleven-hour day in the factory, another three to five hours of housework awaits them. They have to cook, wash, iron, and mend. But for lack of time and strength, this work is either not done or poorly done and, thus, family life suffers.

We want the eight-hour day for the uplift of family life, and, above all, we want it for women workers (8-chasov raboten den 1911, 22–23).

The discourse on the eight-hour day in the Bulgarian left-wing press at the turn of the century was tightly intertwined with socialist views (because the socialists were the only political group promoting the issue at the time) for family relations, domesticity, and children's rights. Shortening working hours was promoted as a measure that supported the family and helped refute bourgeois critics that claimed that socialism sought the destruction of the family unit. The eight-hour workday was presented not only as a solution to the tensions between women's wage work and domestic labour but also as a measure to support and strengthen the working-class family, with its widespread dual-earner model. Moreover, the introduction of the eight-hour day was expected to curb, if not eliminate, child labour and mitigate its detrimental effects on children's physical and intellectual development (Kodzeikov and Lambrev 1953, 50).

Gender- and age-specific labour protection: the 1905 Law on Women's and Children's Labour in Industrial Enterprises and its application

Parallel to the campaign for the eight-hour day as a universal standard, separate but connected campaigns were launched for gender- and age-differentiated standards. In its 1892 programme, the Bulgarian Workers' Social Democratic Party (Bulgarska rabotnicheska sotsial-demokraticheska partiya, BRSDP) set the eight-hour day as the desirable working time only for women and girls above sixteen years, as well as for boys between the ages of fourteen and twenty. While the BRSDP reverted back to its earlier

goal of a universal eight-hour workday at the next 1893 congress, the idea of gender- and age-specific standards persisted (Yochev 2004). Concurrent visions of universal standards *and* special protections for women workers was by no means a distinctive characteristic of Bulgarian labour politics, and eventually the idea of special protective legislation prevailed, as was the case in many other countries and internationally (Wikander, Kessler-Harris, and Lewis 1995). Thus, when in 1905 the first Bulgarian labour law – The Law on the Protection of Women and Children’s Labour in Industrial Enterprises – was passed, it set limits on working time for industrial employment according to gender and age: ten hours per day for women above the age of sixteen, eight hours for children between the ages of twelve to fifteen, and six hours for children aged ten to twelve (Zlatinchev 1945, 6–7).

The 1905 law was passed by the centre-right Popular Liberal Party (Narodno-liberalna partiya), a rather surprising feat given that labour legislation did not feature in its programme or political goals beforehand (Yochev 2004, 93). Regarding the motivations behind the law, the need for special gender- and age-specific legislation was rationalized with an underlying understanding that gainful employment and breadwinning ideally should be preserved for “strong male working hands.” But, lawmakers claimed, because technical progress made physical strength less relevant, employers increasingly substituted men with cheaper women and children’s labour. Consequently, the law aimed to protect women, the family, and society from “moral ruin,” which inevitably followed the “unrestricted and limitless use of the labour of women – the mothers of future generations.” Thus, the path to gender- and age-specific labour protections in the early 1900s was determined by essentialist visions of womanhood and manhood and the desire to preserve traditional family models and protect the male breadwinner wage from the competition posed by cheaper women’s and children’s labour (Stenografski dnevnik 1905, 1997).

From the very beginning, the 1905 law proved difficult to enforce. Control over the law’s application was granted to the newly established labour inspectorate, which, according to Article 16 of the 1905 law, would appoint “the necessary number” of inspectors. In 1907, a Law on the Labour Inspection was passed, but due to insufficient funding, the new labour inspections were not fully functional until 1915. In the interim period, control over labour law was assigned to “labour committees,” collective bodies that included a number of civil servants, as well as a workers’ representative with a three-year mandate. All committee members had full rights as labour inspectors to ascertain labour law violations and impose sanctions. In 1915, the figure of the workers’ representative ceased to exist as the number of salaried professional labour inspectors (in this period, they were exclusively men) was deemed sufficient (Filipov 1966a, 1966b; Zlatinchev 1961, 63). Yet, by their own admission, labour inspectors were unable to ensure sufficient compliance with the existing labour laws. According to a report of chief labour inspector Kutinchev, of the 1,159 factories he inspected between 1910 and 1914, 93.5 percent violated working time limits for women and children, and 91.8 percent failed to provide the minimum amount of mid-work breaks. Moreover, the fact that the law was gender- and age-specific turned out to be another obstacle for its application as employers claimed that interrelated production processes made differentiating women’s and children’s working time practically impossible without stopping production altogether (Kutinchev 1915).

Overwork as a gender-specific problem: labour militancy, expertise, and civil service as forms of activism

Strikes and other militant forms of labour protests were an indispensable part of efforts to lower working hours in the Bulgarian textile industry in the early twentieth century. The issue of shorter working hours was routinely pressed during textile strikes, but concrete demands varied depending on the context: in 1902, workers in the Knyaz Boris textile factory in Varna demanded a ten-hour day during which machines would be cleaned; in 1906, silk workers in Asenovgrad struck for an eight-hour day; and in 1904, textile workers in Sliven demanded a twenty-four-hour break during the work week and the elimination of unpaid overtime work. In some cases, as in the 1902 Knyaz Boris strike, the issue of working hours was linked to wage issues such as the replacement of piece-rate remuneration with a set daily wage (Hadzhinikolov et al. 1960, 99; Kodzeikov and Lambrev 1954, 458; Hristov, Karutsin, and Tsanev 1955, 186–192).

Coordinated left-wing and trade union petitions calling for the adoption of the eight-hour day as part of a broader labour programme were also frequently used by the labour movement as an organizing tactic. Thus, in 1895, a petition by workers from Sofia (later joined by other local workers' organizations) was submitted to the National Assembly communicating a broad labour protection agenda, with the eight-hour day listed as the first demand (Sharova 1956, 9–10). The early 1910s witnessed a notable upsurge in socialist and trade union organizing in favour of the eight-hour day as part of a wider labour agenda. In 1910, the radical wing of the socialist movement organized a series of demonstrations in which more than 110,000 workers took part. Some of these actions – such as the May Day demonstration in Stara Zagora – specifically demanded an eight-hour day, whereas others demanded stricter enforcement of existing labour laws, additional protective legislation, and the improvement of hygiene and safety standards (Andonov 1967, 27). In 1911–1912, labour unions associated both with the social democrats and the communist wing of the labour movement organized a series of local workers' assemblies, each of which produced a list of demands for legislative changes addressed to the National Assembly. While some of the petitions and resolutions were quite general, others – like that of the Haskovo workers from 16 (29) October 1911 – contained a detailed and fairly sophisticated agenda: an eight-hour day, a minimum wage, labour inspectors elected by the workers, comprehensive social security and health insurance, as well as the prohibition of indirect taxation on “basic necessities” (Protest telegrams 1911, esp. 204).

Medical professionals also brought attention to the problem of overwork and the health-related problems it posed to textile workers. In a detailed survey of the industry made shortly after the passage of the 1905 law, Petur Tsonchev, a long-time factory physician in the textile centre of Gabrovo, estimated that people worked a daily average of around fourteen hours on the day shift and nine hours during night shifts. However, these estimates were, as Tsonchev highlighted, only the length of the factory workday, whereas “the actual workday of our workers is much greater (lengthier), because of their own work, done alongside factory labour, especially for women-workers.” Tsonchev claimed that the workday of an average woman worker could reach a total of seventeen to eighteen hours when wage and non-wage labour was combined, which posed serious health risks to women workers. “Their own work,”

Tsonchev explained, varied depending on women's particular social circumstances and life-course stage: unmarried girls making their trousseau, married women performing domestic and care work, and women who were the sole or primary family breadwinner supplementing their low factory wages with additional paid work such as lace making, knitting, or needlework. He also claimed that women's "extraordinarily strenuous workload, which sharply separates them from men workers" could not be solely attributed to material need but was also shaped by gender-specific cultural patterns of overwork which encouraged women to eschew rest and leisure to the point of "disregard for ... their own physical health" (Tsonchev [1929] 1996, 548–550). Furthermore, in both left-wing and right-wing discourse, medical problems associated with long working hours and poor labour conditions were linked to a gendered vision of the nation-building project: overwork would make it impossible for women and girls to bear healthy children, and young boys would be unfit for military service, thus "threatening the future of the nation" (Kodzeikov and Lambrev 1953, 321–326).

Struggles over the eight-hour day in Bulgaria between the 1890s and 1910s took place during shop floor protests, local actions, and on the national political stage. Pressure was exerted primarily by left-wing parties, trade unions, and unorganized workers through strikes, demonstrations, printed publications, and coordinated campaigns, but with limited success. While they managed to give the issue some visibility, the adoption of an eight-hour workday remained a distant, almost utopian dream in the pre-World War One period.

At the same time, the increasing (but still modest) number of women workers turned the attention of medical professionals, labour activists, and politicians across the political spectrum to the gendered implications of overwork. While experts, trade unionists, and politicians alike accepted that the negative consequences of long working hours affected women disproportionately due to the additional paid and unpaid labour women performed, solutions to the health- and social- problems overwork caused varied. Ultimately, gender- and age-specific labour protections began to enjoy wider social support, including by right-wing political parties in the years preceding the outbreak of the Great War. The establishment of the labour inspection service (1907), despite its somewhat slow and challenging launch, was another important milestone, as the institution gradually became a crucial stakeholder in the process of negotiating limits on labour hours in Bulgarian industry.

1919: The eight-hour day is adopted in national and international labour law

At the end of World War One – during the Paris Peace Conference and the Washington Labour Conference – the issue of the eight-hour day resurfaced with unprecedented vigour. The death, deprivation, destruction, and disillusionment caused by the war was followed by revolutions, protests, and hunger riots in its aftermath. The shock of the Bolshevik revolution, revolutionary upheavals in a number of European countries, and the general social radicalization in Europe spurred important concessions in social policy development (Rasmussen and Knutsen 2022). Setting a global standard for maximum working hours per day and per week began to be considered an indispensable part of post-war efforts to forge a sustainable peace based on social justice (Hutchison and McLennan 2021). Consequently, the ten-hour workday, previously entertained as an

international labour standard, was discarded in favour of the eight-hour workday and the forty-eight-hour work week in the ILO's landmark Convention no. 1—Hours of Work (Industry) in 1919. The resulting changes in the regulation of work hours worldwide were, in the words of the ILO's first director Albert Tomas, "of a truly revolutionary character:" during the years 1918–1919, the eight-hour day had, either through collective agreement or by law, become a reality in the majority of industrial countries (Report of the Director 1921, 81–82).

Taking part in the Commission on International Labour Legislation during the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, women activists such as French labour feminists Jeanne Bouvier, Gabrielle Bouillot, and Gabrielle Duchêne spoke passionately in favour of shorter working hours for men and women, social wages for pregnant and nursing women, and a minimum wage (Cobble 2018). During the 1919 International Labour Conference, British trade unionist Mary MacArthur argued that unlike men, whose right to leisure was insured by the introduction of the eight-hour day, women workers required further protections because of their reproductive labour at home. She claimed, "When the man comes home at night his day's work is done, he can sit down by the fire and read his newspaper, or dig in his garden . . . but a woman's work is never done, and when she leaves the factory she usually goes home to begin a new day's work at home" (Boris 2021, 94–95).

In Bulgaria, due to its status as a defeated state in World War One, international developments, especially the Paris Peace Conference (1919–1920), were closely followed, including its proceedings regarding labour. The country's decision to pre-emptively initiate preparations for the adoption of the eight-hour day was undoubtedly influenced by international developments, i.e. the adoption of the eight-hour workday by the newly founded ILO. The ratification of nearly all ILO conventions continued throughout the 1920s and early 1930s, and this was part of a consistent Bulgarian foreign policy that was "dominated by the spirit of an active revisionism" and "done exclusively for the purpose of manifesting outwardly to the victors the desire for a loyal co-operation with the ILO" (Oshanov 1943, 287).

Internal social developments that contributed to the adoption of the standard of the eight-hour day in national legislation were largely synchronous and intertwined with those leading to its establishment as an international labour standard. During the last years of the war, there were women-led hunger riots in a number of towns across the country. Women's riots were followed by a 1918 soldiers uprising that was suppressed only with considerable violence. The old political parties that led the country into the Balkan wars (1912–1913) and World War One were losing popular support at the expense of various left-wing movements. Seeking a broad political consensus in a period of national crisis, in 1918, Prime Minister Teodor Teodorov offered the majority of ministerial posts to agrarians (three out of eight ministries) and social democrats (two ministries, including MCIL, which was headed by the leader of the social democrats and a long-time activist for the introduction of the eight-hour workday, Yanko Sakuzov).

The labour movement also experienced a marked upsurge in support: in 1919, there were 135 strikes throughout the country, in which 76,310 workers took part, including 16,682 women workers. The textile sector was among the most militant segments of the economy, boasting at least eleven successful strikes in several different cities (Karlovo, Troyan, Gabrovo, Kotel, Samokov, Kazanluk, Varna, Pazardzhik) that had broken out between March and June 1919. Immediately introducing the eight-hour workday featured

prominently in (textile) workers' demands, alongside wage increases, the decent treatment of workers by foremen and management, and union recognition (Hadzhinikolov et al. 1960, 197).

In this context, the newly established Supreme Labour Council (*Vurhoven suvet na truda*) – a consultative body composed of representatives of the state, employers' organizations, trade unions, and renown experts – convened its first session on 10 June 1919; the eight-hour day was the first item on the agenda. The arguments made in favour of the eight-hour workday centred primarily on workers' health, the need for social peace and healing, as well as the general "spirit of the time." While these accounts were gender-neutral and presumably referred to the working-class as a whole, a careful reading of the sources in connection with the above-mentioned discussions on overwork reveal some gender-specific dimensions. Several experts, including the aforementioned Petur Tsonchev, argued in favour of the new labour standard (eight or nine hours), linking long working hours with health-related problems. However, Tsonchev also expressed doubts about whether the eight-hour day bill would actually shorten overall working hours as a decrease in factory working hours might be compensated with an increased level of "side work." As was previously discussed, he associated both poor health due to excessive overwork and the tendency to perform "their own work" in addition to factory labour almost exclusively with women workers (*Vurhoven suvet* 1919, 20–23; Tsonchev [1929] 1996, 548–550).

Reservations aside, the eight-hour day did not meet with serious opposition and was quickly approved by the Supreme Labour Council. It was subsequently confirmed by Decree No. 24 issued on 24 June 1919. Given the radicalism of the eight-hour day standard, the lack of serious opposition during this debate tells us a great deal about the historical moment that permitted its adoption. It is even more striking when we take into account that it was only two years before, in 1917, that the country had taken the ground-breaking step to limit adult men's working hours, capping them at eleven hours per day (Yanulov 1941, 232).

Employers' organizations – rather predictably – were strongly opposed to the adoption of the 1919 decree, but they failed to mount a substantial challenge during the preliminary tri-partite discussions. In defense of their position, they pointed out the swiftness of the legislative process as well as the government's biased selection of members of the Supreme Labour Council, the majority of whom were known for their socialist leanings and support for the eight-hour day. Industrialist organizations were apportioned only three out of twenty-one representatives (and as one 1920 booklet attacking the eight-hour day claimed, one of employers' representatives was a social democrat) (Klutsohorski 1920). However, just a few weeks after the 1919 decree was issued, employers' organizations vigorously protested the introduction of the eight-hour day, addressing the government as well as the general public in their calls for the revision of the decree, the postponement of its implementation, and/or the narrowing of its scope. They disputed the inevitability of its introduction and pressed the government to take advantage of clauses allowing for flexibility, exemptions, and derogations against the policy contained in both the peace treaty and the Washington Convention.

Across their arguments against the eight-hour day – which included the need for post-war reconstruction, the low labour productivity that characterized the Bulgarian industrial sector, the cultural specificity of Bulgaria's predominantly agrarian society, and intense

international competition – a distinct anti-colonial discourse can be detected. The main argument against the introduction of the eight-hour day was rooted in a developmentalist discourse and stressed Bulgaria's economic backwardness in comparison to the West. Bulgarian industry, employers' organizations claimed, especially in internationally competitive branches such as the textile sector, required protectionist laws and special exemptions from international labour standards similar to those offered to East Asian countries at the time. From the industrialists' perspective, the eight-hour day was a way to facilitate Western economic expansion by destroying competition in underdeveloped East European countries that used longer working hours to compensate for the low degree of mechanization and consequent low labour productivity (Narodno stopanstvo 1919, 1–4; Klutsohorski 1920; Otchet [1922]).

Employers' opposition notwithstanding, the Bulgarian government moved forward with the cap on work hours and passed a law accepting the decisions of the Washington conference in November 1921. The formal ratification of Convention no. 1 was filed with the ILO in February 1922, but Bulgaria had until 1 July 1924 to make the necessary amendments to the country's existing labour laws (Sbornik 1939).

Enforcing the eight-hour day: an inclusive, multi-scale approach to labour struggles

Negotiating working time on the shop floor: strikes, petitions, complaints

From the very beginning, the eight-hour day was a legal achievement under constant threat of remaining "just a written [text], rolling in dust around the ministry" (Bakalov 1928, 45–47). The issue of the (non-)application of the eight-hour day featured prominently in the workers' agenda during the strike wave of the immediate post-war years. In July 1919, just weeks after the decree on the eight-hour day was issued, several strikes broke out in the textile industry among workers demanding the decree's immediate application. In 1920, successful general strikes broke out in two of the major centres of the textile industry – Sliven and Gabrovo – against attempts to reintroduce the ten-hour workday (Hadzhinikolov et al. 1960, 216, 260; Vasilev et al. 1970, 148–155). Yet, crisis in the industry and increased unemployment weakened workers' bargaining position in 1921, and after an unsuccessful thirty-five-day strike, the ten-hour day was reintroduced in Sliven and, later on, also in Gabrovo (Vasilev et al. 1970, 148–155).

Despite frequent complaints about the ubiquity of violations of the law, its adoption had a significant impact on industrial working hours in Bulgaria in the early 1920s. While data on real working hours is extremely scarce, the available information confirms a significant drop after the adoption the eight-hour day. In the decade preceding World War One, the duration of the workday in the Bulgarian industrial sector averaged around 10.7 hours, whereas in 1922, it fell to 8.5 hours (Berov 1968, 74).

In the late 1920s and early 1930s, when the next wave of labour militancy hit the Bulgarian textile industry, the eight-hour day was again a central demand on the textile workers' agenda. This time, the issue of working time was tightly linked to the consequences of the global economic crisis, mass unemployment, and rationalization processes, which generated a wave of labour unrest among textile workers across the world (Silver 2003, 89). In Bulgaria, the drive towards rationalization coincided with the

start of the worldwide economic depression. In addition to mechanization (which was not always a feasible solution due to the lack of available investment capital), cutting production costs was achieved through the mandatory extension of labour hours or the introduction of new methods of labour organization (such as piece-work payments and minimum daily productions quotas) that achieved the same effect but did not openly violate working time regulations. Thus, in 1930, employers attempted to increase the working hours in the Tundzha textile factory in Yambol to nine hours, but under the threat of a strike, they abandoned this plan and retained the eight-hour workday (Vasilev et al. 1970, 255). The next year, the factory management altered its strategy to decrease production costs: instead of openly increasing working hours, they installed new measurement devices on each working station and introduced a new wage system that was based on workers' productivity. The factory's predominantly female workforce strongly opposed the new management techniques, and a strike broke out on 29 June 1931 (Vasilev 1981). Similar practices were introduced in the textile factories of Sliven, where in order to receive their full wage, workers were required to reach a minimum daily quota, e.g. twelve metres of woven cloth. Workers protested, pointing out that receiving a higher wage (40 to 50 leva) necessitated approximately thirteen to fourteen hours of work. Consequently, they threatened to strike if this system, which forced them to choose between a significant wage cut or a significant increase in working hours went into force (Chervendineva 1964; Eho 1930a).

Throughout the interwar period, the eight-hour workday was featuring prominently in the radical Left's actions targeting women workers. In a 1922 campaign to unionize women workers initiated by the communist-affiliated General Trade Union Federation (*Obsht rabotnicheski sindikalen suyuz*), the eight-hour day was listed as a "women-specific" demand alongside equal pay for equal work, maternity protections, and socialized childcare (Ravestvo 1922). The application of the eight-hour day (together with the six-hour day for underage workers and a ban on women's night work) remained at the centre of the women-related agenda of the communist movement in the 1930s, which was popularized through the communist press, leaflets, and events organized for 8th March (International Women's Day) (Apel 1930).

Complaints and petitions were other popular tactics in textile workers' repertoire of actions that were used to negotiate for shorter working hours. In 1930, five workers (whose names were unfortunately not recorded) complained to the local labour inspection office about the ten-hour day in the textile factory of Nedev-Saruivanov in Sliven, and they requested state intervention to ensure the application of the eight-hour day. The labour inspector investigated the case but also shared the names of the workers with the factory management, which resulted in their dismissal. Following the inspectors' visit, however, the workday was shortened to eight hours (Eho 1930b).

Sending complaints and petitions to the labour inspectorate, the National Assembly, and other government institutions, as well as to the press became a particularly popular form of labour protest in the mid- to late 1930s. This was due to a regime change following the 1934 coup d'état as well as the 1936 Law-Ordinance on Collective Agreements and the Settling of Labour Conflicts, which made strikes illegal. The petition of the Sofia textile workers addressed to the minister of commerce, industry, and labour and to the head of the Labour Department in the same ministry is particularly insightful. The petition emerged out of a general meeting of the city's textile workers that was held

in the cultural centre (*chitalishte*) of a working-class neighbourhood on 2 December 1935. The petition, which was addressed to the government, detailed the pressing problems of textile workers and their demands. It enumerated a long list of problems: the use of coercion and deception to extort unpaid overtime work from employees, the violation of the eight-hour day, the violation of the six-hour night-work limit, the violation of the half-hour mid-day break, employers' disregard for the special legal protections afforded to underage workers, pregnant women, and working mothers, unhygienic and unsafe working conditions, and widespread workplace violence. The petition stressed the ubiquity of labour law violations, claiming that the eight-hour day was exceeded in every factory in the city, but nowhere was coerced overwork as big a problem as in cases where workers lived in factory housing. To solve these problems, women workers demanded a state inspection of all the textile factories in the city. The solution, workers claimed, was increased control over the application of labour laws, which would greatly benefit from workers' participation in labour inspectors' investigations (Karutsin and Tsanev 1954, 294–297). Workers' participation in factory inspections, a practice that existed in the pre-World War One period, continued to be a popular demand throughout the interwar period as it was adopted by vastly different groups within the labour movement, from communists to the state-backed corporatist Bulgarian Labour Union (Bulgarski rabotnicheski suyuz).

Working hours and labour conditions in the textile industry as a national political issue

In 1928–1929, a major scandal regarding the labour conditions in the “Tekstil” factory unfolded, prompted by the high number young women workers in the factory who died of tuberculosis. The “Tekstil” factory, which was located in Varna, employed 1,073 workers in 1928, the majority of whom were young peasant girls living on the factory's premises (Nikolov and Verbev 1928). In May, and again in September 1928, social democratic MPs Iliya Yanulov and Petur Zlatev brought a series of allegations regarding working conditions in the factory to the floor of the National Assembly: the violation of the eight-hour workday and the prohibition of night work for women, unhygienic working conditions, the employment of workers below the minimum age, and the violation of workers' social security rights. Yanulov and Zlatev placed the blame for the lamentable situation of the young girls entirely on the state, which prided itself on its progressive labour laws but lacked the capacity to enforce them: “... In Geneva, our country presents itself as a paradise of social legislation, while here the [lack of] care for the workers and the disregard for the law are as if they belong to the barbaric mores of centuries ago. Such bigotry must be brought to an end as soon as possible” (Dimitrova 2018, 672; Yanulov 1928). The background of the factory's workforce – their female gender, their youth (they were fourteen to twenty years old according to the labour inspection report, but critics claimed their ages were, in fact, much lower: eleven to seventeen years old), and their status as migrants from (relatively) distant rural areas – made these workers particularly vulnerable to violations of their labour rights. Extremely restrictive living arrangements also curbed workers' ability to organize and protest because they were not allowed to leave the factory premises, meet people, or have access to books and newspapers (Rabotnichka 1929; Revolutionäre Arbeiterin 1929). Such a factory regime was made socially acceptable by traditional cultural norms that placed a premium on girls' “virtue,”

which was a pre-requisite for employment in the factory and was confirmed through a virginity test upon arrival (Nikolov and Verbev 1928, 49). Unsurprisingly, the first item on the women workers' list of demands was "freedom and the abolition of the monstrous regime," directly followed by a demand to observe the eight-hour workday (Rabotnichka 1929). These accusations prompted a labour inspection, which was personally supervised by the head of the Labour Department of the MCIL Dimitur Nikolov. The report was extremely favourable to the factory management and promptly provoked allegations of corruption from the left-wing press (Nikolov 1932).

The labour inspection continued to be closed to women inspectors in the post-World War One era, despite art. 427 of the 1919 Neilly-sur-Seine Peace Treaty, which stipulated that Bulgaria "should make provision for a system of inspection in which women should take part, in order to ensure the enforcement of the laws and regulations." It was only in 1929, following a recommendation by the ILO, that Bulgaria reported compliance with this condition (Kodzabasheva 1930, 16). The appointment of the first women inspectors was followed by further reforms in the early 1930s, such as widening the institutional network of inspectors and entrusting labour inspections with additional responsibilities related to workers' safety and job placement. Labour inspection reports were, however, criticized by the head of the Labour Department Georgi Vulev for their lack of information on certain important topics including the application of the eight-hour day and the observance of the ban on women's night work (Vulev 1932). It would take another few years – and, as we will see, also pressure from the ILO – but in the mid-1930s, labour inspection reports started to provide this kind of information. In 1936, labour inspectors made 7,582 factory visits, substantiating 2,395 violations of the working time regulations (266 in industrial enterprises, 1,383 in craft workshops, 673 in commercial enterprises, and 73 in other types of workplaces). In 1937, there were 12,482 factory visits, resulting in 2,778 fines (330 in industrial enterprises, 1,894 in craft workshops, 475 in commercial enterprises, and 79 in other types of workplaces) (MTPT 1939, 126–127).

International oversight: the ILO's monitoring of the application of international labour standards

The ILO played an important role in the long struggle for the implementation of the eight-hour day as it was embodied in the landmark Convention no. 1 Hours of Work (Industry), ratified by Bulgaria on 14 February 1922. As a tripartite organization, the ILO was open to trade unions who used it to bring their grievances to the attention of national governments. Nevertheless, trade unions' inclination to turn to the ILO greatly depended on their political affiliation. While the radical Left generally denounced the ILO, labelling it "a traitor to the working class's interests," and the radical Right rejected it as part of the Versailles system, social democrats and moderate right parties had no qualms about collaborating with the ILO. Furthermore, in cases of flagrant violations of the eight-hour day, trade unions employed a variety of strategies, of which appeals to the ILO was just one among many others. When in 1923 the Supreme Labour Council passed a resolution that reduced the scope of application of the decree establishing the eight-hour day, the initial reactions were local workers' demonstrations and a nationwide campaign of written protests addressed to the National Assembly (Leaflet 1923; Levi 1965; Telegrams, resolutions 1923). However, the ongoing activism around the issue

and the eventual passage of amendments narrowing the scope of industries subject to the eight-hour workday was followed closely in Geneva, as evidenced by a number of articles that appeared in the press (ILI 1923a, 1923b, 1924), official trade union protests (Dimitrov 1924), as well as in the personal correspondence of the ILO president Albert Tomas (Yanulov 1926).

The ILO's main mechanism to enforce the application of conventions were the annual reports sent by national governments that were to provide information concerning the application of all the ILO conventions a country had ratified. These reports were subsequently evaluated by a Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations. When combing through the Bulgarian government's reports and the Committee of Experts' evaluations of them, it is clear that Bulgaria's relationship with the ILO underwent an evolution during the interwar period. Throughout the 1920s, the Bulgarian government supplied rather legalistic and repetitive reports focused primarily on the character of its laws and regulations. In the 1920s and early 1930s, the ILO Committee of Experts occasionally remarked that Bulgaria had sent "very summary reports" and made repeated recommendations for more detailed information. During international labour conferences, governments' reports and their general compliance with ratified conventions was discussed, and workers' representatives could and did point out discrepancies. Thus, in June 1929, M. Kupers, a workers' representative from the Netherlands, observed that "with regard to Bulgaria, official reports on the application of the Conventions do not exist. It is, however, an undoubted fact that the Hours Convention is very widely disregarded." Following up these criticisms made by labour representatives and the Committee of Experts, in the mid-1930s, pressure from the ILO regarding Bulgaria's application of conventions intensified. The Committee of Experts began to persistently demand concrete data on the application and enforcement process: information on the number of workers to which the eight-hour workday standard was applied, the number of infractions, the fines imposed on employers who violated the standards, etc (Annual reports 1936–1939).

In 1935, after repeated requests by the ILO's Committee of Experts to supply detailed information on the number of workers covered by the eight-hour convention and the number of infractions recorded by the labour inspections, the Bulgarian government charged the MCIL with changing the nature of statistical surveys in order to comply with the ILO's request (Table 1).

The increased number of infractions recorded by the labour inspections do not seem to indicate a worsening in labour conditions. Extremely scarce as it is, data on real working hours in Bulgarian industry show a slight decrease in the average working hours in the late 1930s and early 1940s: from 9.1 hours in 1937 to 8.7 hours in 1941 (Berov 1968, 74). However, it is difficult to ascertain to what extent this decrease was due to labour

Table 1. Application of Convention no. 1 Hours of Work (Industry) in Bulgaria, 1935–1939.

Period	Number of workers covered by the Convention no. 1 Hours of Work (Industry)	Number of infractions, related to the Convention's provisions
01.1.1935–3.09.1936	approx. 200,000	963
01.1.1936–3.09.1937	approx. 200,000	1,123
1.1.1937–3.09.1938	209,641	1,507
01.1.1938–3.09.1939	238,850	3,808

Source: Annual reports 1936–1939.

inspections' tighter control, and to what extent it may be attributed to other factors such as disruptions caused by the war.

Furthermore, in the mid-1930s, the ILO's Committee of Experts started to scrutinize national legislation in greater detail and urged for the amendment of some of Bulgaria's labour regulations in order to bring them into full compliance with Convention no. 1's provisions. Thus, in its annual report for 1936, the Bulgarian government stated that it had complied with the Committee of Experts' observation that national legislation did not contain the provisions under art. 8 of the convention, namely that the Department of Labour and Social Security in the MCIL should require all industrial and commercial enterprises to notify their workers about the precise time work begins and ends, as well as the precise time and duration of work breaks. In 1937, the Committee of Experts welcomed the government's assurances that such a regulation had been issued, but it asked to see a copy of the document and insisted on further information concerning how Article 8c on keeping a record of extra hours worked was applied in national legislation (Annual reports 1936–1939).

Conclusion

The issue of the eight-hour day was consistently present in Bulgarian labour politics from the 1890s until World War Two. Investigating the eight-hour workday from a long-term perspective and as the outcome of a negotiated social process that extended beyond the official adoption of it as legal norm in 1919 reveals a much more complex (and messier) picture than does the neat recounting of a series of (ever-more progressive) legislative acts found in histories of labour law. The struggles over the adoption and application of the eight-hour day could also be conceptualized within the larger process of the expanding state in twentieth-century Eastern Europe (Brunnbauer 2022; Grama 2020), exemplified in this case by increased state intervention in the field of labour relations. Pressure for increased labour protections and more rigorous control over the application of existing labour laws came simultaneously from several directions and unfolded on various scales – on the shop floor through workers' actions (strikes, demonstrations, petitions and complaints); in public debates involving labour experts; in political parties across the political spectrum; trade unions (balanced by and in opposition to employers' organizations) – as well as in conjunction with international developments such as the establishment the Versailles order and the passage of the ILO's international labour standards. Finally, the adoption of the eight-hour day was a dynamic process shaped by changing patterns of industrial relations, economic cycles, and political regimes.

A focus on women workers and the textile industry, furthermore, reveals how the adoption of a technically gender-neutral standard in Bulgaria nevertheless held gender-specific meanings for women workers. At the same time, these meanings varied depending on women's life-course stage and social circumstances (e.g. women workers' roles as mothers and homemakers, the specific vulnerability of underage and migrant workers, women workers living in factory housing, etc.). Yet time and again, experts and labour activists argued that the health and social problems associated with overwork affected women workers to a much greater extent than their male counterparts, with radical-left women even framing the eight-hour workday as “a

women-specific issue,” along with equal pay for equal work, maternity protections, and socialized childcare.

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