

Florence Kelley, "The Sweating-System," *Hull-House Maps and Papers: A Presentation of Nationalities and Wages in a Congested District of Chicago, Together with Comments and Essays on Problems Growing Out of the Social Conditions* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1895): 27-45.

The sweating-system is confined in Chicago to the garment trades, which employ some 25,000 to 30,000 people (as nearly as we can estimate), among whom this system is found in all its modes and tenses. The manufacture of garments is in the hands of wholesale firms. Their factories are grouped in the first ward of the city, within a radius of four blocks, where they have large, well-lighted, fairly wholesome workrooms, in which the garments for the entire trade are cut. The cutters, having a strong organization, refuse to work except under conditions more or less equal with the conditions of work usual in the well-organized trades. The hours and wages prevailing in the cutters' shops, therefore, do not differ much from the hours and wages usual in the well-organized trades. Some of the wholesale manufacturers have not only the cutters' shops, but also large workrooms, in which all the processes of clothing manufacture are carried on. These latter are known as "inside shops," or garment factories; and in them the employees work under conditions vastly better than are imposed upon the sweaters' victims, though still farther than the cutters below the standard of hours and wages maintained in the well-organized trades.

In the inside shops the sanitary conditions are fairly good; and power is frequently, though by no means uni- [end page 27] formly, furnished for running machines. The same division of labor prevails as in the smaller shops; and the garment, after being cut, goes to the operator, who stitches the seams, to the buttonholer, the finisher, and the presser. In the inside shop the presser is usually also a skilled cleaner, and adds to his function of pressing the garment made on the premises the duty of removing grease and other soils from the garments returned

from the sweaters' shops. There are also usually employed in these shops both basters and girls who pull bastings out of the finished garments. Formerly the operator was often an "all around worker," who received the garment from the cutters, and handed it finished to the examiner; but the competition of the sweaters has led to a very general introduction of hand-girls, one of whom works with each operator, doing the hand-finishing on the garment as it comes from the operator. The sweating-system has affected disastrously the condition of the employees in the inside shops, since any demand of the inside hands for increased wages or shorter hours is promptly met by transfer of work from the inside shop to a sweater; and the cutters alone remain secure from this competition.

A very important functionary in the inside clothing shops is the examiner, who receives finished garments both from the inside hands and the sweaters, and passes upon the satisfactoriness of the work. Incidentally, it is a painful duty of the examiner to find and destroy the vermin commonly infesting garments returned from outside workers.

Children are not employed to any considerable extent in the inside shops, and the employees are usually Eng- [end page 28] lish-speaking workers, though comparatively few native Americans are left in the garment trades, even in the inside shops. The organizations of employees are feeble, both numerically and financially, except the cutters' union; and wages in the best inside shops are far below the rates common in well-organized trades, and are rapidly and steadily falling.

With two exceptions, every manufacturer of garments in Chicago gives out clothing to be made in tenement houses. This is true of white underwear and custom-made outer wear, quite as much as of the ready-made clothing ordinarily associated in the public mind with the sweating-system. There are three common variations in the manner of giving out goods. Many

manufacturers have closed their inside shops, and retain only their cutting-rooms. These give garments directly to large numbers of individual employees, who make them up in their dwellings; or to sweaters, or to both. Manufacturers who retain their inside shops commonly give out garments in both these ways; and many of them also make a practice of requiring employees who work by day to take home garments at night, and on Saturday, to be made at home on Sunday.

Every manufacturer keeps a list of the names and addresses of the people to whom he gives out garments to be made up, and is required by law to show this list on demand to the factory and workshop inspectors.

It is the duty of the inspectors to follow up these lists, and examine the surroundings amidst which this work is done; and they report that the conditions in which garments are made that are given out from the inside shops for night work and Sunday work differ not [end page 29] a jot from the tenement house shops and the sweaters' home finishers' dwellings. Thus, a recent night inspection of work given out from one of the largest cloak manufactories in the West resulted as follows: The garment maker was found in his tenement dwelling in the rear of a factory. With his family, a wife and four indescribably filthy children, he occupies a kitchen and two bedrooms. The farther bedroom could be entered only by passing through the other rooms. This farther bedroom, where the man was found at work, was 7 X 7 X 8 feet, and contained a bed, a machine, one chair, a reeking lamp, and two men. The bed seemed not to have been made up in weeks; and in the bed, in a heap, there lay two overcoats, two hats, a mass of bed-covers, and nine fine tan-color capes trimmed with ecru lace, a tenth cape being on the machine in process of stitching. The whole dwelling was found to be crawling with vermin, and the capes were not free from it.

The manufacturers hold their outside workers responsible for the return of the goods; and sweaters have been prosecuted for larceny, and have been followed even beyond the borders of the State, and brought back for prosecution under the criminal law for failing to return goods intrusted to them. But the manufacturers do not hold themselves responsible for the dealings of the outside workers with their victims. Thus, a sweater extradited from another State, and prosecuted here for larceny of unfinished garments, is subject merely to a civil suit on the part of his employees for hundreds of dollars of wages due them; while the manufacturer is in no degree responsible for the payment of these wages for work done upon garments belonging to him. Such [end page 30] cases have not been rare; and the manufacturers disclaim all moral responsibility to the unfortunate victims, as they disclaim all responsibility to the purchasing public for disease carried in garments made in the sweaters' victims' infectious homes.

THE SWEATERS.

The name of the sweaters is legion. More than a thousand of their shops have been inspected, and more than eight hundred licensed by the city; while it is an open secret that these numbers fall far below the total actually existing. It is well-nigh impossible to keep perfect lists of sweaters; since a man may be an operator to-day, a sweater on a small scale next week, may move his shop in the night to avoid the payment of rent, and may be found working as operator in an inside shop at the close of the season.

The sweaters differ from the cutters in their relation to the manufacturers, in that the sweaters have no organization, and are incapable of making any organized demand for a standard of prices. They are separated by differences of religion, nationality, language, and location. As individuals they haggle with the manufacturers, undercutting each other, and calculating upon their power to reduce the pay of their employees below any point to which the manufacturers

may reduce theirs; and as individuals they tyrannize over the victims who have the misfortune to work in their shops. There has never been, and there is not now, in Chicago any association of sweaters of any kind whatsoever. There is, therefore, no standard price for the making of any garment, either for the sweater or his victim. With every change of [end page 31] style, there is a change of price, and the tendency of the change is always downward. The fashion and the change of seasons are an ever-ready excuse for the manufacturers, who constantly aim to concentrate the work of the year into the shortest possible season. There are two reasons for this: In a short season the turn-over of the capital invested is quick and comparatively sure; and a more sinister consideration is the fact that sweaters who have long been without work, and whose coming season threatens to be very short, are ready to take work upon any terms offered them. The consequence of the concentration of the manufacture of garments into short, recurrent seasons is an extreme pressure upon the contractor for the speediest possible return of the garments given him; and, hitherto, this pressure has forced the sweaters' victims to work far into the night, and to disregard Sunday and all holidays. It is the belief of the sweaters' victims as well as of the inspectors, that a rigid, enforcement of the eight-hour law within these shops will compel the sweaters to increase the number of employees, enlarge their shops, and so create groups numerically too strong to submit to conditions easily imposed upon ten or a dozen very poor people.

By persistent prosecutions of sweaters found employing children under the age of fourteen years, the practice has been to some extent broken up. During the effort to remove them from these shops, there were found boys whose backs have been made crooked for life by continuous work at heavy machines, and boys and girls unable to speak English, and equally unable to read or write in any language.

The sweaters are found in all parts of the city. They [end page 32] are of nine nationalities, speak nine different languages, and are of several religions. The employees ordinarily follow the nationality and religion of the sweater; though Swedes are sometimes found employing Bohemian children, and Russian Jews are found with employees of various nationalities. In general, however, the language of the shop is the language of the sweater, and follows the nationality of the colony in which it is located.

THE NINETEENTH WARD.

In the nineteenth ward the sweaters are Russian Jews and Bohemians; and their employees in the shops are of the same nationality, while their home finishers are exclusively Italians,—the wives and daughters of the streets-sweepers and railroad gang hands, who form so large a part of the population of the ward. The garments made here are principally coats, cloaks, trousers, knee-pants, and shirts. There are one hundred and sixty-two shops, employing men, women, and children.

The shops are, without exception, in tenement houses or in the rear of tenement houses, in two-story buildings facing alleys that are usually unpaved and always noxious with the garbage and refuse of a tenement-house district. If the sweater's shop is in a tenement house, it is sometimes—but very rarely—in the ground floor front room, built for a store and lighted by large store windows. But far more commonly it is a basement, or an attic, or the flat over a saloon, or the shed over a stable. All the tenement houses selected either for shops or home finishers are of the worst and most crowded description. The staircases are narrow, and are used in common by tenants and garment workers, so that in- [end page 33] fectious diseases breaking out among the swarming children can scarcely fail to be communicated to garments anywhere under the same roof, because the utmost laxity prevails in the matter of isolation. The unsanitary

condition of many of these tenement houses, and the ignorance and abject poverty of the tenants, insure the maximum probability of disease; and diphtheria, scarlet-fever, smallpox, typhoid, scabies, and worse forms of skin diseases, have been found in alarming proximity to garments of excellent quality in process of manufacture for leading firms.

There is not in the whole ward a clothing-shop in any building erected for the purpose; and in no case is steam-power supplied, but the use of foot-power is universal. In but one case known to me within this ward has a sweater acquired means sufficient to own the premises on which his shop is carried on. Employers of this class are usually tenants, who rent by the week or month, and move upon the shortest notice. To illustrate: There is at 165 West Twelfth Street a crowded tenement house, with a Chinese laundry in the ground floor front, and swarming families above. In the ground floor rear is a Jewish butcher-shop, where sausage (not of pork) is made during part of the year; but at midsummer, meat is roasted to supply the demand of a large surrounding colony of Russian Jews. Over this butcher-shop is a tailor-shop, into which the fumes and heat of the wholesale roasting below rise in the most overpowering manner. This shop possesses an irresistible attraction to sweaters of several varieties. It was occupied last summer by a firm of cloakmakers. When they were required to vacate by reason of its [end page 34] unsanitary condition, the shop stood empty but a short time, when two coat-making partners moved in with a large body of victims. As the landlord could not be induced to make any improvement, these also were required to move; and the shop is now occupied by a veteran kneepants maker, who moved into it when required to separate his shop from his dwelling as a sanitary measure!

Under a clause of the law which prohibits the use of any bedroom or kitchen for the manufacture of garments by any person outside of the immediate family living therein, the

inspectors are waging war upon contractors who employ help in kitchen or bedroom, or in any room accessible only by going through the living-rooms of the family. The law is loosely drawn, the difficulties are many, and progress is slow towards an entire separation of shop and dwelling. Nor will such separation ever be complete until all manufacture in any tenement house is prohibited by law.

Meanwhile, every tenement-house shop is ruinous to the health of the employees. Basement shops are damp, and entail rheumatism. They never afford proper accommodations for the pressers, the fumes of whose gasoline stoves and charcoal heaters mingle with the mouldy smell of the walls and the stuffiness, always found where a number of the very poor are crowded together. The light in basement shops is bad, and they are colder in winter and hotter in summer than workrooms in ordinary factories.

Attic shops are hot in summer, and usually foul by reason of the presence of closets to which the water does not rise. As these shops are often on the fifth [end page 35] floor of crowded tenement houses, with narrow wooden stairs, no fire-escapes, and no sufficient water supply, the danger of death by fire is greatly aggravated by the omnipresent presser's stove. Shops on the middle floors are ill-lighted, ill-ventilated, and share the smell from the kitchens and drains of surrounding tenement flats.

The dye from cheap cloth goods is sometimes poisonous to the skin; and the fluff from such goods inhaled by the operators is excessively irritating to the membranes, and gives rise to inflammations of the eye and various forms of catarrh. All these conditions, taken together with the exhaustion consequent upon driving foot-power machines at the highest possible rate of speed, make consumption, either of the lung or intestine, the characteristic malady of the sweaters' victim.

In the minds of the physicians, nurses, and inspectors best acquainted with the sweaters' victims of the nineteenth ward, there is no doubt that the substitution of steam-power for foot-power would do more to change this medical aspect of the case than any other one change that could be made. This is, however, entirely hopeless until tenement-house manufacture is prohibited. Meanwhile, the trade life of the garment worker is probably shorter than prevails in any other occupation; and the employees are always on the verge of pauperism, and fall into the abyss with every illness or particularly bad season.

If the sweaters' victim or any member of his family fall ill, his only hope is in the county doctor and the visiting nurse supported by charity, unless the patient be taken outright to the Michael Reese or County Hospital. If the illness prove a long one, recourse must [end page 36] be had to the various charities; and death brings a funeral ending in the potter's field, unless some prosperous brother of the faith provide for private burial.

A typical example is the experience of a cloakmaker who began work at his machine in this ward at the age of fourteen years, and was found, after twenty years of temperate life and faithful work, living in a rear basement, with four of his children apparently dying of pneumonia, at the close of a winter during which they had had, for weeks together, no food but bread and water, and had been four days without bread. The visiting nurse had two of the children removed to a hospital, and nursed the other two safely through their illness, feeding the entire family nearly four months. Place after place was found for the father; but he was too feeble to be of value to any sweater, and was constantly told that he was not worth the room he took up. A place being found for him in charge of an elevator, he could not stand; and two competent physicians, after a careful examination, agreed that he was suffering from old age. Twenty years

at a machine had made him an old man at thirty-four. During these twenty years his earnings had ranged from \$260 to \$300 per annum.

Even without illness in his family, the sweaters' victim is regularly a pauper during a part of the year. The two seasons of the trade in each year are followed by long pauses, during which nothing can be earned, and debts are incurred. If the "slack" season is phenomenally short, in a year of unusual commercial prosperity, the sweaters' victim may perhaps live through it, by means of the credit given him by the landlord and grocer, without applying for aid to the Charities or the [end page 37] County Relief. But in the ordinary years of merely average prosperity, the sweaters' victim is inevitably an applicant for relief, to supplement, during three to five months, the earnings made during the busy season.

This fact effectively disposes of the favorite humanitarian argument on behalf of tenement-house manufacture; namely, that widows with children to support must be permitted to work at home. Even if these widows made a sufficient living for themselves and their children, the price paid for their prosperity, in the spread of disease and the demoralization of a vast trade, might be considered exorbitant. As a matter of fact, however, no tenement-house garment maker earns a sufficient living for a family, least of all the widow whose housework and care of her children interrupt her sewing, and whose very necessities are exploited by the sweater in his doling out of work and pay. What we really get in the case of the widow is the worst conceivable form of tenement-house manufacture, with full-fledged pauperism thrown into the bargain.

It is preposterous, on the face of it, that a trade employing from 25,000 to 30,000 persons in a single city, with an annual output of many millions of dollars, should be carried on with the same primitive machines which were used thirty years ago. In every other branch of

manufacture the watchword of the present generation has been concentration. Everywhere steam, electricity, and human ingenuity have been pressed into service for the purpose of organization and centralization; but in the garment trades this process has been reversed, and the division of labor has been made a means of demoralization, disorganization, and degrada- [end page 38] tion, carried to a point beyond which it is impossible to go. While the textile mills in which the material for garments is spun and woven have been constantly enlarged and improved, both as to the machinery used and as to the healthfulness of the surroundings of the work-people, the garment trade has been enriched merely by the addition of the buttonhole machine; and this lone, lorn improvement has been made the means of deforming the illiterate children employed at it.

Thirty years ago the shoemaker and the tailor were more or less equally placed. Each went through the experience of the apprentice, the journeyman, the master, working for a limited market, and more or less in personal contact with the individual customer. To-day the shoe industry possesses a wealth of perfected machinery, such that a tanned hide can be carried through all the processes of manufacture under a single roof and with incredible speed. The shoemaker's shop, with its little group of workers, has become the shoemaking town, with a vast organization, both of capital and of labor, and a very high degree of intelligence and class consciousness pervading the thousands of employees. The garment worker, on the contrary, still works in his kitchen, perhaps with the aid of his wife, performing one of the dozen subdivisions of the labor of making garments. He rarely belongs to an organization, and if he does it is so weak as to be almost useless to him either for education or defense. If he is an "all-round garment worker," whatever his skill may be, he has little use for it; since, in competition with him, the cutter cuts, the operator stitches, the seam-binder binds seams, the hand-girl fells, the

presser presses, the buttonholer [end page 39] makes buttonholes by the thousand gross.

Whatever the disadvantages of the division of labor, the garment worker suffers them all. Of its advantages he has never had a taste.

A curious example of the isolation of the garment worker is found in a crowded tenement house in Ewing Street, known as "Poverty Flat," where five different women were found sewing, each in her own kitchen, five different bundles of knee-pants for the same sweater. The knee-pants were of the same size and quality, with the same amount of work to be done upon them; but the prices paid were five cents, seven cents, nine cents, eleven and thirteen cents per dozen, rising in accordance with the skill in haggling of the home finisher, and with no relation to her skill in sewing on buttons.

A millionaire philanthropist, at the head of one of the largest clothing-houses in the world, was once asked why he did not employ directly the people who made his goods, and furnish them with steam-power, thus saving a heavy drain upon their health, and reducing the number of sweaters' victims found every winter in his pet hospital. "So far," he replied, "we have found leg-power and the sweater cheaper."

In the shoe industry the products have been cheapened by developing the plant, perfecting the machinery, and employing relatively well-paid, high-grade labor. In the garment trade there is no plant. Under the sweating-system, with the foot-power sewing-machine, cheapness is attained solely at the cost of the victim. Even the inside shops are often located in rented quarters, and frequently the operator is required to supply his own machine, or to pay the rent of a hired [end page 40] one; and even with these niggardly provisions the manufacturers find it profitable to shift the burden of rent upon the sweaters, who, in turn, reduce the size of their shops by giving out garments to the buttonholer and the home finisher.

The intimate connection between this decentralization of the trade and the danger of infecting the purchaser with disease prevalent in tenement-house districts, is too palpable to need comment, and emphasizes the question why the clothing manufacturer should be permitted to eliminate the item of rent from his expenses, at the cost of the trade and of the purchasing community. All other manufacturers have to include rent in their calculations, why not he?

The condition of the sweaters' victim is a conclusive refutation of the ubiquitous argument that poverty is the result of crime, vice, intemperance, sloth, and unthrift; for the Jewish sweaters' victims are probably more temperate, hard-working, and avaricious than any equally large body of wage-earners in America. Drunkenness is unknown among them. So great is their eagerness to improve the social condition of their children, that they willingly suffer the utmost privation of clothing, food, and lodging, for the sake of keeping their boys in school. Yet the reward of work at their trade is grinding poverty, ending only in death or escape to some more hopeful occupation. Within the trade there has been and can be no improvement in wages while tenement-house manufacture is tolerated. On the contrary, there seems to be no limit to the deterioration not in progress. [end page 41]

MERCHANT TAILORS.

It is a fact of which the public has remained curiously ignorant, that the worst forms of danger to the wearers of garments are found in heavier proportion in the manufacture of expensive custom-made clothing than in the ready-made clothing trade; since there are no inside factories for the manufacture of custom-made clothing, and merchant tailors employ only cutters on their premises, and never have any garments completed there, but always give them out to be finished in the sweater-shop, or in the individual tailor's own home.

Throughout the agitation carried on for some years past against the sweating-system, the merchant tailors have enjoyed a wholly undeserved immunity from the accusation of spreading infectious and contagious disease by means of the tenement-house manufacture of garments. A striking example may serve to illustrate the point. I have myself found on Bunker Street a brick tenement house filled with Bohemian and Jewish tenants engaged in the tailoring trade and in peddling. In the ground floor, front flat, which was exceedingly clean, I found a tailor at work one Sunday afternoon upon a broadcloth dress-coat belonging to an evening suit of the finest quality, such as sell for from \$70 to \$100. On a bed about five feet from the table at which the tailor was working, his son lay dying of typhoid-fever. The boy died on the following day; and the coat when finished was returned to the merchant tailor, and delivered to the customer without fumigation or other precaution. This was before the passage of the present factory law, and at a time when no authority of [end page 42] the State of Illinois had power to interfere in such a case.

Even where the home tailor, by twenty years of work, has come to own his house, this prosperity is no guaranty of clean goods for the purchaser. At 135 Forquer Street, there stands a two-story frame building swarming with Russian, Jewish, and Italian families, the ground floor occupied by a most disorderly and repulsive grocery. The premises belong to a tailor who lives in a shanty in the rear, where his old mother, dying of cancer, occupies a bed in the kitchen, in which this landlord has been repeatedly found working with his wife upon uniforms for the officers of the Chicago police and the Illinois militia, while his children and a number of chickens swarmed upon the floor. This man, after nineteen years of installment payments upon his property, is still guilty of all the vices of thrift, in the hope of finally lifting the mortgage indebtedness during the present year.

LAW.

The sweating-system in Chicago has been a subject of investigation since 1891, when Mrs. Thomas J. Morgan, on behalf of the Chicago Trades and Labor Assembly, made the first inspection that attracted public attention to the subject, upon the publication in pamphlet form of the results of her investigations.

From 1891 to the passage of the law of 1893 under the leadership of Hull House, the organizations of garment workers, including the shirtmakers, the men's shop-tailors' union, the women's protective union of cloakmakers, the custom-tailors' union, the cloakmakers and the shoemakers, kept up an unwearied agitation for [end page 43] the abolition by law of the sweating-system, and obtained results proportioned to their good tactics, zeal, and energy, rather than to their numbers.

They urged on every public occasion that tenement-house manufacture is a public injury; and they availed themselves of the solidarity of the unions throughout the State, to bring the facts of the case home to legislators with the emphasis of the labor vote. Their claim on behalf of the public health is an unanswerable one; and their appeal for themselves, in their effort to place the garment trades upon the same modern business basis as the factory trades, finds ready response in the minds of intelligent people. Opposition to legislation looking towards the abolition of the sweating-system came from the manufacturers, less than one hundred in number, whose interests are affected, and from a few kind-hearted persons apprehensive of possible injury to the home finishing widow, because they do not know her well enough to judge correctly her present irreparable situation.

In July, 1893, the present Workshop and Factories Act went into effect, and this essay is written after eight months of effort to enforce it. The results obtained may be briefly summed up

as consisting of the reduction in number of the small children in shops; the partially successful separation of the homes from the shops, and the partially successful enforcement of the eight-hour day for the women and girls. These results are not wholly unsatisfactory, in view of the fact that the law is not yet a year old; but they indicate that this initial, tentative measure is inadequate for the effective protection of the health of either the public or the employees of the garment trades. Its chief value lies in its use as [end page 44] a transition measure, paving the way for the abolition of tenement-house manufacture.

This should be a comparatively easy matter in a new city where there is no long-standing tradition of generations of handloom weaving in the worker's home, or indeed of home manufacture of any sort. In Chicago, where all industry is on a large scale, and the cheap land available for building factories is ample, there is not even the excuse afforded by the traditions of London or the overcrowding of Manhattan Island. If we tolerate tenement-house manufacture, we do so in the face of the experience of older cities, and in spite of industrial conditions which invite us to its abolition.

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