

## CHILD WAGE-EARNERS IN ENGLAND: WHY THE "HALF-TIME" SYSTEM HAS FAILED TO SOLVE THE PROBLEM: BY MARY RANKIN CRANSTON



THE modern factory system has done much to raise the standard of living for the masses. By lessening the cost of production, it has placed within the reach of slender purses articles formerly classed as luxuries. It gives employment to a vast army of skilled workers, thus raising the standard of labor, even though many must be pushed aside in this survival of the fittest. The concentration of industry in fewer large establishments instead of innumerable homes or small workshops makes inspection not only necessary, but less difficult. Better working conditions, as a rule, are the result.

There is another side to the question, however; there are evils which must be checked if disastrous results are not to follow by the time the present generation reaches maturity. Of these, child labor is the worst. In the United States, four hundred thousand children are engaged in industrial pursuits.

As a generalization, steady, monotonous work for long hours is bad for any growing child. Specifically, the employment of children harms not only the child but the parent, also both the present and the future generations. It is bad for the child because it makes him old before his time, even where it does not wear him out physically; it is bad for the parent since it reduces his wages or cuts them off altogether, with the frequent result that he soon becomes lazy and willing to be supported by his children. Of course, there could be no child labor if factory owners refused, or were not permitted, to employ children.

Without a compulsory education law the factory, where conditions are good, is not so detrimental to the child, for it keeps him out of mischief by teaching him a trade. This plea, so often made by employers, cannot, by the wildest stretch of imagination, be construed into an argument in favor of child labor, for two wrongs never yet made a right. In states permitting the employment of children and having no compulsory education law, obviously the thing to do is to get such a law. Every state in the Union at present has a child labor law of some kind, except one whose legislature now has such a bill before it, which is quite certain to become a law before

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the session adjourns. None of the territories have passed child labor laws.

Every country has its own industrial system, consequently its peculiar methods of employing labor, its own problems to solve. In America, if children are employed at all they work continuously, during certain hours, six days in the week, but not on Sundays, rarely on legal holidays. In England it is quite different since what is known as the English half-time system of child labor has been for years the custom.

What is known as the English half-time system of child labor is the legal provision which permits children between certain ages to engage in gainful occupations out of school hours, six days in the week, on Sundays and holidays. Theoretically, a plan which gives the opportunity for work to children of poor parents, without interfering with education, is an ideal system. In reality, it is very bad from both the educational and the economic standpoint. Only the brightest children are able to work and keep up with their studies at the same time. The attempt to do so devitalizes the child. The average half-timer can not keep pace with full-time pupils, consequently he is a drag upon his class and keeps it down to his level. Hence, the system is an injustice to both half-time and full-time children.

**F**ROM an economic point of view, all of the stock objections to child labor in any form are multiplied and intensified. The horrible abuse of children in the early days of the factory system forms one of the darkest pages in English history. The demand for child workers which came with the application of steam to machinery, during the last years of the eighteenth century, was too great to be normally supplied. Almshouses and orphan asylums were filled with children who were a burden and an expense to the state, and managers took advantage of the chance to reduce the number of inmates. Tiny children were literally fed to the factories as to a heathen god. Babies not more than four or five years old were dragged from their beds before daylight and carried, in arms, to work. If they became drowsy during their working-day of eighteen hours, cold water was dashed in their faces to awaken them. The fearfully high death rate caused an inquiry to be made which resulted in the first British factory legislation, in eighteen hundred and two, mainly for the protection of women and children.

Since that early time the Factory Acts have been many times

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amended, notably in eighteen hundred and seventy-six and in nineteen hundred and two. An explanatory word concerning the English method of law making may not be amiss. An Act which applies to the entire United Kingdom is passed by Parliament, making a general law and prescribing its limitations. Local authorities may then pass by-laws, giving a broad interpretation to the provisions of the Act where stringent measures are unnecessary, but making greater restrictions in other directions. Thus, it is possible to remedy what might be a hardship in one part of the country, although most beneficial in another, without undue strain upon the general law. The Act is made sufficiently elastic to suit common needs, but its full intent must be carried out, and strict enforcement makes the people respect it.

The framers of the law in eighteen hundred and seventy-six believed they had found a solution of the difficult child-labor question which had been before them for so many years, for it was thought that there would be two sets of children, one of them working during the half day that the other was in school, and that they would alternate, morning and afternoon. It was hoped that work and study would be evenly balanced, but in actual practice it never has been. As a matter of fact, all schooling was crowded into two successive days, and the rest of the week given over to steady employment. It was then tried to enforce school attendance on alternate days. This gave somewhat better results but was still far from satisfactory.

During recent years the social conscience has been so stirred about the ethical and other aspects of child labor that in nineteen hundred and two a special committee was appointed by Parliament to make an inquiry into existing conditions. The changes made during the next year in the child-labor laws represent the high-water mark of such legislation. As the law now stands, children of school age may be employed only during certain hours before and after regular school sessions and upon days when schools are not in session.

**T**HIRTY years ago a child might be employed in textile factories at ten years of age; in workshops and agriculture, at eight. To-day no child less than twelve years old may be regularly employed in factory or workshop, and the limit for agricultural work is eleven. When the mature age of fourteen is reached one becomes a "young person" and may be employed full time. There are, however, some exceptions to these statutes in favor of children who have passed certain classes, or standards, as the Eng-

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lish call them. In some parts of the country a child may work half time if the fourth standard has been passed, irrespective of the age limit, in others, the seventh must be completed before exemption is allowed.

No child may be employed between the hours of nine at night and six in the morning; street trading by children under eleven years of age is forbidden, nor may they engage in any kind of work likely to be detrimental to health or education. Neither may a child under ten years of age be licensed for public entertainments. Seven years has hitherto been the age limit. Street trading is considered harmful for girls under sixteen, therefore in some places is prohibited, and in others carefully safeguarded, according to local dangers and customs.

Of course, the little half-timers engage in minor occupations. They are grocers' boys, dusters and cleaners in the small shops which abound in England, messenger boys, lathers in barbers' shops, match-box makers, laundry helpers and milk boys. It is customary to deliver milk from central depots in a number of small carts, each in charge of a man who may have one or two boys to help him. Milk boys are at work by half past four or five every morning, in good and bad weather, in school by half past eight, at work again during the noon recess from twelve to two, and at the close of the afternoon session until late in the evening. There is no time to play, no energy left for anything. Newsboys deliver papers during the early morning and late afternoon. Paper selling is found to be a source of crime on account of the tendency to gamble. Out of twenty-two boys arraigned at one of the city courts for various misdemeanors, in one month, twelve were, or had been, newsboys. Early morning work is harmful because the child does not get sleep enough at the age when he most needs it, nor does he always have his breakfast before starting out. Naturally, it is not uncommon for the early workers to go to sleep in school. Nevertheless, what is one person's poison is sometimes another's meat, and consumptive children have actually been benefited by early morning work when it has been so regulated as not to become a hardship.

In London there are seven hundred and forty-seven thousand school children, four hundred and eighty thousand of them over seven years of age, and of these thirty thousand and eight hundred are half-time wage-earners. About half of them spend during each week twenty-seven hours in school and more than twenty hours in work. In one district such children work from fourteen to fifty hours

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a week and are paid at the rate of one to two cents an hour. In small laundries the helpers are employed for two or three nights a week until ten o'clock and all day on Saturdays, working in a steam-laden atmosphere and amid surroundings that are distinctly undesirable. Lather boys in barbers' shops have hours that are much too long, never less than forty a week. They are usually busy from five to ten every evening, all day and until midnight on Saturday, and on Sunday from eight to nine in the morning, and from one to two in the afternoon. Grocers' boys average twenty hours a week for wages equal to seventy-five cents or one dollar a week, when money is paid, but it is the custom of the trade to give food in payment. Messenger boys and girls employed by milliners, dressmakers and in small shops, oftentimes work from fifty to fifty-nine hours a week. Half-timers who are undertakers' boys are engaged in the cheerful business of measuring corpses for a shilling a week.

**O**VER three thousand of London's half-timers are employed in domestic service. This is not so bad as some other occupations because the work is light, are generally done indoors, so that the children are free from exposure to all kinds of weather, and a good breakfast is assured. A majority of the little "boots,"—boys who clean and polish shoes of the guests in boarding houses,—are half-timers, and so are the knife boys and errand boys. But household work is universally so ill regulated that it encourages lack of punctuality, which offsets its advantages. In the home industries, small tailor shops, match-box making and the manufacture of cheap underwear, there are bad cases of overwork where half-timers are busy for twenty, thirty, and even so much as sixty, hours a week.

Liverpool has more than thirty-two thousand children in the Board schools, twenty-three thousand half-timers. They average twenty-three hours a week at work; seventy-seven per cent. of them are boys; sixty-nine per cent. have fathers in regular work, the fathers of twenty per cent. are casual laborers and the remainder are deserted or fatherless. Only twenty-nine per cent. are needy cases. Their total earnings amount to about eight hundred and twenty dollars and nineteen hundred and seventy-nine meals, which works out two cents an hour and one meal a day for one child out of every seven,—not munificent wages. It is expensive labor, so far as the state is concerned, for physically, at least, the workers will be far below normal at maturity. So that in the end, instead of adding to the sum total of industrial efficiency, they will be incapable of self-support or of

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serving their country, and in all probability a great number of them will even become public charges, to be taken care of in public institutions supported by tax-payers.

In England there are sixty-one hundred and fifteen half-timers in agricultural work, but the majority of them are fruit and hop pickers, employment which is beneficial rather than harmful. Children are found to be good for this kind of work and are boarded out on farms for what they can do before and after school hours.

Children are not permitted to work in factories in Dublin or Cork, so they become street traders. In Belfast, half-timers may be employed on alternate days, school attendance being compulsory on the other days. The factory hours are very long, from six to six, but with a two-hour interval at noon; on Saturdays they are from six to twelve, with a half-hour interval during that time. Working conditions are good and the children are bright and cheerful. Of course, English and Scotch factories and workshops employ half-timers, but as a rule state inspection is so strict that there are relatively fewer abuses in these establishments than in the minor industries.

The worst feature of the half-time system, just as it is with American child labor, is the exploitation of children by lazy or intemperate parents. The good income of an English father does not prevent the child from working for long hours. The son of a policeman earning forty-five dollars a month, a sum which goes farther in England than it would in the United States because living costs less, works forty-seven hours weekly; the son of a police sergeant, whose income is the same, works for a shopkeeper from six to nine every morning, from half past four to half past eight every evening and from seven to half past eleven every Sunday morning.

**A**LL work and no play is injurious for anyone, and particularly so for children during the formative period of their lives. It results in either dwarfed mentality, stunted or abnormal physical development, or both. If the school curriculum is worth anything, the necessary study requires all the mental and physical energy of a growing child. Unoccupied time should be left free for relaxation,—for the playtime which is a child's birthright.

Where children earn so little, it is difficult to see how the family budget could be affected by such small sums. In a country like Great Britain, where poverty is so great, and work for adults so hard to obtain, there are, unfortunately, cases where the few pennies a half-timer may earn are absolutely necessary. Only children of

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the poorest parents should be allowed to keep the nose so steadily to the grindstone, in school and out. Even then it may well be asked if the industrial system cannot find a better way of increasing the income of families on the border line of pauperism than by sapping the vitality of a child.

Light employment with not over long hours would not be harmful, for a proper amount of work under right conditions never yet hurt anybody; on the contrary, it is an opportunity for mental and spiritual growth, if congenial, and in any case affords the means of economic independence.

The trouble with the half-time system is that, between school authorities who rightfully insist that every child shall be educated, the parental laziness or intemperance that finds a need for his wages, and the cupidity of unscrupulous employers, England's youth is to-day ground between the upper and the nether millstone.

What Parliament is trying to do, is eventually so to protect the child that he shall work only a reasonable number of hours and only under the best possible conditions. It is easy to see that any form of child labor is susceptible to abuse, the half-time system especially, since children are so liable to be over-taxed in mind as well as in body. There is great opposition to it in Great Britain. Trade unions naturally oppose it, social workers, as a rule, set their faces against it, while a majority of adults, who were themselves half-timers in childhood, will do much to keep their children out of workshop or factory.

Some inquiry concerning the English plan of half-time labor has been made from time to time by persons in the United States. It is to be hoped that it will never be attempted in this country. It would mean expensive experimentation that would inevitably end in failure, but probably not before American nervousness had been augmented, constitutions drained of their strength, and possibly statistics of insanity increased, for American life is pitched in a higher key than any other. What we need is the cultivation of repose, poise which is due to self-mastery, and *not* the wastefulness which comes through the dissipation of forces or the blight of premature development in our children.