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Child Labor in Eastern Pennsylvania. Peter Roberts.

The industries in which young children are employed in the State of Pennsylvania are those of silk, hosiery, cotton, woolen, tobacco, candy, box, umbrella, school slate, rope, wire, nut and bolt, lock, etc. Nearly all these factories are located east of Harrisburg, and of the forty thousand children under sixteen years of age employed in this State, eighty-five per cent. labor in mills and factories located in twelve counties east of our capital.

No child under thirteen years of age can, according to law, be regularly employed, but in every industrial center where children are to any extent employed the consensus of opinion among labor leaders and professional men is that the law is evaded. A labor leader in Lancaster said, "I'll swear by a stack of Bibles as high as the Lutheran church that there are scores of children under thirteen years of age in these factories." In Allentown child labor is at a premium while men walk the streets unable to get work. A silk manufacturer of this city said, "All silk-throwing plants ought to get out of Allentown, for child labor is too scarce." In Reading a hosiery manufacturer said, "We cannot get all the boys and girls we need in our factories." Employers, when asked, "Do parents try to secure employment to children under age?" invariably answered, "Yes." Superintendents of public schools, in centers of textile industries are uniform in their testimony that a certain percentage of parents take their children from school when they are only ten, eleven, or twelve years of age and send them to the factory or mill. Physicians who practice among employees in mills and factories are unanimous in their testimony that children are employed before they are thirteen years of age. Lawyer Craig, of Lebanon, said, "Stop ignorant and greedy parents from committing perjury when they take out certificates of employment to their children." Dr.

Davies, of Lancaster, said, "Execute the laws now in force before you attempt to pass others."

Is this expression of public sentiment justified? In every industrial center there are humane and patriotic employers, but they must compete with sinister and heartless men who regard all consideration for tender children seeking employment as "sentiment" which has no place in business relations. In every large city there are factories of ill repute, wherein conditions are wretched, wages low, and the moral atmosphere degrading. I visited one of these where six hundred employees labored, sixty-five per cent. of whom were under sixteen years of age. Six months ago a strike had occurred in this factory. I asked a boy seventeen years old if they had won it; his reply was, "No; the kids defeated us." Among these employees it would be easy to select a score or two of boys and girls under thirteen years. The deputy factory inspector has sent home as many as thirty employees from this mill in one day, but within a week most of them were back again. The two wards from which the employer draws his labor supply are the most congested in the city, and one of them is being rapidly filled by an influx of Slavs and Italians. A public school superintendent, who has taught in these two wards for fifteen years, said, "It's an impossibility to stop the exodus of boys and girls to the mills before they are thirteen years of age." He had conducted night school for many years in these wards, and fifty per cent. of the boys attending them were doing primary work. In the town of Freeland I met three sisters coming home from the silk-mill. Each of them began to work when she was twelve years of age. The superintendent of public schools in this borough said, "Boys and girls leave my schools in large numbers from ten to twelve years of age. Some leave before they are ten years." In my visit through silk and hosiery mills, rope and school slate factories, cigar and candy establishments, I saw anæmic children, under the legal age, with frail constitutions, working sixty hours a week. Some of these were stunted and deformed, whom competent physicians would send to hospitals rather than have them work ten hours a day in a vitiated atmosphere for three cents an hour.

Do not factory inspectors know this? Yes; but their hands are tied by political influence. When Gus Egolf, of Norristown,

was appointed deputy factory inspector last June, he turned out in one week two hundred children illegally employed in his district. In one borough of eight thousand population he sent home fifty children from factories. When Deputy Factory Inspector Betchel was appointed last June, over five hundred children illegally employed were found in Berks County alone. In one borough he sent home forty-five children from nine to twelve years, who were employed contrary to law. He prosecuted the Mayor of the city of Reading for illegally giving two boys certificates of employment. The Mayor paid a fine of thirty-one dollars. He also successfully prosecuted an Alderman for the same offense in the same city. In another city the factory inspector tried to prosecute an Alderman who issued certificates of employment to children not legally qualified to work. He did not succeed, for the reason that no Justice of the Peace would try a "brother officer." One factory inspector candidly admitted that he could not discharge his duties in the town in which he resided; if he did, he would commit political suicide within six months. Another factory inspector successfully prosecuted an influential employer. The suit cost the employer four hundred dollars, and the inspector his office. The Central Labor Union of Lancaster prosecuted the leading factory in the city for employing children contrary to law. The case has never been tried, and the officers of the union cannot find out the reason why. Sometimes factory inspectors "strain at a gnat and swallow a camel." A poor organ-grinder in one of our cities was fined twenty-five dollars and costs for employing a boy not thirteen years of age to help him; in the same city a factory, wherein nine hundred persons labor, has from fifty to sixty children employed contrary to law, but this transgressor has not been prosecuted. Another storekeeper was prosecuted for employing a girl under thirteen years of age, and in the same city scores of girls are employed under that age, and nothing is done about it. The heads of large factories are invariably a power in the politics of the town or city wherein they reside, and the factory inspectors are appointees of the "machine."

Many employers and parents, by deception, defeat the inspector's purpose. In a large firm employing over seven hundred

persons, who were scattered over the four floors of the massive building, it was affirmed that the smaller boys were sent from one floor to the other when the officer made his inspection. In a silk factory employing about two hundred hands, a few boys were stowed away when the inspector made his visit. The officer was informed of this, and on the following day he returned to the factory and discharged the boys. Employers generally demand certificates from children under sixteen years of age, and most children employed under thirteen years enter the factory or mill because their parents swear falsely in order to get the "permit." Factory Inspector Leiserring said that ninety per cent. of the parents who send their children to factories and mills will perjure themselves in order to get their children to work at an early age. Each inspector whom I interviewed cited instances where parents had two children working, with certificates showing only four or five months difference in their ages! One child, of proper age, would secure a certificate and give it to a younger brother or sister. In Allentown, South Bethlehem, Norristown, etc., a large foreign-born population is found. The sons and daughters of these Slavs and Italians go to the factories and mills, and both the public school authorities and the factory inspectors confess that they are unable to check the greed of these parents. The test required by law, that children under sixteen years of age must know how to read and write the English language intelligently, is not rigidly applied.

Some employers transgress the factory laws of the State in working children under sixteen years of age and adult females more than sixty hours a week. The chief transgressors in this respect are the silk and hosiery mills, the cigar, school slates, box, and umbrella factories. These industries have their busy seasons, during which the employees work overtime. In one factory little girls were kept working from one o'clock till eight without respite—a continuous stretch of seven hours. Sometimes one department in a large factory falls behind the others, and the employer offers a premium to the employees to "catch up." Under this pressure I saw boys under fifteen years of age working fourteen hours a day. The mother of three young girls who worked overtime said, "It's from bed to work and from work to

bed." These children got up at six o'clock in the morning, and worked till eight o'clock in the evening. When questioned about the time they had for the noonday meal and how they used it, one of the girls said, "I take a nap when I can on the bales." Can any one say what thirteen or fourteen hours a day means to these young boys and girls? In my investigation I saw two or three of the wrecks. One young girl in her seventeenth year had been earning nine dollars and ten dollars a week, working from seventy to seventy-five hours. She had done it for three years, and is now broken in health and spirits. Another girl, eighteen years of age, having worked for six years in a silk-mill, said, "I used to be stout and strong, but now I'm poor enough." Dr. Weaver, of Easton, who has for the last ten years practiced among the operatives of a hosiery-mill which employs some twelve hundred hands, said: "Girls, when they have been in that mill from twelve years of age to twenty, are not much good after." Upon girls of tender years the blight of factory life falls heaviest. The boy may be stunted or he may grow disproportionately, but the effect upon the more delicate organism of the female is disastrous and cruel. Sixty hours a week is more than the average child of tender years can stand, but add another ten hours overtime and the pressure works disastrously. Dr. Samuel Davies, President of the State Board of Health of Pennsylvania, said: "Factory girls soon wilt, and they ill discharge the functions of maternity." Is it surprising?

Another wrong to tender boys and girls employed in silk-mills is night work. This is confined to silk plants installed in the anthracite coal fields. In Allentown, Reading, South Bethlehem, Lancaster, etc., children do not work nights, for employers cannot get children enough to operate their plants in the day. Mr. Cardiff, manager of a silk-throwing plant in South Bethlehem, said "The coal fields is the ideal place for a silk-throwing plant; you get cheap rent, cheap coal, cheap labor, and the parents don't object to have their children work nights."

Not in any other industrial center in eastern Pennsylvania are young girls employed in night work. Ten or fifteen years ago night work for girls was unknown in this State. The evil arose when the silk-throwing plants were built in anthracite

communities; and as these enterprises multiply, the number of tender children employed at night increases. A plant in Dickson City, employing some three hundred hands, draws its labor supply from a radius of two miles, and young girls not sixteen years of age work twelve hours for five nights in the week. When an employer was asked, "Do they work as well by night as by day?" he answered, "No. They don't sleep in the day, and when midnight comes they get drowsy and the waste is larger." I saw little girls going to and fro before scores of revolving spindles, having their short dresses tied with a cord to keep them from being entangled in the machinery as they stretched on tiptoe to catch the broken thread. And these little girls in short dresses, standing before these whirlers—some of them making twenty-five thousand revolutions a minute—from 6 p. m. to 6 a. m., get drowsy. It means more waste—the waste of nerve and tissue of future mothers in the commonwealth of Pennsylvania. In another factory some little boys watching the spindles kept a box near by, for they could not well catch the broken thread unless they had something to stand on. The Empire Silk Mill of Wilkesbarre discontinued night work for girls, and a man living in close proximity to the mill gave the reason: "We couldn't sleep. The girls came out at midnight, walked the streets, shouted, screamed, jumped on our porches, etc. It was terrible. What mischief one would not think of doing another would. So we protested, and the manager discontinued night work." That was in a city, but there are twenty silk-throwing commission houses in small mining towns of from four thousand to twelve thousand population where girl employees can run during the midnight meal hour without disturbing the rest of those living in these thinly populated communities. Behind it all is the greed of employers. The owner of a small silk-throwing plant said, "By working day and night I get my money for three per cent." Another manager, who recently transferred his plant from Paterson to a mining village, said "I save from sixty to seventy per cent. in wages by coming here." I asked, "Have you a sufficient supply of labor?" He answered, "Twice as much as I need." Under these conditions is it likely that humane considerations

will deter these men from working this cheap labor day and night?

Before the silk manufacturers transferred their plants to these mining towns there was little work here for girls to do. Their coming has been a material aid to our people, and no one can gainsay the benefit conferred by them upon many communities in their struggle for subsistence. Males only are employed in the mining industry. Mine employees, as a rule, have large families, and the increase to the family income from the wages of girls working in factories and mills is needed and is put to good purpose in most homes. No intelligent person will protest against a diversity of industries entering into our towns. Each one of our boroughs offers inducements to manufacturers to come within its borders. Employment to girls of sixteen years and over is a physical and moral good. But what is argued for is that boys and girls from ten to fourteen years should not be agents of production; that it is a crime to work them seventy and seventy-five hours a week; and that a law should be passed in the next session of our Legislature making it a crime to employ any boy under sixteen years and any girl under eighteen years between 7 p. m. and 6 a. m. in any industry.