

EXTENT AND CHARACTER OF HOME WORK

Numbers employed.

The importance of the home-work problem is indicated by the situation in New York and Pennsylvania, two industrial States that are attempting thorough regulation and control of home work and that publish detailed reports of their work. In New York State in the year ended June 30, 1927, over 21,500 persons were found engaged in home work in licensed houses.¹ During the same period, in the New York City district alone home work was given out to 11,516 workers by 1,467 employers.² On November 1, 1927, Pennsylvania had 1,161 employers licensed to give out home work and they reported more than 12,600 home workers for the month of September.³

In New Jersey in the year ended June 30, 1928, licenses to do home work were issued for 3,027 families.⁴

In Massachusetts, where home-work licenses are required only in the case of wearing apparel, licenses were issued to 347 families in the year ended November 30, 1927. Naturally, a considerable part of the home work in this State does not come under the license requirement, and therefore no reports from employers or home-work inspections are had in these lines. Information on the extent and the conditions of home work in Massachusetts, accordingly, is incomplete.⁵

A few other States recognize the problem and make serious efforts to control it. In many others it is known that the home-work problem exists, but information is fragmentary and in a large majority of cases no legal regulation is in force.

Industries engaged.

The needle trades are the great sources of home work. Of the 21,573 home workers found in licensed houses in New York State in the year ended June 30, 1927, the clothing trades employed over 13,000 and embroidery and artificial flowers gave employment to 4,000 more.⁶ In New York City during the same period 33.5 per cent of the registered home workers were employed on men's clothing, 22.4 per cent on embroidery, and 15.9 per cent on trimmings and flowers.⁷ In Pennsylvania in 1927 (according to home-work reports of September) 27 per cent of the employers and 23 per cent of the home workers were in the men's clothing industry, while other clothing, knit goods, and tobacco were the industries next in importance.⁸ Many kinds of work are being done in homes in various localities. Stringing tags, carding buttons, hooks and eyes, or safety pins, mak-

¹ New York. Department of Labor. Annual Report of the Industrial Commissioner for the 12 Months Ended June 30, 1927. Report of division of home-work inspection, 1927, p. 254.

² Ibid. Industrial Bulletin, June, 1928, p. 277.

³ Pennsylvania. Department of Labor and Industry. Labor and Industry, March, 1928, pp. 12 and 13.

⁴ New Jersey. Department of Labor. Industrial Bulletin, September, 1928, p. 41.

⁵ Massachusetts. Department of Labor and Industries. Annual Report for the Year Ending Nov. 30, 1927, p. 25; and typewritten report on industrial home work and its regulation in Massachusetts, 1927.

⁶ New York. Department of Labor. Annual Report of the Industrial Commissioner for the 12 Months Ended June 30, 1927. Report of division of home-work inspection, 1927, p. 253.

⁷ Ibid. Some Social and Economic Aspects of Home Work. Special bul. 158, February, 1929, p. 8.

⁸ Pennsylvania. Department of Labor and Industry. Labor and Industry, March, 1928, p. 13.

ing garters, and work on cheap jewelry, lampshades, powder puffs, paper boxes and bags, carpet rags, and toys, are a few of the simple occupations characteristically found as home industries.

The home-work employers are to a considerable extent an unstable group of small manufacturers or contractors. In Pennsylvania 75.7 per cent of the 1,161 licensed home-work employers in September, 1927, had fewer than 25 employees each, and 38.5 per cent had fewer than 5 each. Only 20 employers had 100 home workers or more.⁹ In New York City in 1928 the average number of home workers employed by each firm was 8, and they ranged from an average of 5 to a firm in the women's clothing industry to 19 in powder-puff manufacturing.¹⁰ The home-work employers are a numerous and shifting group, principally small operators who work with little capital and depend upon an elastic reserve of cheap labor for their production.

Causes.

Home work in place of factory production is resorted to chiefly by manufacturers whose work is irregular, highly seasonal, or subject to fluctuation with changes in fashion or process, and in which, therefore, producers seek a labor force that can be quickly expanded or contracted. In such types of work many manufacturers consider it advantageous that their work in rush seasons should be done by home workers rather than add to the burden of overhead by providing for the peak of production in the factory.

The clothing industries, which are highly seasonal and produce on short notice, are responsible for fluctuations in employment even greater for the home workers than for factory workers, though the latter are notoriously an irregularly employed group.¹¹ Other industries, not so much seasonal as subject to changes of fashion, find that sudden turns in demand result in spectacular increases or decreases in home-work employment; for example, buttons, beads, necklaces, powder puffs, embroidery, or lampshades. Or a new process may affect, in one direction or another, the employment on home work. In all these cases the manufacturer is able to call into service a large reserve of labor without providing factory space or taking responsibility for the workers as regular employees. That low rates of pay are accepted, in many cases lower than rates for similar operations in the factories, is a further inducement to manufacturers to use this type of labor.

The Pennsylvania Department of Labor questioned approximately 600 employers as to their reasons for giving out home work. The desire to avoid overhead expense proved to be important among the motives of the manufacturers.¹²

Lack of space in the factory, high rents, and a desire to keep down general overhead expenses was stated by about 15 per cent of the employers as their primary reason for giving out home work. It seemed rather evident that this desire to keep down overhead expenses was a contributing factor in the majority of cases where work was sent into the homes although perhaps not always

⁹ Pennsylvania. Department of Labor and Industry. Labor and Industry, March, 1928, p. 12.

¹⁰ New York. Department of Labor. Industrial Bulletin, May, 1929, p. 628.

¹¹ New York. Department of Labor. Home Work in the Men's Clothing Industry in New York and Rochester. Special bul. 147, August, 1926, p. 35.

¹² Pennsylvania. Department of Labor and Industry. Labor and Industry, April, 1927, pp. 8 and 9.

clearly formulated as such in the minds of the employer. Occasionally, the rapid growth of business in an establishment temporarily forced work out into the homes. Finding that it could be carried on satisfactorily in this way the employer had no particular urge to add to his investment by providing more factory space.

The New York State Department of Labor in its study of home work in the men's clothing industry also emphasizes these points. In New York City about two-thirds of the men's clothing is produced by manufacturers who cut the goods and market the finished product but farm out to contractors the actual making of the garment. Furthermore, manufacturers who themselves make garments usually give out some work to contractors. In fact, the system of giving out garments to home workers for certain operations is used extensively by both manufacturers and contractors. This complex system of production is characterized as follows:¹³

Divorcing the making of the garment from the marketing has relieved the manufacturer of the necessity of carrying a large overhead and of providing stable employment for a large working force and has put the burden of expansion and contraction upon the contractor. Carrying on production by means of small shops tends to keep the industry in a fluid state. * * * The system of small shops together with a large reserve of labor allows for quick expansion of business. * * * Firms manufacture to order rather than for stock and the market is organized to make quick deliveries on large orders. This results in sharp expansion and contraction of business producing a markedly seasonal industry. Business is carried on under highly competitive conditions.

The industries that use the home-work system vary in their details, but they are alike in using, to quickly expand the labor force when a rush of work comes, the labor available in the home. Thus the industries need not provide factory space and pay rent and other overhead for this part of their production. Under the pressure of competition, the employers avoid these costs as far as they can. The burden of expansion and contraction, instead of being carried as one cost of the industry, is passed on to the home workers in the form of irregularity of employment and earnings. Inevitably questions arise as to the soundness and the social ethics of such a system of production. From the standpoint of the industry itself, it is questionable whether the instability and unregulated competition of this system is advantageous; whether such an organization of production is efficient. From the standpoint of the public there is a clear case for regulation, if not the more drastic measure of prohibition, to set limits to the conditions that this highly competitive type of production imposes upon a group of workers who are, by the nature of the case, in poor position to protect themselves.

THE WORKERS

Home workers are largely women, aided all too frequently by children. They are chiefly unskilled or semiskilled. Recruited largely in tenement neighborhoods, often from recent immigrants or other groups with little or no industrial experience, they have limited knowledge of job opportunities. Of 642 women reporting on previous work in a recent New York study, 51 per cent had never worked outside their own homes; 15 per cent had worked in completely

¹³ New York. Department of Labor. Home Work in the Men's Clothing Industry in New York and Rochester. Special bul. 147, August, 1926, pp. 9 and 10.