

LABOR OF WOMEN AND CHILDREN IN TENEMENTS¹

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TWO tasks of great difficulty confront those who are trying to prevent the labor of women and children in tenement houses. They are difficult because they are fundamental.

The first is to induce the court of appeals of the state of New York to reverse itself, to reverse the opinion which has fastened the curse and blight of tenement-house work upon this city since the year 1888. In that year the court decided that the attempt to prohibit tenement-house work in the interest of the health of the people who do the work cannot be sustained as a legitimate use of the police power.

When that decision was handed down people did not understand, as they do now, the communicability of disease, the relation of excessive fatigue of the workers to disease, or the relation of home work to excessive fatigue of women and children. We have now a body of new knowledge available for the use of the court of appeals. Our first task is to give wide publicity to the disease-breeding conditions of manufacture in the tenements, thus leading the legislature to make a fresh attempt at outright prohibition, at the same time making it possible for the court of appeals gracefully to reverse itself. Until that is done, all attempts at regulation of manufacture in tenements are illusory; they simply lull the public conscience vainly and cruelly, when it ought to be alert and militant.

The second task is to imitate Massachusetts in creating a state commission to examine into the wages paid women and children who work in the tenements, with a view to securing minimum wage boards in all those industries that overflow into tenement houses.

We have at present forty industries for which licenses are required before work can be done in a tenement house; but we

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know of sixty-two additional industries carried on in the tenements for which no license is required. There are over thirteen thousand houses licensed as work shops, and in order really to control them we ought to have twenty-six thousand inspectors, an inspector in each house all day and all night. Without this, all inspection of tenement-house work is illusory.

The Massachusetts method is to make it so expensive as to be unprofitable to employ workers in the tenements. The commission has made its report, the bill has been favorably reported out of committee and is now before the legislature. The members of the commission are hopeful that it may pass. When our legislature meets next year we shall have an object lesson, here at home, such as has existed in England for two years, and for seventeen years in Australia, of this method of dealing with home work by requiring that home workers shall receive compensation not only for the work they do, but for the relief they afford the manufacturer in the rent, heat, light, cleaning, supervision and transportation of materials and finished products. Where that has been done the joy of the manufacturer in the overflow work has been dampened, and he has been encouraged to supply sufficient room for carrying on the work under his own responsible supervision, without the intervention of the great mass of sweaters who batten upon our tenement industry.

In the opinion of the organization which I represent, these are the two difficult and essential next steps to be taken—the reversal of the decision of the court of appeals, and the establishment of a Minimum Wage Boards Commission in this state.