

# Laborers in Heat and in Heavy Industries

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I WRITE as a prohibitionist convinced that the Eighteenth Amendment will never be formally repealed but will last as long as the Constitution. But I am deeply concerned lest it suffer such annulment as has befallen the Fifteenth Amendment in the Southern states, and befalls Article II of the Constitution during and long after every war. I am, therefore, grateful for this opportunity to point out, though it is neither new nor original, one means of making friends for the Eighteenth Amendment which seems to have been neglected hitherto. I refer to the systematic provision of attractive, refreshing substitute drinks for working people who are exposed to excessively high temperatures by the climate, or by the nature of their employment, or who suffer thirst by reason of their own hard physical labor, with or without the other two influences. Prohibition has sharply accentuated a long struggle of wage earners of the most varied character for an elementary human right—the right to replace, as needed, the fluid which they exhaust at their work.

## PROPER DRINKING WATER FACILITIES DIFFICULT TO ENFORCE

In standardized industries, where the importance is recognized of keeping the labor turnover down and the regular attendance of the working force up, drinking water does not normally come up for discussion between employers and employed. It is supplied as a matter of course. These are, however, unhappily, a vanishing minority of the great total of American industries.

Employments which involve over-

powering heat and prolonged extreme physical exertion are not standardized. They are socially subnormal. A single exception to this statement is, perhaps, the work of locomotive engineers in the hot months in the hot regions of our country. The demand for sustained attention is, in itself, a severe strain. The locomotive engineers, however, have in some measure standardized their industry and largely control the conditions under which they work.

Back in the '80's, the industrially developed states were beginning to insert in their labor laws a provision that employers must supply sufficient, accessible, wholesome drinking water. But the workers found it permanently difficult to enforce this law, especially those who had no trade organizations. In the Atlantic coast cities and some others, torrid summers made this a recurring grievance. Local boards of health lost golden opportunities to gain the respect and lasting good will of multitudes of honest folk by seeing to it that they had good water to drink. So, alas, did the temperance forces, by failing to bring to bear their power in the community in support of so obvious and feasible a health measure.

## CONDITIONS THIRTY YEARS AGO

My own first personal contact with human suffering and ruin due to the absence of attractive, wholesome beverages available for men and boys subjected to the double strain of heat and hard labor, was nearly thirty years ago, in the winter of 1894 and 1895. As Chief State Factory Inspector of Illinois, I visited with two deputy

inspectors the great glass bottle works at Alton. One of the most vivid memories of my life is the picture of more than a hundred gnomelike figures of little boys, some crouching at the feet of the bottle blowers, opening and shutting molds in front of the fierce glare of the glass ovens; others running from that terrible heat, carrying bottles to the annealing ovens at the circumference of the building. The blowers' ovens were heated with coal and filled with sand melted to suit the blower and his blow pipe. The boys, as we learned the next day in their homes, were from seven years old up. The hour was nearly two o'clock in a bitter morning in early January. When the night shift closed at two, the children went with the men under whom they worked, across the street to the grog shops (this was the customary name in Alton) and drank the poison sold there—some of the little boys paying for their drink and some emptying the dregs of the men's glasses.

The heat to which the boys' growing frames were daily exposed was appalling. Pneumonia, tuberculosis and rheumatism were their characteristic industrial diseases, as we learned incidentally in their homes.

These, however, were not what shocked the authorities of the city to whom we turned for help for the illegally employed, who had to be dismissed because the new child labor law prohibited the employment of children below the age of fourteen years in manufacture. What horrified the prosperous citizens of Alton was the profanity, the obscenity, the drunkenness, the "general toughness" of the "glassworks' boys." But no one provided any satisfying non-alcoholic beverages within the reach of their purses, or their homes, or their workplace, within the hours of the night shift at the works.

#### NOTHING BUT "GROG" OR WATER

My next encounter with the fatal dearth of wholesome beverages for men was in an industry necessitating both hot and heavy labor. This was in 1907, as a participant in the work of the Pittsburgh Survey conducted by Paul Kellogg and published by the Sage Foundation. Among a multitude of examples, the outstanding one was a factory producing a world-renowned metal product requiring exposure to heat well-nigh unbearable. The manager was a Scotchman, a teetotaler, filled with angry disgust for the drunkenness and lack of thrift of his employees. Indignantly he pointed to a city block, facing his own entrance, and occupied exclusively by low saloons, almost one for each of the nationalities to be found in the works.

"There," he said, "that's where their earnings go. Instead of buying homes in the building and loan associations, and living like Americans, they loaf in those grogeries and sleep in bunks in lodging houses, three eight-hour shifts of sleepers for every bunk, and all known kinds of vermin in common."

As I listened in the overpowering dizzying heat, suffering myself from thirst, I made hold to ask—remembering the boys in the Alton glassworks—what else was available for his men. "One of the finest Artesian wells in the United States," was his complacent answer, "and the water some of the coldest and most refreshing." The scene and the self-satisfied employer's preposterous reply stand out as though they were yesterday. Twelve years had passed since the Alton visit, and here was the same situation. A mass of workmen squandering money, health, and intelligence upon alcohol in its worst forms, not because they preferred it to better things, but because no wholesome, attractive, sub-

stitute was accessible. For that constituency, in those surroundings, amid that deadly heat and poisoned dust, ice water or Artesian water was unthinkable.

For me, the experience was, indeed, a melancholy one. My father, for nearly thirty consecutive years a member of Congress from Philadelphia, taught the doctrine of the American workingmen building up the industrial strength of the Republic, their own prosperity and high wages assured by a protective tariff encouraging the industry of which they were an integral part. And here, in his own state of Pennsylvania, less than twenty years after his death, was this vast typical works, producing on an enormous scale, under a high tariff, an article which had become a necessity of American life.

#### IMMIGRANTS REPLACE AMERICAN-BORN

And where was the American workman? From the Scotch general manager to the youngest messenger boy not one could be found of native birth. None could be induced to work amid such torturing surroundings or to live according to the standard that the manager himself had sketched as the prevailing one.

The immigrants who, in 1907, replaced the Americans of my father's nineteenth-century vision, in the great basic metal industries demanding heat and hard labor, were as powerless to defend themselves from their demoralizing surroundings as the little boys in the Alton glassworks a dozen years before. Without command of English, separated by their polyglot state, exhausted by their daily sweltering labor, and dulled in mind by drink, they took what the "grogeries" (as the Scotch manager called them) offered, to slake the thirst that was as clearly a product of the industry which

employed them as the goods that it placed upon the market. From the cradle they had been used to beer, of which the content and quality had been supervised, if not prescribed, by their governments.

It may be argued that great changes for the better have been made in the industries themselves, since the episode of 1895 in Alton and in Pittsburgh in 1907. Let anyone who inclines to this belief read the recent description of personal experience in copper smelting, in the *Atlantic Monthly*, for June, 1923, under the title "Copper: A Study in Ingots and Men," by Charles Rumford Walker.

#### THE NEED STILL THE SAME

Granted that, in the glass bottle industry, which has spread in many directions, the proportion of diminutive boys has been reduced in some states by child labor laws, which have stimulated the use of mechanical devices; and granted, also, that gas and oil have largely deprived the industry of excuse for a permanent night shift which was once afforded by the use of continuous coal fires throughout the works, employees in the glass industry still need satisfying substitutes for intoxicating beverages.

In the steel works, at the time of the Survey, the twelve-hour day and the seven-day week prevailed, as the former still does in the plants of the United States Steel Corporation. We found young "water boys" working twelve hours every day (or night) in the month; and twenty-four hours on two Sundays when the shift changed from night to day, or back again from day to night, once every fortnight. These boys were free, of course, to drink at will the water that they purveyed. But, like the men, they found little comfort in cold water and were steady customers of the "grogshops"

at the gates of the steel plants. Terrible heat, inhumanly long hours and night work gave controlling power to the craving for stimulants. In the employ of the United States Steel Corporation water boys will still doubtless be found under substantially these conditions, so long as the twelve-hour day is continued.

#### SAFE DRINKS NOT TRASH

What, in conclusion, are safe drinks for employees who suffer from heat while at work? Certainly not ice water or that drawn freshly from Artesian wells. For many people, pure water alone is distasteful and often injurious. "The safe, old standby" in glass, iron and steel works is water containing oatmeal. Anything less attractive would be hard to find! Switzerland affords a practical example. When some of the railroads were nationalized by the Swiss Federation, men employed in the train service were forbidden to use alcohol in any form during their working day. Fruit juice, excellent in quality (not any synthetic substitute), is carried on trains and is accessible to employees, though passengers must content themselves with commercial beverages bought at stations.

Chemistry has wrought miracles since these observations were made in 1894-5, 1907, 1913 and 1919 (the latter in Switzerland), but what has chemistry contributed to the experience of men who complain that they "sweat the flesh off their bones" in heavy industries at high temperatures? Near beer, coca-cola, and other worthless synthetic trash in all known colors

and of myriad flavors, at commercial prices, permanent sources of exasperation to these laborers.

Men powerful in body and sluggish in mind, of the type who even in eight hours exhaust their energy by sustained physical exertion at a high temperature, will drink whatever momentarily lessens their discomfort at the end of the work period. Good or bad, legal or illegal, cheap or dear, openly or secretly, drink they will have outside if they are not, as a routine matter, abundantly supplied with satisfying fluid to replace what they have spent at their work. This is obviously inevitable. The only question is: where and what they will drink.

Forbidding them beer, without affording an available substitute wherever they suffer from heat and heavy work, is merely tempting them to violate the Amendment. It is living in a fool's paradise to suppose that they will not violate it. They will also hate it. They will believe that they have been deprived, against their will, of beer which they have found refreshing and have been taught to regard as a food, and furnished instead with worthless stuff which they dislike. Their experience will, moreover, be incessantly so interpreted to them by the advocates of light wines and beer, within and without the ranks of organized labor.

In the interest of the Amendment, therefore, it behooves its friends to provide cheap, good, refreshing, non-alcoholic drinks within permanent easy reach of the people who most need them. Ordinary commerce has failed utterly.