

“SWEATING,” HOME AND FACTORY SYSTEMS

The “sweating” system and the “sweat-shop” are terms familiar to all who know anything whatever about labor conditions among the clothing workers of the great cities. It is the object of more assaults by reformers and philanthropists, perhaps, than any other system of labor. The “sweating” system is not known as such by the wholesale manufacturers or dealers who are responsible for it. By them it is called the “task” system. It was made possible, or it was the inevitable result of letting out work to persons who performed it at home. The wholesale firm lets the job to a contractor, who, in turn, sublets the work in small lots to other contractors, or directly turns it over to the employés in his little shop, or to persons who do it at home.

The evils of the system are inherent, and could not be eradicated without the abandonment of the system itself. Of course, the tendency is to lower prices and lower wages, and when the first contractor sublets to smaller contractors, and two profits must be made out of the work before the employé can expect a cent, there is very little left for wages. The steady lowering of wages, in effect, when they have not been lowered in actual amount by the task, is one of the most startling and discouraging facts connected with clothing manufacture. At the beginning of the “sweating” system a task consisted of eight or nine coats a day. In hard times, the contractor would tell the employés that, in order not to cut down wages, the task would have

to be increased. And so, coat by coat was added to the task, the wages for which were never increased. This method of getting more work for the same wages was followed with adroitness, until the task reached as high as twenty coats for a day's work, although it often required twenty and thirty hours of labor to complete it.

Before the task, or sweating, system was introduced, a journeyman tailor received about \$2.50 or \$3 for making a ready-made coat, all of the work on which he did himself. Now, under the task system, five or six different persons work on different parts of the same garment. There is the operator, who gets about \$18 for a nominal week's task; the baster, who gets \$16; the finisher, who gets \$11; and the presser, who gets \$12. Last of all there is the girl who makes buttonholes and sews on buttons, who gets \$4.50 a week. The week's task may be two or three weeks' actual work. Economically, the system is wonderfully successful. The owner of a sweat-shop requires little capital and pays little rent. A shrewd man having found out where his employer gets his work, goes to the wholesale firm, and underbids him. This reduces the cost to the manufacturer, and also reduces the earnings of the employés. But soon, perhaps, some worker in the sweat-shop will resort to the same tactics, and underbid his employer; and so on indefinitely, wages being decreased, meantime, while the task is made greater and greater.

The over-supply of cheap and unskilled labor is supposed to be largely responsible for the sweating system, as the cities are flooded with men and women unable to do any kind of skilled labor, and quite willing to undertake even a laborious task at small pay. The system of sweating, however, is gradually being replaced by the factory system, which produces better clothes, and pays better wages, and, at the same time, has proved fully as profitable as the objectionable system of the "sweat-shop."

The term "sweating system," according to the United States Labor Department reports, has a general meaning, but is specifically used to describe a condition of labor in which a maximum amount of work in a given time is performed for a minimum wage, and in which the ordinary rules of health and comfort are disregarded. It is inseparably associated with contract work, and it is intensified by subcontracting in shops conducted in homes.

Such conditions prevail to a distressing degree in localities having a large, herded foreign population, and among people known for excessive industry and thrift—virtues otherwise considered indispensable to prosperity and happiness. Recently arrived foreign working people when crowded into big cities are most helpless, and in order to live are willing to submit to almost incredible exactions. It is thus that this form of labor soon outcompetes and displaces all other forms, and becomes the standard for the particular industry in which it is introduced.

The "task," or "sweating," system was the natural product of a metropolis like New York, overcrowded with impoverished labor; while the "factory" system, which is supplanting it, even in New York, is developed in the smaller and less crowded cities. It is generally known as the "Boston" system, although quite as familiar in Philadelphia, Chicago, Baltimore, St. Louis, and other centres. Its inherent principle is the fullest possible

subdivision of work; on the principle that the same amount of work can be accomplished at less expenditure, while permitting the payment of better wages, because the greater specialization enables the worker to accomplish more. While under the "task" system five workers may be engaged in the making of a single coat, in some factories it may pass through the hands of one hundred workers. This makes it possible to have a large number of unskilled persons working under the direction of a few skilled overseers. The thing to be done by any one worker is so limited that he soon acquires great facility, and can thus earn more than under the sweating system. The advantages of the factory system are numerous. Wages are paid regularly, the hours are reasonably short, and the working places are in far better and more healthful condition.

There is still another system of making clothes which is even more objectionable than the "sweating" system. This is known as the "home" system, where the individual workers take their tasks home. Very few of the garments are finished in the shops, but are taken home and completed. Into many of the dirtiest tenements of the city cloth for trousers and coats is taken in whole pieces, and remains several days in the midst of filth, often becoming infected with disease. This system is older than the sweat shops, having been found particularly economical, as saving the expenses of a shop. Even women of means were willing to take in sewing, in order to earn a little "pin money." The system has had a most demoralizing influence upon wages and labor conditions; but, fortunately, it is, also, yielding to the factory system.