

Chicago Sweatshops

Illinois Bureau of Labor Statistics



OVERVIEW

Industrial growth attracted working-class people to the cities, where they often worked in sweatshops. Greedy manufacturers and others took advantage of the desperately poor, especially in the clothing industry. Life in the sweatshops is described in these excerpts from an 1893 report by the Illinois Bureau of Labor Statistics.

GUIDED READING As you read, consider the following questions:

- How has the sweatshop developed within the clothing industry?
- What is the job of the “sweater”? How does he evade government authorities seeking to clean up sweatshops?

ANY INQUIRY into the occupations of working women in Chicago, or in any other of the larger cities, must lead the inquirer, sooner or later, to the so-called sweating system, under which the manufacture of ready-made clothing is chiefly conducted. The peculiarities of this phase of industrial life are, however, so marked, and have recently attracted so much attention, that it has been deemed proper to extend the observations of the bureau in this matter beyond the women employed under this system and to gather whatever facts or figures were available concerning all the shops of this kind, and all the people, both men and women, employed in them in Chicago. . . .

The "sweating system" is one of respectable antiquity and is a surviving remnant of the industrial system which preceded the factory system, when industry was chiefly conducted on the piece-price plan in small shops or the homes of the workers. Machinery developed the modern factory and concentrated labor, but in the tailoring trades, the practice of sending out garments, ready-cut, to be made by journeymen at their homes and at a price-per-garment, has survived and is still maintained in custom work, in which the journeyman is still a skilled tailor who makes the whole garment. The modern demand for ready-made clothing in great quantities and of the cheaper grades has, however, led to much subdivision of the labor on garments and, with it, to the substitution of the contractor, or sweater, with groups of employees in separate processes for the individual tailor skilled in all of them.

The odious but expressive name "sweating" has been attached to the business because of its evil nature and consequences. In its worst form, and there are doubtless degrees in its development, it is simply extortion practised upon people whose environment prevents their escape from it; in other words, it is a deliberate preying upon the necessities of the poor. In its economical

aspect it is the culmination and final fruit of the competitive system in industry.

In practice, sweating consists of the farming out by competing manufacturers to competing contractors the material for garments, which, in turn, is distributed among competing men and women to be made up. The middleman, or contractor, is the sweater (though he also may be himself subjected to pressure from above) and his employees are the sweated or oppressed. He contracts to make up certain garments, at a given price per piece, and then hires other people to do the work at a less price. His profit lies in the difference between the two prices. In the process he will furnish shop room and machines to some, and allow others, usually the finishers, to take the work to their living and lodging rooms in tenements. . . .

In Chicago, where it dates back scarcely a generation, the sweating system seems to be a direct outgrowth of the factory system; that is, the sweatshops have gradually superseded the manufacturers' shops. It increases, with the demand for cheap clothing, the influx of cheap labor and the consequent subdivision of the processes of manufacture. In the clothing trades in Chicago, three different sorts of shops have been developed, known among the employees as the "inside shops," or those conducted on the factory system by the manufacturers themselves; the "outside shops," or those conducted by the contractors; and the "home shops," or family groups. . . .

Substantially all manufacturers employ a number of sweaters who conduct small shops on their own account. These underbid each other to obtain work. They do not make common cause against the manufacturers, either by combining among themselves or by uniting with their employees. On the contrary, they exploit their employees to the utmost to compensate themselves for the exactions of the manufacturers and the competition among themselves.

The economic position of the sweater is anomalous. He has no commercial risks; he gives the manufacturer no considerable security for the goods entrusted to his care, and rarely has more than a wagonload of them in his possession; he pays one week's rent in advance for his shop (which may also be his dwelling) and buys his sewing machines on the installment plan, paying for them 75 cents a week each; or, he may still further reduce his investment by requiring his operators to furnish their own machines. Finally, he does not pay his employees until he receives his money for the finished lot.

In the small shops the characteristics of the sweating system are accentuated, and the most marked of these are disorder and instability. The latter results from the irresponsibility of the sweater and the facility with which he may either establish himself or change his location. This has very much embarrassed the process of enumeration. A man may work in his bedroom today, in another man's shop tomorrow, in his own shop in a month, and, before the end of the season, abandon that for a place in a factory. If an inspector orders sanitary changes to be made within a week the sweater may prefer to disappear before the close of the week and open another shop in

another place. Such easy evasion of the authorities places the sweater almost beyond official control, and many of them overcrowd their shops, overwork their employees, hire small children, keep their shops unclean, and their sanitary arrangements foul and inadequate.

The provisional nature of the small shops also accounts largely for the absence of steam motive power for the sewing machines, though it is also explained by the statement that "leg power is cheaper than steam." The increasing employment of girls aged from twelve to sixteen years as machine operators is making this motive power still cheaper and at the same time more destructive of health and life.

The minute subdivision of the work in the sweaters' shops reduces the skill required to the lowest point. The whole number of employees, therefore, in all the outside shops includes, besides a few of the skilled, who would, under the old system, be employed in the inside shops, a majority of unskilled hands of both sexes, earning low wages, easily replaced, and wholly at the mercy of the sweater. Subdivision thus reaches its highest development; operators stitch, pressers press, basters baste, button girls sew on buttons, others draw basting threads, and finishers finish. Sometimes one girl, with a buttonhole machine, makes a specialty of the inside bands of knee pants, making buttonholes by the thousand gross. On the other hand, coats requiring buttonholes made in cloth, and with more skill, are sent by the contractor to a buttonhole shop, where two or three young men work machines, and where small boys or girls smear the holes in preparation for them.

In nearly every small shop there are some finishers, but in the case of knee pants, trousers, cloaks, and vests, the garments, after being cut, basted, stitched and buttonholed, are given out to have all that remains, the felling and handstitching, done at home before the garment is pressed and sent to the factory.

These tenement workers are known as "finishers." They are generally associated with some one of the shops, but will take work from any of them. Hundreds of women and girls compete among themselves, keeping their names on the contractors' lists, as the contractors compete among themselves for work from the manufacturers.

These women sew in the intervals of their housework and the garments lie about the living rooms, across greasy chairs and tables, upon filthy floors and vermin-infested beds. Soils upon garments are so common that the presser in the shops is also a cleaner, provided with benzene, alcohol, etc., for the removal of grease and stains. The competition of the home finishers constantly presses upon the wages of the shop hands. In some localities nearly every house contains some of these home finishers; our enumerators have located a total of 1,836 of them in the several districts; and they increase as the shops increase and as immigration increases. . . .

A few examples may be cited illustrating what some of these places are like. In one case, several men were found at work pressing knee pants in a low

basement room, poorly lighted and ventilated by two small windows. There was no floor in this room, and the people were living on the bare earth, which was damp and littered with every sort of rubbish. In another case, seven persons were at work in a room 12 by 15 feet in dimensions and with but two windows. These people, with the sewing machines of operators and the tables used by the pressers, so filled this meager space that it was impossible to move about. Charcoal was used for heating the pressers' irons, and the air was offensive and prostrating to a degree. Separated from this shop room by a frail partition which did not reach to the ceiling was a bedroom about 7 by 15 feet in size, containing two beds, for the use of the family of the sweater. In another instance, in a small basement room which measured only 7 feet 10 inches by 6 feet 6 inches, and without door or window opening to the outer air, a man was at work pressing knee pants by the light of a very poor gasoline lamp and using a gasoline stove for heating his irons. . . .

A shop was found in which twelve persons lived in six rooms, of which two were used as a shop. Knee pants in all stages of completion filled the shop, the bedrooms, and kitchen. Nine men were employed at machines in a room 12 by 14, and there knee pants were being manufactured by the thousand gross. This is in the rear of a swarming tenement in a wretched street. . . .

But the worst conditions of all prevail among the families who finish garments at home. Here the greatest squalor and filth abounds and the garments are of necessity exposed to it and a part of it during the process of finishing. A single room frequently serves as kitchen, bedroom, living room, and working room. In the Italian quarter, four families were found occupying one four-room flat, using one cook stove, and all the women and children sewing in the bedrooms. For this flat they pay \$10 a month, each family contributing \$2.50 a month. Another group was found consisting of thirteen persons, of whom four were fathers of families and five were women and girls sewing on cloaks at home. These thirteen people pay \$8 per month rent, each family contributing \$2. . . .

Wages are paid by the piece and by the week; by the piece to skilled hands and to the home finishers; by the week uniformly to beginners and usually to shop hands; but all employees, whether paid by the piece or by the week, are subject to the "task" system; that is, they must accomplish a certain amount of work in a given time or forfeit their places. The best rates of wages are naturally found in the manufacturers' "inside" shops and in the better contractors shops, in both of which the employees are usually of the more skilled class who speak some English and have some trade organization. . . .

Very few sweaters' victims accumulate any savings. When they do they become sweaters themselves. So far as observation extended, no disposition was discovered among them to return to the countries whence they came, even when they became able to do so. On the other hand, they manifest great desire to see their children attain some degree of prosperity greater than their own. Unfortunately, their eagerness in this particular frequently defeats itself, for

they send their young children to the shop instead of to the school. Here their health is undermined; their presence in the shop reduces the wages of adults, and both parents and children become involved in a common struggle for existence. The result is that discontent is universal. The sweater complains of increased competition and reduced prices and profits; the victims complain of low wages, of poor pay, of the long dull season, of the heat and overcrowding in the busy season, and of the poverty and toil from which they cannot escape.