

### 3. Sweatshop Conditions Horrify a Factory Inspector, 1893

[T]he sweating industry is carried on principally in the south-east part of Philadelphia; . . . at least 90 per cent. of the whole of this work in the sewing line is done right here; a close count shows from 3,500 to 4,000 people engaged, with a few exceptions, at work in tenement houses or a combination if you choose; the living apartments, cooking, eating and sleeping are on the first, and part second floors, the remaining part second and all of the third is used for work rooms. The nationalities represented are Russian Jews, Poles, Huns, Slavs and Italians, and their general temperament is of a most avaricious kind.

The matter of hours seemingly do not count. It is simply this; If a contractor wants a coat, pants, or vest as the case may be, the person who sub-contracts for the work has no choice of hours or ought else, but hastens to accomplish the task, being sure to get back at the given time or forfeit his chance for getting more work, so that after all the whole system is the effort of an industrial evil, which is being fostered by our American people through their very indifference to actual surroundings, and the sooner the whole people get on their thinking cap the better, and adopt such means (radical though they may seem) as will prohibit entirely, work of this kind being done in the home. Then and then only, will contractors provide proper work rooms subject to proper shop discipline, and regulated by a full enforcement of the Factory Law. For the conditions that surround this class of people is outrivaled by no other. Actual filth contributing largely to their immediate surroundings, and any attempt on my part to describe my actual findings, would mean a shock to the pride of our much boasted prosperity in this, our city of homes.

Speaking to a sub-contractor recently of the condition of trade, he said in answer to my query, "Why, the coat I used to get \$3 for making two years ago, I now get \$1.50 for. Then I was treated with some consideration, some respect, but since the invasion . . . of the tenement house workers I am glad to take just what I can get without making a remark, lest I be subject to insult and deprived of all work. It is a tremendous odds to be competing against, and the few of us who strive to keep shops would gladly hail the enactment of a law compelling all to do likewise." I will cite just a few instances that you may get a faint idea of some of the prevailing conditions.

In visiting what I can only describe as an old tinder box a few days since, I found three different contractors with men, women and boys amounting in the aggregate upwards of sixty. The drinking water was drawn in buckets and filled into a tin boiler, each day's sediment going to the bottom (for it was never cleaned,) only to be rolled

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and raised by each day's filling. Cigarettes were being smoked at such a rate as to make the air blue; confusion reigned supreme; coal ashes were strewn all over the floor; this coupled with scraps of basting threads, clippings of cloth, etc., went to make up a most trying picture. In the midst of it all sat a young man who was temporarily disengaged from his work, eating a dark colored piece of bread with mustard. Out of the rooms and in the hallway was one water closet in a vile condition, and the stairway gave evidence of mistaken use too disgusting to mention.

Another was a building three stories high in which rag sorting was the main occupation. On the ground floor I discovered the wife of the proprietor and three of her children, aged 3, 5 and 8 respectively, the mother was acting as purchaser and sorter in the absence of the man. The children naturally were close beside her; when she sorted, they tried to help her; when she weighed they stood around the scales looking worldly wise. On I went to the second story and there discovered a number of old women working, who, from all appearances, were closing in on their three score years, they were surrounded by rags of the filthiest kind. After a general survey of this room I ascended still higher only to find more old women on the third floor, occupied in like manner as those on the floor below. The odor that pervaded this room was vile in the extreme. I immediately set to work to fathom the cause, when, lo and behold, there in a corner was a bin which was used as a receptacle for dog manure. I could scarcely believe my eyes, but there it was, and there it had been for the best part of the summer months, so the women told me. This is but a brief account of much more that could be enumerated by me, for this is the dark side of our darkest Philadelphia, and when I discover the reckless spirit manifest among those people, their total disregard for any law, only that which (as they themselves tell me) will bring them dollars and cents, I fear for the future.