

Organizing Women Workers. Leonora M. Barry (1887)

Upon the strength of my observation and experience I would ask of officers and members of this Order that more consideration be given, and more thorough educational measures be adopted on behalf of the working-women of our land, the majority of whom are entirely ignorant of the economic and industrial question which is to them of such vital importance; and they must ever remain so while the selfishness of their brothers in toil is carried to such an extent as I find it to be among those who have sworn to demand equal pay for equal work. Thus far in the history of our Order that part of our platform has been but a mockery of the principles intended.

Men! ye whose earnings count from nine to fifteen dollars a week and upward, cease, in the name of God and humanity, cease your demands and grievances and give us your assistance for a time to bring some relief to the poor unfortunate, whose week's work of eighty-four hours brings her but \$2.50 or \$3 per week.

December 10 - went to Newark to investigate the matter concerning the sewing-women of that city, which was referred to our committee at the General Assembly at Richmond. Found, after a careful study of the matter, that in general the working-women of Newark were very poorly paid, and the system of fines in many industries were severe and unjust. Instance: a corset factory where a fine is imposed for eating, laughing, singing or talking of 10 cents each. If not inside the gate in the morning when the whistle stops blowing, an employee is locked out until half past seven; then she can go to work, but is docked two hours for waste power; and many other rules equally slavish and unjust. Other industries closely follow these rules, while the sewing-women receive wages which are only one remove from actual starvation. In answer to all my inquiries of employer and employed why this state of affairs exists, the reply was, monopoly and competition

Went to Auburn, N.Y., Feb. 20. I found the working-women of this city in a deplorable state, there being none of them organized. There were long hours, poor wages, and the usual results consequent upon such a condition. Not among male employers alone in this city, but women in whose heart we would expect to find a little pity and compassion for the suffering of her own sex. To the contrary, on this occasion, however, I found one who, for cruelty and injustice toward employees, has not an equal on the pages of labor's history - one who owns and conducts an establishment in which is manufactured women's and children's wear. Upon accepting a position in her factory an employee is compelled to purchase sewing machines for the proprietress, who is an agent for the S.M. Co. This must be paid for in weekly payments of 50 cents, provided the operative makes \$3. Should she make \$4 the weekly payment is 75 cents. At any time before the machine is paid for, through a reduction of the already meager wages, or the enforcement of some petty tyrannical rule - sickness, anger, or any cause, the operative leaves her employ, she forfeits the machine and all the money paid upon it, and to the next applicant the machine is resold. She must also purchase the thread for doing the work, as she is an agent for a thread company. It takes four spools of thread at 50 cents a spool to do \$5 worth of work, and when \$2 is paid for thread, and 50 cents for the machine, the unfortunate victim has \$2.50 wherewith to board, clothe and care for herself generally; and it is only experts who can make even this.

I succeeded in organizing two Local Assemblies in this city, one of woodworkers, and one women's Local Assembly, numbering at organization 107 members, which has grown rapidly and is now one of the most flourishing Local Assemblies in the State. Here it was that Sister Annie Conboy was discharged from the silk mill for having taken me through the mill, although she had received permission from her foreman to take a friend through, yet, when the proprietor found out I was a Knight of Labor she was discharged without a moment's warning.

March 14 was sent to Paterson [New Jersey] to look into the condition of the women and children employed in the Linen-thread Works of that city. There are some fourteen or fifteen hundred persons employed in this industry, who were at that time out of employment for this reason: Children who work at what is called doffing were receiving \$2.70 per week, and asked for an increase of 5 cents per day. They were refused, and they struck, whereupon all the other employees were locked out. The abuse, injustice and suffering which the women of this industry endure from the tyranny, cruelty and slave-driving propensities of the employers is [sic] something terrible to be allowed existence in free America. In one branch of this industry women are compelled to stand on a stone floor in water the year round, most of the time barefoot, with a spray of water from a revolving cylinder flying constantly against the breast; and the coldest night in winter as well as the warmest in summer those poor creatures must go to their homes with water dripping from their underclothing along their path, because there could not be space or a few moments allowed them wherein to change their clothing. A constant supply of recruits is always on hand to take the places of any who dare rebel against the ironclad authority of those in charge.

In submitting my report to the members of the Order and the public at large, I ask only one favor, namely, a careful perusal and just criticism. I can only hope that my labor will yet bear good fruit, and that in the near future fair consideration and justice will be meted out to the oppressed women of our nation.

Review Questions

1. Compare the data given for men's wages and women's wages. Were women receiving equal pay for equal work? What kinds of costs were often deducted from women's wages?
2. Describe the kinds of conditions that women faced at work.
3. Why was it easy to fire women workers? What does this suggest about the dynamics of nineteenth-century supply and demand for labor?
4. Propose a solution to the problems Barry describes. What if anything should government, employers, workers, or others have done to create a better work environment?