Vice and Low Wages

Following is an Associated Press dispatch: Chicago, March 7.—"The employers think low wages have nothing to do with immorality among women. The women who have fallen think low wages have everything to do with it." That was the way a member of the state senate vice committee summed up the comflicting testimony given at the hearing today.

Arrayed on one side were Julius Rosenwald, president of Sears, Roebuck & Co.; James Simpson, vice president of Marshall Field & Co.; E. F. Mandel, president of Mandel Bros., and Roy Shayne, president of John T. Shayne & Co. Their firms employ many thousands of girls and women. On the other side were half a dozen denizens of the "tenderloin," brought before the committee on "Jane Doe" warrants.

The committee explained to the employers that it wished information bearing on a bill now pending in the legislature establishing a minimum wage scale of $12 a week for women. The employers held this figure to be excessive and declared the law an impossibility.

It developed that practically all the women employed in the retail stores live at home and much time was consumed in discussing a proper wage for those so situated. The employers took the position that they are under no obligation to pay errand girls and other unskilled help classed as "juvenile" a living wage, as such employes are assumed to be entitled to a living at the expense of their parents.

Senator Nels Juul of the committee insisted that the other members of a working girl's family earn no more than enough to support themselves, and that if any member of such a family earns less than a living wage the family suffers.

Mandel and Rosenwald expressed the opinion that a girl's character and her environment shape her life. Wages have little to do with it, they said. They laid stress on environment.

"But does not a living wage or a wage under that have much to do with environment?" queried Lieutenant Governor O'Hara, chairman of the committee. This was admitted.

"If a girl can not live on her income, don't you think that with the pitfalls which surround a young woman, an immoral life offers the easiest way out?" Mandell was asked.

"Not if she is the right kind of a girl; if she is starving and immorality is repugnant to her, as it should be, she can go into domestic service."

"What?" exclaimed Senator Juul, "do you think there are enough places for domestics to take care of all the underpaid girls and women working in stores and factories?"

"Those servants are mighty scarce," smiled the witness.

Mandel expressed the opinion that $8 is a living wage for a girl dependent on herself alone.

Juul asked him to show how this should be spent to provide the necessities of life. After Mandel had enumerated $1 for clothes, 25 cents for laundry, $4 for board and room, 60 cents for sickness, 70 cents for lunches, 60 cents for carfare and 10 cents for the collection box in church, Juul declared that these items included only about half the girls' necessary expenses.

Mandel insisted, however, that the committeeman should not disregard the fact that most employes live at home and are not entirely dependent on themselves.

Mr. Simpson presented figures which showed that the Marshall Field retail store employs 4,222 females whose average wage is $10.76.

Of these 440 are short hour employes, who work during the rush hours and while the regular clerks are at lunch. All live at home, he said.

It developed that the short hour employes are paid on a basis of $8 a week, so that a clerk working but four hours a day would receive but $4.

"This latter class is composed mostly of married women, who wish to earn a bit of pin money and of students who do not depend upon us for a living," explained Simpson.

Simpson was asked to state the net profits of the Field business, but he declined to answer. The same question was put to the other employers. Its purpose was to learn if the salaries of girls earning $4 and $5 could not be doubled without materially affecting profits.

Simpson detailed the welfare work of his firm, speaking of the rest rooms, vacations, a compulsory school maintained in the store, where those who have had no advantage in childhood are forced to acquire the rudiments of an education, of salaries paid during sickness and the like.

The last witnesses of the day, the women of the tenderloin, talked in whispers. All said that they had been unable to make a living at reputable callings.

"A. R." was a woman of thirty-eight. She worked in a laundry at $4.50 a week after her husband died and left her with two children.

"You could not support a family on that, could you?" inquired O'Hara.

"No, I found out that I could not even support myself on it, so I went wrong."

"How old were you then?"

"Twenty-eight."

"Where are the children now?" she was asked.

"Well, you may be sure they are not in Chicago."

"E. P. B." worked in a St. Louis shoe factory from the age of fourteen to eighteen and never got more than $5 a week. Then she answered the call of the underworld and had been there for five years. Like the others she placed her earnings at about $25 a week.

"R. M." worked for $3 a week, but her parents seemed dissatisfied with her contributions to the general fund and she found another way.

"R. R." wore a wedding ring, the only piece of jewelry about her.

"Married?" asked O'Hara.

The girl looked at the ring, hesitated and then answered: "No, it belonged to my mother; it's the only thing of hers I have."

Those close enough to hear the testimony were reminded of Mandel's testimony anent girls going into domestic service when "J. H." took the stand.

"Why did you go wrong," asked Senator Juul; "too little money?"

"Well, yes, that was it."

"What did you work at before that?"

"Domestic servant."

"What were you paid?"

"Two fifty. I got up at 5 o'clock in the morning and worked until through, generally about 8 o'clock at night. I had enough to eat, but I did not want to work so hard. I got to running around with fellows and then I'd want to be decent and would go back to work again, but it was too hard. I began housework after my parents died, and I was ten years old. I stuck to it until I was seventeen.

Rosenwald testified that he was at one time chairman of the Chicago vice commission which conducted an investigation of vice conditions in this city. A portion of this report was suppressed by the committee.

"Did not your company within the last few years conduct a private investigation to ascertain the minimum wages necessary for a girl to support herself without assistance?" asked Mr. O'Hara.

"I don't recall—there may have been—but I don't remember now. Perhaps Mr. Miller—"

The latter promptly entered the breach and said that such an investigation had been held by a committee composed of department heads.

"The committee reported the minimum requirements of girls 'adrift,' not living at home, was $8."

"Now, I want to ask you," said O'Hara, "as a man of wide philanthropy, if you think that low wages induce inmorality in women."

"I will answer that as I have answered before—there is practically no connection between them. Prostitution is as likely to come to a woman who earns $100 as to a woman who earns less. A girl earning a small wage might use that as a subterfuge to account for her derelictions."

"Do you consider $5 enough for any woman to live upon?"

"Yes, if she lives at home."

"And $8 is enough for one who supports herself?"

"That is what our investigation showed."

"How much did your corporation earn in 1911?"

"Approximately $7,000,000."

"Could you raise wages and still pay your stockholders a legitimate profit?"

The witness said that the stock of the corporation pays 7 per cent on both common and preferred stock. There was a surplus of $12,000,000 at the end of 1912 out of profits and still pay some dividends.

State Senator Neils Juul asked the witness if he thought stockholders were fair judges of what compensation the girls should receive and if he didn't think the state would be a fairer judge?"

There was a period of applause when Rosenwald replied that he would be glad to meet the wishes of the state so far as competition will permit.

Asked if he would object to disclosing his own income, he replied in the negative.

"Well, then," said O'Hara, could you live on $8 a week?"

There was a titter when the witness said he had never tried it.

O'Hara asked if there were "drivers" in his employ. The witness had never heard of them.

"Have you an employe called 'the scolder?'"

"Not so far as I know."

Senator Juul took the witness and wanted to know if the corporation took pains to learn if the wages received by a girl was sufficient in each individual case.

"No" was the slow reply.

"You stand on the theory that the girls must live on what you pay them?" commented Juul. Then he asked if the witness thought any woman should be asked to live on less than any average woman.

"Competition might account for the differences," replied the witness.

"To pay 1,000 girls $5 a week more than you do would cost you $260,000 a year," stated the senator. "Would that make much differences to your dividends?"

"I would say that the earnings of one year might not be those of other years," said Rosenwald.

The small room where the sessions are being held was packed with a well-dressed crowd, most of them women.

A woman, clad in black and answering to the name of Emily, took her seat in front of the inquisitors and by the side of Rosenwald. She had been employed by Sears-Roebuck, but left there to take a better position. Her only criticism of the firm was that the forewoman "scolded" and made some of the luckless culprits guilty of some infraction of the rules or making a mistake cry. This did not occur every day, however.

Suddenly attention became acute as Lieutenant Governor Barrett O'Hara, a young man, leaned over, and with blushes asked the witness such a question as he found difficulty in wording.

"We have had a great deal of philosophy here today from men; now let's find out what yours is. If a girl was getting $8 a week (the minimum paid by Sears, Roebuck & Co. to girls living alone) and had to support a widowed mother, would you blame that girl if she—if she—she committed suicide?"

The witness looked puzzled for a moment and then, comprehending, looked up frankly and said: "No, I would not."

"And would you blame her if she committed a greater crime?"

The young lieutenant governor's words were in embarrassed tones and blushes, and by now the girl was the more composed of the two.

She paused a moment and then repeated distinctly, "No, I would not."

The room had been painfully quiet, but at this there was a round of applause, largely by women spectators.

"Emily" was then dismissed.

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