

# Real Causes of Industrial Accidents

(By Gustavus Myer in American Federationist.)

At a time when workmen's compensation laws have already been enacted in twenty-two states and agitation is under way to extend these laws and broaden their provisions, it is remarkable that the old assertion that alcoholism is responsible for the bulk of industrial accidents is being disseminated with a continued virulence.

Were it not that this apparently systematic attempt to represent the workers as drunkards imposes upon many people who do not know the facts, it would hardly be worth the effort of serious attention. But it is an assertion that unfortunately has its ramifications of influence. It is to be met with in books which, although of an obviously shallow order and full of the most glaring generalizations, pass in some quarters as "authorities," and in that capacity are solemnly and freely cited. It is an assertion conspicuously appearing in resolutions, speeches or statements emanating from individuals or organizations having either the scantiest or most prejudiced knowledge of the workers or bent upon deliberately spreading an impression hostile to labor. All of these generators and circulators of this assertion are by no means influenced by the same design. Some are merely ignorant; others are both ignorant and intentionally careless of what the facts are, finding it easier to make conventional generalizations than to spend effort in ascertaining the facts; others scrupulously and conscientiously endeavor to find such an assertion useful in promoting some ulterior purpose such as prohibition laws; still others, particularly certain corporations, welcome diffusion of the assertion believing that it removes the odium that would otherwise be thrown upon employers for the responsibility of conditions leading to industrial accidents.

The cumulative outpouring of the assertion that alcoholism causes most industrial accidents has undoubtedly had its effect upon that part of the public not familiar with industrial conditions. It is an effect not to be ignored. It creates and sustains prejudice, if not antagonism, of a positive kind against labor. It has a strong tendency to place labor on the defensive in a direction in which labor has every just reason to regard itself as the injured party and be the aggressor for rectifying measures. Also it greatly tends to direct attention from the actual causes of the bulk of industrial accidents, and has a retarding effect upon the progress of legislative action aimed at the vital causes.

Considering that there now exists a mass of official data on the subject accessible to any inquirer for the facts, it is amazing to note the bold frequency with which this assertion is even now constantly circulated in some emphatic form or other. Always in these productions it is the same inimical note: the workers themselves are responsible if they are maimed or injured in industrial accidents; the cause lay mostly in their personal fault in being addicted to intoxicants. No mention whatever is made of the combination of causes which every official report on the subject shows bring about the vast proportion of these accidents—unsafe machinery, lack of proper safeguards, flying objects, hazards of trade, dangerous speeding up and other factors. These causes, operating either singly or together, in so great a number of cases, are ignored, and the situation is so twisted and so misrepresented that these perverters make a sweeping case indicting the workers as the chief culprits, and virtually saying that if they did not get drunk, there would be few or no industrial accidents.

One particularly audacious example of this variety was recently exhibited in the newspaper press of the United States which reported that at a session of the National Council for Industrial Safety, at Chicago, L. R. Palmer, chief inspector of the Pennsylvania Department of Labor and Safety, assured the delegates that 60 per cent of the industrial accidents in the United States were charged to liquor. This was the bare form in which this assertion went out to the newspaper press readers; it can be easily imagined what effect a statement would have upon many good people accepting it as a fact. Nor was this all. At this same convention—a high-sounding convention that nominally might be expected to have some knowledge at least of what caused industrial accidents and what factors really imperilled safety—A. T. Morey, of the Commonwealth Steel Company, and chairman of the committee on resolutions, introduced this resolution:

"Whereas, It is recognized that drinking of alcoholic stimulants is productive of a heavy per cent of the accidents and diseases affecting the safety and efficiency of the workmen; be it

"Resolved, That it is the sense of this organization to go on record in favor of eliminating the use of intoxicants in the industries of the nation."

This all-inclusive resolution, as benevolently worded as though the whole motive was an infinite solicitude for the welfare of the workmen, was merely a formal expression of the kind sentiments of the

committee. In urging the adoption of the resolution, Mr. Morey had more to offer in the way of comments; he became more positive and gravely declared that "it is recognized that most industrial accidents are brought about through the use of alcoholic stimulants." Just where this alleged fact "is recognized" Mr. Morey did not pretend to say. Had he been cross-examined an edifying farce would have developed; all that would have been necessary would have been to confront him with a few score official reports and his declaration would have collapsed. However, this situation did not come about but another did. After committing themselves to this wonderful resolution the delegates, upon adjournment, repaired to an elaborate banquet at which a variety of the choicest liquors was served.

It is this brand of assertions that published broadcast in newspapers affects the opinions of large numbers of readers. Very curious it is, too, that newspaper editors with their universal knowledge and a capacity to write learnedly on every conceivable subject do not seem to have the simple desire to challenge and examine assertions seriously concerning the welfare of millions of American workers. Vast numbers of workers are annually killed or injured in industrial accidents, yet no aim is manifested to find out why and wherefore. The official facts are at hand in any number of investigations and reports, but they are never consulted. Finance budgets, diplomatic documents, political papers, scientific reports all are carefully scrutinized so as to compare assertion with fact and exultingly expose error, yet no attempt is made to do so in the case of matters causing death and injury on so enormous a scale as in the industrial arena. Let any corporation or partisan speaker or writer give out for public consumption the fiction that drink causes most of these casualties, and it is published unquestioned; though an old fiction and one exploded by the facts it still does impressive duty.

This was further illustrated recently when various railroad companies and different component companies of the United States Steel Corporation ostentatiously issued orders prohibiting employees from using intoxicants. To discourage intoxication is of itself a laudable undertaking, but the purport and effect of these orders was something quite different than a mere moral and unselfish aim. The manner in which these orders were issued was adroitly calculated to give out the impression that railroad and industrial accidents were caused by drunkard employees, and that if employees would only cease getting intoxicated, then there would be no such shocking accidents. By implication the whole responsibility was thrown upon the workers. Many of the newspapers which conspicuously published articles dealing with these orders discreetly refrained from asking embarrassing questions. These would have shown that stock-jobbing mismanagement and managerial incapacity, perilous speed demanded of employees, inherent risks of trade, obsolete and dangerous equipment, defective roadway, the hiring of inexperienced men and other factors were the most vital causes, and that there was an evident campaign to conceal these by concentrating attention upon the element of liquor.

These inexcusable distortions are seen in their fullest tragic light when we consider the huge sacrifice of human life on what are called industrial accidents. Mr. Frederick L. Hoffman, one of the foremost statisticians, estimated several years ago that the number of fatal accidents to adult workers in the United States was between 30,000 and 35,000 a year, and that there was an annual total of 1,250,400 non-fatal accidents in the United States. In an address recently given before the National Association of Cotton Manufacturers, Mr. Carl M. Hansen, secretary of the department of accident prevention, workmen's compensation service bureau, estimated that from 40,000 to 50,000 wage workers were killed by accidents in industries in the United States yearly. The Massachusetts Industrial Accident Board places the number of workers in the United States yearly killed by accident at 75,000 and the number annually injured at 3,000,000.

If most of these casualties are the result of alcoholism, as certain special pleaders airily assert, then employers must necessarily plead guilty to the charge of employing and retaining great numbers of drunkards in their employ. This charge, however, the employer would be the very first to resent. But when we further reflect that great parts of the United States are under prohibitory laws and that among the casualties are those of large numbers of women, children and youths, it is self-evident that there is, considering these facts alone, a colossal libel in attributing the bulk of industrial accidents as the result of drink.

Speculation is unnecessary on these points or on any others regarding this question. Official data conclusively show what approximate factors do cause these accidents, and of some of these findings we shall give a summary.

A recent federal report dealing with the operations of the Federal

Workmen's Compensation Act covering the government employees shows that the total number of claims—2499—allowed during the year, there were 406 disputed cases. Of these 406 cases, the charge of intoxication was raised in only one case and that charge was dismissed. The New York State Workmen's Compensation Commission began operations on July 1, 1914, under a law making intoxication a cause of exclusion of awards, and in 6813 claims disposed of in six months the question of intoxication was raised by the employer or insurance carrier in only five or ten cases, and not a claim in even these cases was denied, clearly showing that even in the few cases in which it was charged that accidents resulted from intoxication the charges were not substantiated.

The 1914 report of the Massachusetts Industrial Accident Board shows (p. 10) that during the years 1912-1913, there were in that state, 84,694 non-fatal accidents, of which 72,862 were insured, and 474 fatal accidents, of which 290 were insured. Only 156 of these cases were contested by appeal to the arbitration committee or to the courts, and of these 156 cases there were only two cases of proved intoxication. The Massachusetts Industrial board describes in this report, how "dusty trades, industrial poisons and occupational diseases are responsible for an annual loss in the United States of \$150,000,000 through needless diseases and disabilities, and Massachusetts has her proportion of this enormous waste. The great majority of wage-earners spend at least one-third of every twenty-four hours in the factory, mill or shop. Conditions in many of them are such that the worker is unable to attain full efficiency by reason of the conditions which surround him, and this has a direct bearing upon the number of accidents or the quantity of the output of the worker."

The Industrial Insurance commission of the State of Washington states, in its 1913 report that of 11,896 claims submitted during the year by injured workmen, only twenty-three appeals were taken to the courts, thus showing that charges of "wilful misconduct," including intoxication, were insignificant. Under the head of "Personal Fault," the report states (p. 97) that: "It appears that 69 per cent of all cases (of accidents) were ascribed to risks of trade and not to personal fault. Only 11.2 per cent of the injuries are here charged to personal fault." In a previous report the commission declared, "the records of this commission do not show many cases of intoxication."

The Industrial commission of Wisconsin reports a total of 8,224 accidents reported during the year 1912-1913, of which number 4,526 cases were subject to compensation. Inasmuch as of 3,571 cases of accidents in establishments of private employers, 2,781 were at once settled and compensation paid by those employers without an order of the commission, this is the clearest possible proof that intoxication was entirely absent as a factor. Under the Wisconsin workmen's compensation law intoxication is penalized 15 per cent. Of the sixty-two contested cases of accident awards from September 1, 1911, to June 30, 1913, the question of intoxication was raised in only one case, and this solitary charge was not sustained by the Supreme court. The 1914 report of the Wisconsin Industrial commission shows further that intoxication is an almost negligible factor.

The New Jersey Workmen's Compensation law specifically says that if the injured employee was intoxicated at the time of the injury, recovery of accident claims is thereby barred. Yet the New Jersey State employer's liability commission states in its 1913 report (p. 5) that of 5,750 cases of non-fatal accidents and 233 cases of fatal accidents reported for compensation during the year, 93.2 per cent were settled automatically. This shows fully that intoxication or other form of "wilful negligence" was lacking.

In California, 10,835 industrial accidents were reported in the year ended December 31, 1912. The California Industrial Accident board declared on the subject as follows: "Our statistics show that in California we kill four times as many as we should but California has done nothing in the way of safeguarding its working people against needless dangers. There are literally no laws requiring machinery to be made safe. If the legislature will give the Industrial Accident board power and authority to make the employments and places of employment as safe as they reasonably can be made, it will undertake, within five years, to reduce by one-half the number of serious and fatal accidents that would otherwise take place."

The soundness of this plea was recognized by the California legislature which passed an act, to take effect in 1914, authorizing the Industrial Accident board to establish a bureau of safety.

The Iowa Employers' Liability commission recently made a similar declaration. "If the members of the general assembly," it reported, "will provide sufficient and adequate means for the enforcement of laws relating to accident prevention, injuries to employees in this state can be reduced, in a very conservative estimate, 50 per cent and thereby very materially reduce the cost of any new system of compensation." The Iowa Workmen's Compensation

law went into effect on July 1, 1914. In the report of the Pennsylvania Accidents commission, a legislative inquiry body, the causes of industrial accidents were recently stated as follows: "It may be stated with fair exactness that 20 per cent of all factory accidents are primarily due to the negligence of the employer, or of those representing him in positions of superintendence; that 25 per cent are chiefly due to the negligence of the injured man himself; that 20 per cent are due to the negligence of a co-employee of the injured man; while 35 per cent are due to what may be called the hazard of the industry." Further this commission explains that, "many accidents, which in statistical tables are ascribed to the negligence of the workman himself, are in reality entirely due to overwork. And this is particularly true of women, whose incapacity for long-continued toil, particularly at periods of illness, is strikingly shown by these statistical reports."

An investigation recently made by the Factory Inspection department of the board of public welfare of Kansas City, Mo., showed that in 33.8 per cent of the cases of accidents, defective equipment was responsible, and in 8 per cent, defective equipment in conjunction with negligence of the workmen. This made 42 per cent in which the employer was wholly or partially responsible. In 22.7 per cent of cases, according to this report, fault on the part of the workmen—such as carelessness, disregard of instructions, etc.—was responsible. This report stated, however, that 76.8 per cent of the accidents investigated were due to conditions over which the worker had no control, and it pointed out "how large a proportion of the accidents are due to the risks of trade."

Mr. Don D. Lescohier, expert of the Minnesota bureau of labor, states that hazards of industry cause 71.6 per cent and contributory negligence 5.2 per cent. Mr. Lescohier points out that in their returns of accidents, Minnesota employers admitted that 60 per cent of all accidents were due to inherent dangers of industry. The Minnesota bureau of labor holds that more than 50 per cent of these accidents were preventable. Mr. Lescohier reported that "the principal causes of accidents found responsible in whole or in part for the 38 per cent of the accidents attributed to the workmen, were youth, ignorance of the English language, incompetence, carelessness ranging all the way from momentary inattention or forgetfulness, to foolhardy recklessness, personal shortcomings like deafness, or excitability, absorption in the work in hand which made the workman oblivious of approaching danger, fatigue and nerve strain."

Turning to accidents on steam railroads the official reports give illuminating facts. The reports of the interstate commerce commission show that from 1904 to 1913 a total of 29,820 derailments, killing 487 persons and injuring 8,385 persons, were caused by defective equipment. From 1902 to 1912 defects of roadway, such as rotten ties, caused 12,674 derailments, killing 517 persons and injuring 15,664 persons.

In the fiscal year 1911-1912, the interstate commerce commission ordered inspections of 74,234 locomotives of which 48,708 were found defective, and 3,377 were ordered out of service as dangerous. In the next year, 1912-1913, a total of 4,676 locomotives were found flagrantly defective and dangerous and ordered out of service.

The interstate commerce commission repeatedly has reported that in many instances the safety appliance act and the hours of service act have been grossly violated.

In its 1913 report the interstate commerce commission described at length how high speed was expected of railway employees, notwithstanding the formal rules. Testifying before the United States Employers' Liability and Workmen's Compensation commission, Mr. W. G. Lee, president of the Brotherhood of Railway Trainmen, declared that the railway employee did not have time to observe safety rules, such as examination of cars, trucks, appliances, etc. "All employees know," he testified, "that they would not be continued in service if they consumed the time necessary to make such examinations. \* \* \* The rules (of the railroads) go to the public which condemns the carelessness of the men, but the unwritten order goes to the employe to keep traffic moving at all hazards, and it is the latter order that he obeys." Mr. A. B. Garretson, president of the Order of Railway Conductors, testified to the same facts. "The deadliest offense," he stated, "that occurs on any railway is delay. Employe can be guilty of no more serious offense than to create overtime; and if that economic situation

was eliminated a very large proportion of the causes for accidents would disappear."

These are only a few of the facts set forth in official reports. It is testimony requiring no comment. Experts on industrial accidents generally agree that alcoholism is but a minute factor in industrial accidents and on the whole does not directly cause 1 per cent of the number. It may have an additional contributory effect in certain cases, possibly to the extent of a total of 2 per cent. In view of the known facts, it is about time that the old libel of attributing the bulk of the accidents to the worker's own personal fault should be effectively exposed.

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