The Story of the Consumers' League

By Florence Lucas Sanville, General Secretary Consumers' League. Reprinted by Permission from The Outlook.

A group of women in a suburb of Philadelphia recently set about an attempt the issue of which seemed doubtful in the extreme. Their hope was to induce the shopkeepers of the community to grant to their employes the relief of a half-holiday in each week during the months of July and August—an experiment hitherto practically untried by the merchants in the town. To any one who is familiar with the climate of Philadelphia at that season of the year the need of this endeavor will be patent, especially as the habit of night shopping had fastened upon the community, and was as great a feature of summer as of winter.

Surprising success met the effort, some stores granted a Saturday half-holiday, while others, which could not readjust the demands of their business on such short notice, closed their doors on Tuesday afternoons; but the vast majority of the shops on the main street of the town displayed cards announcing one or the other of these days as closed to the public "for the benefit of our employes."

The writer entered one of these shops as a customer one day, and in the course of purchasing a box of note paper asked the man in charge how he accounted for the readiness with which the new custom had been adopted.

"Well," he replied, "of course the idea is not a new one. The proposition has been brought up in our business association a great many times, but there was always enough opposition to down it. But this year, you see, the customers took a hand for the first time and that decided the matter for a great many of the members. It was the ladies who did it, I guess."

The significance of this incident lies in the elements which it contains of a wide spread movement which, seizing upon the hint of power implied, has built upon this power the organization known as the Consumers' League. This league is simply a part of that great process of combination which is the characteristic feature of our present industrial civilization. We have organization of employers to develop economy of production and to protect themselves against excessive competition. We have organization of workers to develop a standard of earning capacity, and to protect themselves against an underselling of their labor. Both of these are organizations of producers. The Consumers' League represents the organization of a still greater economic class. It is a combination of individuals who use their power as consumers to protect the community of which they are a part from the disastrous effect of unregulated industry upon its workers—an organized expression of responsibility on the part of the buyers of things toward those who make and distribute the things which they buy.

In these days when the differentiation ever becomes wider and more striking between whole classes, as producers and consumers, the basis for such an organization as the Consumers' League becomes apparent. The great suction wheel of consumption which draws out the fruits of industry and appropriates them to the uses of complex human life, derives its power from the countless little acts of shopping and buying in our daily lives. Each woman as she purchases a 5-cent cotton handkerchief, a 15-cent can of "sifted June peas," or a $40 hat from a fashionable milliner; each man when he buys his six-for-a-quarter cigars or his $4 derby—every insignificant part of the millions of purchases made each day, guides, controls, nay, moves, this wheel. And because women do the lion's share of shopping for the community, and thus contribute most to the power that keeps the wheel in motion, the appeal of the Consumers' League has always been directed especially to them.

For the most part, too, this appeal has been directed to members of the leisured class. Under even the best conditions, the individuals of this class consume far more than they produce; and the purchasing power of one woman among them is greater often than the combined power of a dozen workingwomen. Also, working men and women have a power of their own to further their industrial welfare, and the trade union educates them in many of the very principles which it is the purpose of the Consumers' League to establish. The curious structure of society completely hides these wealth-producers from the normal view of the numerically small but economically powerful class of wealthconsumers; and it is to establish the economic relationship between these two classes—or rather to point out the intimate and often tragic relationship that already exists—that the Consumers' League has especially directed its efforts.

Can it be done? Let the story of the facts answer.

Just 20 years ago a group of women in New York, appalled by the discovery of certain conditions in a big retail store, began an inquiry into the conditions under which saleswomen and cash-girls worked. So apparent was the difficulty of forming an effective organization among the unskilled young workers in the store that a committee was formed with the purpose of organizing the influence which could be exerted by the customers of this and other stores. The first step taken by this committee was the compiling of a list to keep shoppers informed of such shops as deal justly with their employes, and so bring public opinion to bear in favor of just employers, and also in favor of such employers as desire to be just, but are prevented by the stress of competition from following their sense of duty."

This was the birth of the Consumers' League. At its very inception it thus affirmed that there is an element of morality in the act of buying which is too often ignored; and that, while cheapness as cheapness is not being attacked, some of the worst evils from which wage-earners suffer are traceable directly to the thoughtless buying which demands the cheapest market, regardless of how that cheapness is acquired; that it is therefore not only the privilege but the duty of consumers to satisfy themselves as to the conditions under which their purchases are made and distributed.

When the principle was first applied, by the setting of a standard of employment conditions and publishing a list of merchants who conformed to it, it was by no means a universally popular step.

"How would you like me to walk into your kitchen and ask how many hours your cook works, and whether she is allowed to sit down during the day?" an irascible employer once demanded of the writer.

"If you should eat the food she cooks, and pay me for it, you would have every right to this or any other information as to how your food was prepared—nothing could be more your business," I replied.

A frequent and more disinterested criticism against the publication of "White Lists" has characterized them as thinly disguised boycotts. These critics, by their objection, practically reject the whole theory of the responsibility of consumers. A vague sense of responsibility is about as effective as none at all. Each individual must apply that sense to the practical affairs of life, if it is to be felt. Thus, when a woman, by supporting an indorsed employer, not only encourages him in his enlightened policy, but also stimulates a hesitating brother merchant to follow along, she has given a practical value to her sense of responsibility. The publication of the names of a group of merchants for the guidance of shoppers with a wide-awake conscience can no more be condemned as an act of boycott than can the publication of a list of satisfactory hotels by Baedeker for the guidance of tourists on the lookout for their creature comforts.

The standard required of every firm before acceptance on the White List covered hours, wages, physical conditions, holidays, obedience to the law, and general behavior toward employes. In time it became evident, however, that in certain essential things it was necessary for the better employers to be protected against the less enlightened policy of competitors who were not so sensitive to public opinion; the most direct means of securing such protection was clearly the passage and enforcement of a law before which all employers should be equal. The enactment of the Mercantile Employers' Act in 1896 was the first important step thus taken by New York State for the protection of children and women employed in retail stores.

While the Consumers' League was thus establishing its influence in New York City, sister leagues were springing into life in other communities, with the same basis of appeal. In 1895 the idea caught in Pennsylvania, followed by a league in Illinois in 1897, and one in Massachusetts in 1898. Then came a new stage in the development of the movement.

It was felt that this newly recognized responsibility could not logically stop with local conditions in retail stores; that behind these visible workers in each community was an army of unseen toilers, the product of whose labor was distributed far and wide through the land. To find out some of the facts which controlled the lives of these workers and to make them known to the public which buys the product of their hands was felt to be the next most vital undertaking. In May, 1898, a conference of all the existing leagues was called to consider the formation of one organization with a nation-wide scope and a nation-wide interest at heart; and just a year later the National Consumers' League began its work, with Mrs. Florence Kelley as its general secretary.

The first efforts of the national body were given to diagnosing the case of the clothing trades. Even without preliminary investigation it had been apparent that this industry in its several branches leaned especially heavily upon woman and child workers, and to those whose occupation brought them into contact with the poorer residents of the large cities some of its most serious evils were already known.

The basis of appeal of the National Consumers' League was identical with that of the local branches, and its method of gaining its end was therefore similar—i. e., the setting of a standard and the encouragement of employers (in this case manufacturers) to conform to it by winning the support of the consumers of their products. Investigation had shown that there were four chief evils to be combated: child labor, the sweating system, unduly long and irregular hours of work, and disregard for such laws as already existed. In support of such factories as were free from these unwholesome conditions, and as a guarantee to the public, the Consumers' League devised a label to be placed on stitched underwear—a trade not covered by the trade unions' labels—and granted the use of this label to approved manufacturers.

The immediate task of the Consumers' League was to find these factories, to educate the purchasing public into demanding goods bearing the label, and thus to gain the co-operation of both the manufacturer and distributer of these goods. Not a very long time was required to demonstrate again what had similarly become apparent to the New York City League in its early days—viz., that legislation alone can prove an adequate foundation upon which to maintain an effective standard of industrial conditions. Thereupon was begun a systematic and continuing endeavor to secure better legislation and to defend existing laws, which has resulted within the last two years in obtaining two of the most important decisions favorably affecting labor that the Supreme Courts of the State of Nation have been called upon to render.

A scrutiny of this brief history of early development reveals the four distinct methods by which the Consumers' League undertakes to win its purpose. Shortly expressed, they are: first, the essential step of investigation; second, the creation of standards in conditions of employment, by conference and co-operation with the best employers; third, the securing of necessary legislation and its enforcement, and of judicial decisions affecting labor conditions, so that these standards shall be rendered permanent and of universal application; fourth, the education of the buying public into showing a watchful and intelligent interest in the sources of its purchases, and so directing its purchasing power that its whole mighty force shall be thrown into the balance for industrial fairness and justice.

The difficulty of securing from the general public a recognition of the conditions and demands of modern industry upon its workers is therefore very apparent. One of the efforts by which the Consumers' League, in co-operation with two other societies, sought to win this recognition was by an industrial exhibit held six years ago. Here the public was first brought into direct contact with living workers from city sweat shops, and was given a chance to see, represented by life-size tableaux, the work in mines and factories as it is done by the young people of Pennsylvania. Exhibitions of this kind had already been held in Germany and England, but this was the first effort to present facts in this form to the American public.

Many school girls were brought in groups by their teachers to see this exhibit, and their visits brought about another and more widespread educational movement. Consumers' Leagues had existed in some of the women's colleges for several years; but the idea of systematically establishing chapters of the local league in nearby colleges and schools was first begun in Philadelphia, in the belief that the students are none too young to have their minds trained and their help sought in matters concerning the lives of girls no older than themselves, but from whom modern society has removed its traditional protection and solicitude. The results have strengthened opinion into conviction. The girls in the chapter think twice before they give a rush order to their dressmaker or start a shopping tour after the Saturday matinee.

* * *

An interest of this kind is not extinguished by graduation. Each girl is expected to carry it into her own home community and spread it there; and this expectation is realized in the fact that in several towns in Pennsylvania, at least, the first impetus toward considering the welfare of the workers there has come from a graduate member of a college or school league.

There have been many expressions of this new-found interest in Philadelphia, but none louder or more forcible than that signified by the concerted action of the great merchants and the Christmas shoppers in the last holiday season.

Six years ago a nightly tour of the retail shopping district was made for two weeks before Christmas. Earlier in the year a law had been passed in Pennsylvania, with a provision limiting the hours of work for women to ten in a day during this season. In spite of this regulation the employes of practically every store in a radius of five blocks of the central shopping district stated that they were required to work from 8 a. m. until the closing hour at night—in some cases on alternate days, in others continuously every day. And no manager who was interviewed was aware of any regulation prohibiting such overtime.

Late one Saturday night the league's investigators left a store after talking to several weary girls who confessed to having worked a continuous 14 hours a day for 10 days past. Two nights later, when we returned there to find if our complaint to the official department had brought the needed relief, one of the girls said: "Do you know, after you was in here asking questions that night, three of the girls right here on the floor fainted dead away. You oughter seen that! That was the worst day ever!"

In 1910, that same establishment was visited at 9:15 on the night of December 14. "We close at 9:30, and I came in at 10 this morning," the girl replied, in answer to our questions, volunteering further: "The girls under 18 have to get out at 9 sharp. Gee! don't I wish I was under 18!"

Improved though it was, even this store was an undesirable exception in 1910. For the Christmas of that year saw in Philadelphia a movement in behalf of the women and children in the stores and the boys and men of the delivery service such as has not been paralleled in any other large city in the country.

This general closing began in 1909, when about 5000 interested women seized upon a suggestion of the Consumers' League and wrote personal letters to the leading merchants, urging them to reduce the number of open nights. Quick to respond to the wishes of the public, the customary 10 nights was cut to five. In 1910 another and equally powerful factor entered the situation in the shape of a new law requiring among other things that no girl under 18 be employed after 9 P. M. In addition to the usual reminder sent each year by the Consumers' League to the merchants since the discovery of the prevailing ignorance of the law six years ago, the Department of Factory Inspection late in November officially notified every employer of the new regulations.

The result was inevitable. The enlightened public and the newspapers were incessantly urging, "Shop early!" The law demanded that a large proportion of their employes be dismissed at 9 o'clock. The reply of the merchants to this combination, first over the telephone to the Consumers' League, and next day in the daily newspaper advertisement, was: "This store closes at 6 o'clock throughout the holiday season." And with the exception of a few cheap candy and trinket shops, small stores followed suit. Thus, after years of prodding the public and persuading the merchants, a victory for about 40,000 workers in Philadelphia was won, and Pittsburgh, joining hands with her larger sister, conferred the same boon upon her working citizens and children.

Manufacturers, too, have not been slow to feel the keener eye of this new public interest and criticism turned on them. Only two summers ago I was obliged to record the shameful neglect of the welfare of the girls in two mills in Lackawanna County, in which I worked. One of these mills was visited less than a year ago by a committee of women in the town, and the shocking lack of cleanliness and sanitation was found to have been replaced by new and adequate sanitary provisions. In the other mill, which happened to be the one visited last summer by Mr. Roosevelt, I had worked in July, 1909, across the aisle from a group of girls who stood at work for five days in a wide shallow pool which escaped from under the door of a broken toilet—the only one available for the 50 or 60 girls on that floor. In 1910, not only did Mr. Roosevelt report the mill as clean and sanitary, but the very man who advised me to seek work there on account of its evil conditions, told me last summer, when I visited the place, that the girls said that everything was wonderfully improved. Whether the lower window sashes are still permanently fastened summer and winter, and whether the foreman continues to arraign brutally any girl who is caught sitting for a moment's rest on a pile of bobbins in lieu of any other seat, I did not, at this last visit, ascertain.

The need of creating in manufacture the same sort of standard which now controls the provisions for employes in retail trade is painfully apparent. In Pennsylvania, at all events, the lunch and rest rooms, adequate toilet and washing facilities and a proper supply of seats—all now a part of every large store's equipment—are rare exceptions in factories, where the need is even greater on account of the longer hours and the character of the work.

A White List of local factories cannot be compiled on the same basis as with stores, which deal directly with the public, and yet the Consumers' League has long felt the want of some such standard in a manufacturing community like Philadelphia. As an attempt to meet this difficulty the League there has commenced a systematic investigation of factories, which aims eventually to cover the city. All factories which then seem to comply with a required standard of wages, hours and physical conditions are placed on an approved list, and applicants for work are received by the League and sent to any of these factories as they require workers.

This branch of the work is known as the Industrial Betterment Bureau, its purpose being to raise the standard of employment conditions as well as to divert people, especially girls and boys leaving school, from the worse to the better places; and the reasonableness of the request that the League's investigators be allowed to inspect a plant is usually justified for employers on this ground. This new attempt, which is less than a year old, is already throwing many sidelights into unexpected corners. A sickly and deformed boy of 14, who had just received his working certificate, was by mere chance overheard to remark that he had secured a job in a glass factory—this meaning, in Pennsylvania, alternate weeks of work all day and work all night. A horrified bystander happened to overhear this, and told the boy that he could get a better job by going to the Consumers' League. When the little fellow came, one glance was enough to show the need of a medical examination, and he was found to have tuberculosis of both lungs and of the spine. Except for the chance overhearing of the child's remark, he would have now been throwing away his last chance of life in the overheated atmosphere of a glass factory—largely because no physical standard and no physical examination are required of a child before he receives his work certificate.

Such oversights as these are due merely to unrecognized factors in industrial life. The comfort is, that as they are recognized by the public, so are they dealt with. The task of the Consumers' League, not only in the communities to which this sketch has necessarily been limited, but wherever industrial society hides its darker secrets, is to search out these secrets and place them as facts before the public, and then to make it clear that, after all, "the producing world is only the servant of the consuming world, and the final direction of industry lies with the consumers."

Among the Workers

Revelstoke, B. C., retail clerks, teamsters and other employes in the retail trade, have organized an association, the objects of which are "the procuring of better working conditions and a general early closing day each week."

A combination consisting of the Women's Trade Union League, the Young People's Social League, and several Socialist party members, are actively engaged in organizing the department store workers in Rochester, N. Y.

The Typographical Union has succeeded in securing substantial wage increases from the Baltimore newspapers. The new agreement carries an increase ranging from $2 to $5.40 per week.

About 700 workmen at the Crystal City Glass works are on strike because the management refused to conform to eight-hour law. The men who struck were unorganized.

The strike declared in the Paint and Cabin Creek districts against the coal operators for failure to live up to the tentative agreement reached some time ago, is still on.

Since March 1, 14 local unions have been added to the International Union of Shingleweavers, Sawmill Workers and Woodsmen.

South Chicago teamsters have gained a wage increase of $1 per week by arbitration. The increase affects 500 teamsters.

In the Grand Rapids railroad yards the company has established a stockade to pen in its 150 strikebreakers.

A local union of waiters, waitresses and cooks has been organized in Sioux City, Iowa.

The law requiring semi-monthly pay days in Pennsylvania became effective July 1.

Journeymen horseshoers of Pillston, Pa., are on strike for recognition of the union.

Trades unionists of Bloomington, Ill., are planning to build a labor temple.

Electrical workers in Bloomington, Ill., have gained the eight-hour day.

The two carmen's unions in Philadelphia are planning to consolidate.

The bakers of Victoria have organized a union.

It is seldom that a man is a beau, and bow-legged, too.

THE PROSPECTIVE SON-IN-LAW.

A contributor to the August Woman's Home Companion on the subject of marriage writes, in part, as follows:

"How much do most mothers know of the men their daughters finally marry? And how much real friendship and trust is there, usually, between young men and the mothers of the girls the young men choose to marry? Yet I do not as a general rule count this to be the fault of the young men. The mothers are older and wiser—should be wiser at least in all such matters—yet they are generally slow to speak of them or share in them, whether from shyness, or jealousy, or inability to express themselves, or a forgetfulness of the years when they, too, were young.

"The mother who does not think herself wiser in all these matters than her daughter is rare to find; yet there are not many mothers who are conscientiously helping—fitting would be the better word—their daughters to make a wise and rational choice. Perhaps most mothers have shope that when the time comes they may be allowed to choose for these daughters of theirs; and they fail to realize that almost their whole duty lies in fitting them to choose for themselves."

Many a man who is always looking for a snap lacks ginger.

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