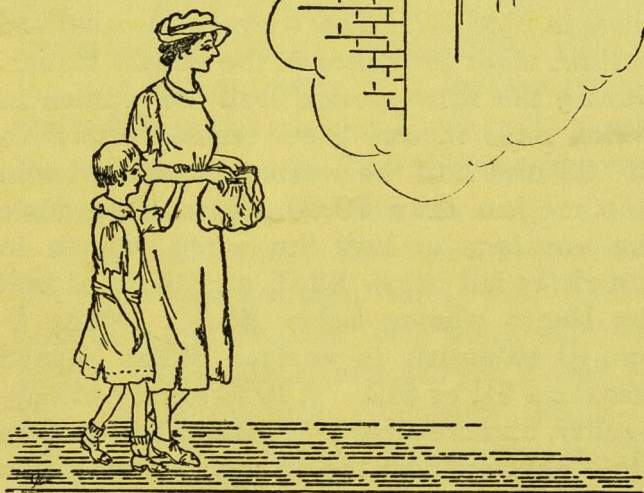


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THE HIGH COST OF LOW WAGES

Pamphlet

COMMUNITY RELIEF



AND HOW TO PREVENT IT

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What Should a Woman's Pay Envelope Contain?

AT LEAST enough money to buy the necessities of life. But facts show that hundreds of thousands of women are working for wages so low that they cannot have those things essential to the most meager living.

Half the women surveyed in plants making men's work shirts earned less than \$10 a week in 1936-37. Low wages characterized certain other branches of the needle trades. During the same period half the women in cotton mills in one State earned less than \$10.30 and half the women in canneries in another less than \$9.60. In a third State the earnings of half the white women in laundries fell below \$7.15 and those of half the Negro women below \$6.30. Many 5-and-10 salesgirls in various States earned less than \$11 or \$12. A 1938 survey of egg, poultry, and creamery plants in a midwestern State showed half the women earning less than \$8.20 a week.

The Women's Bureau, United States Department of Labor, which collects information on working women and recommends standards to improve their working conditions, could cite many more examples from other industries, multiplying the evidence that thousands of women are receiving pay envelopes that contain neither fair nor living wages. Few people realize how serious and far reaching are the consequences.

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To Women Workers Low Wages Mean Poverty and Suffering

BEHIND this recital of low wages in terms of dollars and cents are the poverty and suffering of each individual woman trying to live—to pay her rent and buy food and clothes with a pay envelope of \$8, \$6, or even less a week. To these women what is there left for the many other things essential for maintaining health and self-respect—for carfare to get to and from work, for laundry, for doctor's bills, insurance and savings, recreation, vacation, and church and charity?

The situation would be serious enough if women workers had to provide for themselves only. But the census of 1930 showed that almost half a million women—some married, some single—not only worked for wages but also kept house for and were the sole support of others in their families.

The great majority of women who work do so because of economic need. If they are married, unemployment or low wages in their families have made their earnings a necessity. If they are single, often their wages must support not only themselves but their parents or brothers and sisters. On their meager earnings depends not only their welfare but often that of their families and communities.

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To the Community Low Wages Mean the Cost of Relief

UNABLE to solve by themselves the problem of living on their wages, many women are forced to turn to relief.

Some people were startled recently to learn that over 6,500 employed women in New York City were found to be receiving wages so low that city relief had to add what was necessary for subsistence. But this situation is typical of many. In hundreds of large cities and small towns women workers are driven to the doors of charity by their scanty pay envelopes.

This means that the community is forced to subsidize industry by paying women workers the additional amount necessary for them to maintain themselves. Another cost of low wages, that cannot be measured in dollars and cents alone, is the burden of unhealthy and unhappy citizens.

For the community the problem becomes even greater because women's low wages tend to drag down those of men. Women's wages are generally much lower than men's even when they are working on the same jobs. As a result it becomes impossible for men to obtain high wages for work which can be done more cheaply by women. As long as women are in so many cases the unwilling competitors of men in the labor market, low wages will tend to pull down the standards of living of the whole working population.

To Industry Low Wages Mean Fewer Goods Sold

MANY people consider low wages the problem only of the worker and the community. But they are also the problem of industry. Wage earners constitute the majority of the consuming public which must buy the goods produced by industry. The woman who has a weekly wage of \$10 or less has not much money to spend. When wages are low, the purchasing power of a large section of the public is reduced, and with it the market for industrial goods. The maintenance of a sound market depends on fair wages.

Many employers realize this and also know the value of a healthy, happy work force in increasing production. But when other employers drive down wages to the lowest possible depths, the more progressive employers are forced by this unfair competition to lower the wages of their workers also.

The age-old practice of reducing costs under the stress of competition by lengthening hours and cutting wages to less than subsistence levels must be discarded. The interests of employers as well as workers require this step. As long as the law fails to set a bottom level below which women's wages are not allowed to fall, many employers will continue to jeopardize the welfare of workers, communities, and industry.

Minimum-Wage Laws Are a Bulwark Against Low Wages

SOME States have enacted laws providing for the fixing of minimum-wage levels. To women workers these laws say, "Your wages cannot be cut below a fair return for your services and a minimum in healthful living standards." To the public they assure protection against subsidizing industry through supplementing low wages by relief. To industry they aid in maintaining the workers' buying power at a level necessary for industrial stability.

Today such laws for women are on the statute books of 26 States—Arizona, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Illinois, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maine (one industry only), Massachusetts, Minnesota, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Dakota, Utah, Washington, and Wisconsin; also Alaska, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico. Activity has greatly increased in this field since the United States Supreme Court in March 1937 found the Washington State minimum-wage law constitutional. Eight new laws have been enacted and five old laws, previously declared unconstitutional, revived. Since March 1937 about 80 wage orders, or more than half of all issued to date, have provided protection for many additional thousands of women.

Minimum-Wage Laws Protect the Interests of All

THOUSANDS of women workers receive fuller pay envelopes because of these laws. Of course, women in the lowest wage levels, those who were trying to live on \$10 or less a week, have gained most. Women in laundries have benefited particularly from the laws of the newer minimum-wage States. In these States effort has been made to raise the standards of the service industries—laundries, hotels, restaurants, beauty shops—that employ large numbers of women and in which wages have been distressingly low.

On the other hand, women receiving higher wages also benefit from the laws. Facts show that setting minimum rates has not had the effect of reducing their wages. Rather in many cases it has increased them, because employers must maintain wage differentials to pay for skilled work and continued service.

Minimum-wage laws aim to protect the interests of all concerned. Wage rates generally are not set in the laws. In any industry where many women or minors are believed to be working for oppressive or unreasonable wages, a wage board is set up composed of representatives of the workers, the employers, and the public. The wage board recommends fair and reasonable wage rates, which after public hearings and final approval are put into effect throughout the State.

Public Opinion Demands Minimum-Wage Legislation

"**SOCIETY** demands some definite means to prevent the exploitation of women and children in industry." So stated one newspaper editorial after the United States Supreme Court declared the New York minimum-wage law unconstitutional in June 1936. Many press reports showed that a large part of the public favored minimum-wage legislation. Less than a year later the Supreme Court reversed its position and cleared the way for legislation that would meet society's demand for decent wages.

Until recently minimum-wage laws have applied only to women and minors. The Oklahoma law, passed in 1937, was the first to cover men workers too. A recent court decision upheld the constitutionality of this law though its defective title will require legislative revision before it will apply to men. The Connecticut law now covers men. The Federal wage-hour law applies to both sexes, but only to interstate industries. There is growing conviction of the need for Nation-wide legislation to protect all workers against unfair wages and to protect fair employers against "chiseling" competitors.

For great numbers of workers, State minimum-wage laws are still necessary.

For further information write to the
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