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OUTWORKERS AND HOMEWORKERS

Exploitation among outworkers and homeworkers - known as "sweating" - was a vicious scourge in the latter half of the last century. Many women with invalid husbands or ailing relatives were forced to take low-paid piecework to support their families. They worked up to sixteen hours a day and often children worked alongside their mothers to earn a few more pence. The women had to wait in long queues to collect payment and more work - if work was available. Some trades - particularly the clothing trade - were being ruined by competition from this cheap outside labour and in 1879 manufacturers, "moved no doubt by sympathy for the women and children . . . but also concerned about the competition from sweated labour, set out to have the Factory Act amended".(1) In 1895 an Anti-Sweating League was formed to stop poverty and degradation of homeworkers.

According to recent media and other reports, it would appear that, apart from the employment of children and the women having to queue for work, little has changed since the last century.

One of the major problems is the lack of information as to how many homeworkers there are and where they are located. However certain assumptions can be made as to who they are. The overwhelming majority are migrants, women with young children, the disabled and the handicapped. They tend to be concentrated in certain industries such as clothing and textiles or in certain jobs such as packing and envelope-addressing which are lowpaid even in factory or office. Other areas include typing and door-to-door commission-selling of cosmetics, kitchen ware etc. Not only are homeworkers the most exploited sector of the workforce; they are almost always employed on work which has traditionally been connected with poor wages. It is a vicious circle.

HOMEWORKERS AND THE LAW

One reason for the lack of information is the inadequacy and ineffectiveness of the law. For example, under the Victorian Labour and Industry Act 1958 records of homeworkers are supposed to be kept for the information of 'factory inspectors' and forwarded monthly to the Department. Perhaps employers are not aware of the law or perhaps they simply ignore it. Failure to comply carries a fine of only \$10 per day.

The 'factory inspectorial' in Victoria (and probably in other states too) is understaffed and does not even visit all formal workplaces - let alone homeworkers. Some Commonwealth inspectors do check wages of outdoor workers in the clothing and footwear industries where these workers are employed by employers who register their outworkers. Such workers are covered by federal awards. However many retailers have work done outside their premises. They do not submit records to the Department of Labour and Industry and, since they are able to undercut the firms who do keep records, it would appear that they get the work done much more cheaply. Women who do this work at home probably do not know that they should be paid an award rate and, if they do, they don't complain because they are afraid of losing the work.

Because homeworkers are piece workers the rates are only subject to random checks and the jobs performed may not be carried out in the factory so no equivalent rate can be established. Moreover the rates rarely include an amount to cover costs of heating, lighting, hire or purchase of machinery (if any), power used to operate such machinery or medical expenses to cover the costs of accidents - and these workers are not covered by workers' compensation or entitled to sick or holiday leave.

DISCRIMINATION IN INSPECTIONS

Even when the location of homeworkers is known, protection by the Department of Labour and Industry is usually minimal. It is interesting, in light of the regulations and the fact that in Victoria there are only two female inspectors, to note that:

"Every person licensed . . . shall answer all questions put to him (sic) by an inspector as to the person for whom the goods are being prepared or manufactured and the price or rate to be paid to himself therefor; but no woman or girl shall be asked such questions except by a female inspector." (L & I Act 1958 Cl.69(8))

Of course most homeworkers are women.

SELF-EMPLOYED STATUS

Depending on the kind of work performed, some homeworkers are considered to be self-employed, receiving work via agencies. They are therefore unprotected in terms of the Labour and Industry Act, particularly with regard to threats to their health and safety.

WHY ARE WOMEN HOMEWORKERS?

Although faced with poverty-line wages, insecurity and the lack of protection, women homeworkers have little option. Because of inadequate community-based childcare centres, lack of community support facilities and society's attitude that "women's place is in the home raising children", mothers with young children have the choice of earning nothing, farming out their children to unregistered, ill-equipped child-minders at approximately \$25 per week in order to take a fulltime job or of doing work at home.

Migrant women are faced with the added hurdles of language and cultural constraints which make full-time work difficult in factories and impossible in offices. Childcare centres are seldom adapted to migrants' needs; nor do they employ multilingual workers.

In order to be licensed by the Department of Labour and Industry people have to prove that they are "in necessitous circumstances or that, for special reasons, they are unable to work in factories". It is a pity that the government's lack of action in the area of childcare and family support services creates such "necessitous circumstances".

WHAT WOMEN SAY ABOUT HOMEWORK

For most it seems to be the only compromise. It solves their childcare problems and provides the ultimate in flexible working hours - but there are a number of disadvantages.

"I am isolated in every way, not only from the other workers in the factory, but because in the factory what rights the workers have are respected while at home, even though I am a worker, I have no rights."

"The difficulties I have encountered are enormous. When I finish doing the housework I try to get some work done. The boss gives me the most difficult, complicated, annoying work to do. I work on the piecework system and this means that in order to earn that little bit extra I need to fill a quota first . . . I cannot discuss too much with the boss or demand that he treat me better, so he exploits me even more."

The pay is low and the women don't feel that they get paid what the job is worth. However many homeworkers consider this is the price they must pay for an otherwise ideal situation.

"I get less than \$50 per week . . . but I feel sorry for most working mothers. It's better to have a job at home so you can stay with the kids. You would always be worrying about them if you went to work . . . This way the baby just plays around while I'm working and if he needs me I can stop for a while . . . but my husband doesn't like it when I'm behind and have to work at night to catch up instead of sitting and relaxing with him."

EMPLOYER ATTITUDES

It is easy to understand why employers maintain the homeworking system. If work can be done outside the factory or office the company saves on overhead, sick and holiday pay, workers' compensation and sometimes payroll tax when the women are not registered.

The women are mostly not aware of their rights and are not organized to fight for them. They are also liable to jeopardize their earnings if they take action individually.

UNION ACTION

Exploited and unprotected, homeworkers are a fertile area for union activity. It is unfortunate that so few are unionized. Some homeworkers don't know they can join a union or receive union coverage. They are difficult to organize - isolated in the home and working in industries which themselves may be poorly organized.

In Britain recently some success has been achieved. The General Municipal Workers' Union established its first Homeworkers Branch. A Trade Union Congress Working Party is now examining the issue and has advocated improvised social action and gives high priority to the organization of homeworkers. The London Homeworking Campaign has produced the following Charter which could be adapted to Australian conditions and adopted by unions:

"We pledge ourselves to agitate and organise for:

DECENT PAY AND CONDITIONS FOR THOSE WHO WORK AT HOME

1. Full status of 'employee' for homeworkers and the extension of existing protective legislation to cover homeworkers (for example Health & Safety at Work, Employment Protection Act).
2. Extension of trade union organisation to cover homeworking and the full involvement of homeworkers in Trades Unions.
3. Full information on homeworking and the rights of homeworkers to be widely publicized.
4. Enforced obligation on employers to provide statistical details of homework to the Department of Employment. Lists of homeworkers should be available, through a responsible local agency, to Trades Unions and others concerned to ensure the rights of homeworkers.
5. Pay equal to rates of unionized factory workers, plus a homework premium to cover overhead costs.

DECENT SOCIAL PROVISION TO END THE NECESSITY FOR HOMEWORKING

6. Improved local authority provision for
 - * Daytime care of young children, preschool and school-aged children (after school and during school holidays)
 - * Day care of handicapped and elderly dependants
 - * English language training for immigrants.
7. State benefits (Family Allowance, Family Income Supplement, Supplementary Benefit) to be raised to realistic levels to end the financial necessity of taking in homework.
8. Extension of government training programmes with pay.
9. Enforcement of employers' disabled workers quotas.

So long as women are expected to shoulder the responsibility of childcare it is essential that they have a choice of working hours and job options. For the majority of homeworkers neither a fulltime job nor working at home is appealing. Like night work (see our Discussion Paper No. 12), homework is seen as a compromise between going out to work and having insufficient money to provide for their children's needs.

It is also essential that homeworkers come under the umbrella of the union movement. Until they do they are a constant threat to the wage standards and conditions of other workers.

One way of tracing homeworkers would be to check the labels of clothes, footwear, curtains and other goods, track down the firms who market these goods and pressure the government to check their wages records against sales records to see if wages recorded adequately account for the amount of goods sold. If not, they could check further and find out where the goods are being manufactured. If the unions don't take up this matter no-one else is likely to.

REFERENCE

- (1) Ryan, E. and Conlon, A. Gentle Invaders: Australian Women at Work 1788-1974. Nelson 1975.