

Fabian Tract No. 80.

# SHOP LIFE AND ITS REFORM

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## Modern Shopkeeping.

It would be difficult to point out any industry which has altered more rapidly in its social aspects within recent years than shopkeeping. The small shop is rapidly losing its place in the economy of distribution, and the "respectable shopkeeper" is disappearing as the Store and the Limited Liability Company step in to do his work. In the grocery trade the shopkeeper has become a mere salesman who deals in proprietary articles and needs no skill to select his goods. On the whole, these changes have not been of benefit to the shop assistant. In former times he\* worked in close contact with his employer; he had opportunities of gaining a wide knowledge of his trade; he had social advantages almost on a level with those of his master, and a reasonable prospect of being some day in business on his own account. Now he is a machine in the employ of a firm; dependent for his comfort and security on a foreman who is also a machine; and having before him practically no chance of advancement, and, worse still, no chance of employment when his hair begins to turn grey and he is past his prime. Only a small proportion of shop assistants become shopkeepers; and while an old assistant is seldom to be seen behind the counter, we know that he has not received a training which will fit him for any other useful work when the shop no longer needs him. Grave problems are presented by the lives of the young men and young women who serve us so briskly and obligingly on our shopping expeditions. Although they work under such varied circumstances, some still serving almost single-handed in small shops while others are massed together by the hundred or thousand by some Universal Provider, yet there is a similarity in the conditions of almost all, which may be summed up in the words "long hours, small pay, and an unhealthy mode of life."

## References.

To learn the trade of shopkeeping one must start young and serve at least six months for little or no pay and with no teacher except the pains and penalties which follow on mistakes. When an assistant desires to change his situation he must have references from his last employers, and the system which obtains with regard to these is most unsatisfactory. As a rule they are kept secret from

\* In this Tract the masculine pronoun includes the feminine.



the employee, so that however unjustly or carelessly they may be drawn up he cannot defend himself; and often most impertinent and irrelevant questions are asked as to his social habits, religion, etc. The employer thus holds in his hands the future of his assistants, who are compelled to submit in silence to much discomfort and even tyranny, lest complaint, however justifiable, should lead to dismissal with an unsatisfactory reference and a weary wait for another engagement. The Trade Unions affected are at present considering the best means of remedying this grievance.

### Engagements and Dismissals.

The same competition which makes it difficult for the assistant to get work makes it also difficult for him to keep it. It is a common practice with large firms to engage extra hands for each busy season of the year, giving them to understand that, if they prove suitable, the engagement will be permanent. At the end of the season, when it is almost impossible to obtain fresh employment, very few are found to be "suitable," and these are only retained in place of less "pushing" salesmen who were there before them. The rule in most houses is, that the employer has the power to dismiss an assistant at a moment's notice, but that the assistant must give one or more week's notice. Wages are rarely paid in lieu of notice. Where assistants "live in," the only provision to secure that he shall not be absolutely penniless when he leaves is the retention by the employer of the first fortnight's or month's wage, which is paid on dismissal. "In one shop six girls were dismissed on Christmas Eve, without any reason being assigned and with no extra pay. The girls, being allowed to buy things in the shop and have them entered against their wages during the month, and not expecting to have notice given them, might have been only just out of debt when dismissed."\* In many cases the assistant must resign his situation before applying for another, and failure to notify his employer of his intention often leads to loss of his present engagement without the reference necessary for securing the new appointment.

### Agreements.

Employers often demand from assistants the signing of certain agreements as a condition of engagement, usually producing them only after the situation has been taken up. These may prohibit after employment in the same trade in the same neighborhood, enforce obedience to all rules on pain of instant dismissal, or grant the right of search to the employer's inspectors; whatever they are, the assistant will probably sign away his liberty with scarcely a glance at what he is doing, for it is a choice between that and losing the place. He dare not risk his situation or the prospects of obtaining a situation, by non-compliance with regulations, though these may hamper him in his business career. He must sign the customary agreement or seek other

\* C—6894 XXIII., page 88, Royal Commission on Labor Report.

employment. A notable legal case was that of *Bladon v. Davidson*.\* Some time after the defendant had accepted the position of shop-walker in the employ of Messrs. F. F. Bladon and Co., he was requested to sign an agreement that he would not accept any position in the drapery trade within a radius of ten miles or in the town of Hull, should he at any time, for any cause, leave the employ of the plaintiffs. He objected to the condition, but finally submitted under threat of dismissal. Some eighteen months afterwards the defendant left, and secured a situation with another firm of drapers in Hull. Messrs. Bladon and Co. thereupon applied for a perpetual injunction restraining Davidson from continuing in employment as a draper's assistant within the area specified by the agreement. The injunction was granted, and, although the local Trades Council interceded with Messrs. Bladon and Co. on Davidson's behalf, the legal decision was enforced, and the defendant was made bankrupt to defray the cost of the action.

To take another example, an assistant, working in Bradford,† signed an agreement not to accept employment in a similar capacity within a mile of any of the firm's branch shops, which, as this firm had from twenty-five to thirty branch shops scattered over several neighboring towns, practically amounted to a contract not to accept employment with any other firm in those towns. He did accept employment contrary to his contract, and his late employers applied for a perpetual injunction and £50 damages. The Bradford Branch of the National Union of Shop Assistants, Warehousemen and Clerks took up the case, and the firm agreed to compromise by withdrawing the claim for damages, on condition that the assistant left the situation he then held.

### Hours of Labor.

If eight hours is the daily allowance for a man's toil, then many shop assistants do the work of two men in one day. The work, while they are at it, is both laborious and tedious, and in very few places have they either time or strength after it for recreation and social intercourse. We must not judge the length of hours only by the time the shops keep open; there is much to do, before and after, in arranging and sorting stock; and the weekly hours given in the examples which follow only include the hours in which the shop is open to the public.

The House of Commons' Committee which received evidence on Shop Hours in 1886, reported that "The hours of labor in shops range as high as 85 per week." The Lady Commissioner says "the hours compare unfavorably with those permitted in industries protected by the Factory Acts," and that "the idea that a shop assistant's work is less arduous than that of a person in factories seems also to be erroneous." The representatives of the National Union, when giving evidence before the Royal Commission on Labor (November 9th, 1892) estimated the average hours per week as from 80 to 84. The Secretary of the London Early Closing Association stated to the House of Commons Committee, on the Shops Early

\* *Hull Daily*, May, 1892.

† Gallon and Co. v. H. Rogers, Grocer, 1894.



Closing Bill, 1895, that, "where there is an early closing day in London, hours still average from 80 to 82 per week, and, where there is no early closing day, from 82 to 84 per week." Other witnesses put the hours from 68 to 100 per week.

Mr. Henry Cushen, an official of the Metropolitan Grocers' and Provision Dealers' Association, and a tireless opponent of Parliamentary limitation of Shop Hours, stated that "The following are the hours, in my experience, in London: Monday,  $13\frac{1}{2}$  hours; Tuesday,  $9\frac{1}{2}$ ; Wednesday,  $13\frac{1}{2}$ ; Thursday,  $13\frac{1}{2}$ ; Friday,  $14\frac{1}{2}$ ; Saturday,  $16\frac{1}{2}$  hours. Total: 81 hours per week, less half-an-hour each for *dressing*, breakfast, dinner, tea and supper =  $2\frac{1}{2}$  hours per day, being 15 hours per week, net total of working hours 66 per week." Mr. Lomax, Secretary of the Loughborough Shop Assistants' Association, stated, at the Shop Hours Conference, Manchester, 1892, that he had worked in a shop where, during four years, he had never had an opportunity of putting on his coat or his hat, except on Sundays.

Mr. Charles Booth ("Life and Labor of the People," Vol. VII.) gives the hours of men in drapers' shops in London as from 59 to 70 in first class shops, and hours of women as from 56 to 67 (exclusive of meals). The difference between the hours of men and women who work in the same shop is explained by the fact that women seldom enter the shop before breakfast. The hours of labor in first class suburban shops, Mr. Booth estimates as from  $62\frac{1}{2}$  to  $74\frac{1}{2}$ ; medium shops, from 71 to 76, and in some places more; small shops have no quotable hours. The grocers and oil and colormen work longer hours, their almost universal time of opening being 8 a.m. and their usual closing hour for the first four days, 9 or 9.30 p.m. In some districts there is an "early" closing day from 5 p.m., but on Friday few shops close before 10.30 or 11 o'clock, and on Saturday the usual hour is 12 p.m.

The Women's Co-operative Guild, in their Report on the Treatment of Women Employees in the Co-operative Movement in 1895, state that 530 women and girls were employed as shop assistants by 104 societies and that the average hours worked were  $53\frac{3}{4}$  per week; 38 or 7 per cent. worked 48 hours or less per week; 179 or 34 per cent. from 49 to 53 hours; 240 or 45 per cent. from 53 to 57 hours; 59 or 11 per cent. from 57 to 60 hours; and 14 or 3 per cent. 60 hours or upwards.

In small shops, and in those shops where meals are provided on the premises, the assistants rarely leave the shop *during the day*. In medium and lower class shops the number of hours during which assistants are confined to the shop cannot, in large cities, be less than 78 hours per week on the average. In those places where a half-holiday is customary, the average would be less, but, in far too many cases, the larger average is exceeded. In country towns and in first class shops the hours are fewest.

### Wages.

In considering comparative rates of wages it must be borne in mind that the shop assistant's chance of obtaining or retaining employment largely depends upon a neat and prosperous appearance.

He cannot, like many other workmen, economize on his clothes. The wages-table compiled by the Labor Commissioners gives, for male assistants, an average of 23s. 11d. per week. A representative of the National Union of Shop Assistants, when giving evidence before the Commission, put the average wage at 23s. The *Lancet* Sanitary Commissioner, in 1892, estimated the hourly earnings of assistants at from 2d. to 6d. Mr. Charles Booth has tabulated the earnings of assistants with twenty-five firms, representing grocers, oil and colormen, tea, coffee and cocoa traders. 770 adult men were employed, 64½ per cent. of whom received under 30s. per week; 20 per cent. from 30s. to 35s. per week; and 15½ per cent. received over that sum. The same firms employed 314 women, of whom 41 per cent. earned under 12s. per week; and of 344 boys employed, 62½ per cent. received under 12s. per week. The average hours of the class of traders mentioned were about 80 per week. More than half the boys and women were paid less than 2d. per hour; 33 per cent. of the adult men were working for 4d. per hour, and 85 per cent. were receiving less than 6d. per hour. Drapers are better paid than grocers, and work fewer hours. Mr. Booth has given similar particulars about the earnings of drapers employed by thirty-six wholesale and retail firms in London. 2,268 assistants were employed, of whom 1,177 were men, 931 women, and 160 apprentices (115 lads and 45 girls). Of the total 2,002 "lived in," and 411 "lived out." Of 911 men who "lived in," 60 per cent. received under £50 a year, and 93 per cent. under £100 a year. The 266 men who "lived out" were engaged either in wholesale houses or as managers or heads of departments in retail shops. Allowing £20 as an equivalent for lodging and partial board lost, only 18 per cent. of those who "lived out" earned under £70 a year as against 60 per cent. of those who "lived in." Of 786 women who "lived in," 81½ per cent. received under £50 a year, and of 145 women who "lived out," 75 per cent. were paid less than £70 a year. Of the 115 lads returned as apprentices, 34 received some remuneration, which in most cases was under £10 per annum. None of the 45 girls received any salary, but board and lodgings were provided. After making allowance for food, lodgings, and all other additions to wages, Mr. Booth estimated that half the men drapers were little better off than a workman earning 30s. a week, and that three-fourths of the women received the equivalent of 20s. a week. The returns upon which this estimate is based include too many wholesale firms to give any other than the most favorable average, and the additions to wages are valued at sums above the average current in the trade. The Scottish Shopkeepers' and Assistants' Union put in a statement to the Royal Commission on Labor in which they estimated the average wage of drapers' assistants in Scotland to be—men 25s., women 10s. per week. The Women's Co-operative Guild, in the Report already mentioned, found the average weekly wage of 272 women employed as shop assistants in co-operative stores to be 14s. 5d.; 44 per cent. earned below the average, and 41 per cent. above it.

The competition of women and girls for employment in the drapery and millinery trade is made particularly severe by special



circumstances. Those who are solely dependent upon their situations for a livelihood have to compete for employment with others who are attracted by the apparent gentility of such occupations, and either receive assistance from parents in fairly comfortable circumstances or supplement their earnings from other sources. Fellow employees who are exceptionally well dressed and well supplied with money make things much harder for poor and vain juniors who look upon such possessions with envy.

### Premiums and Commissions.

The system of giving premiums on certain goods sold (often old stock or that most difficult to sell) or commissions on total amount sold, is bad, both for shop assistant and customer. It makes the former push things which are not wanted by the latter, and it also is bad for the assistant, because it introduces an element of uncertainty into his wages. It arouses a bad spirit between him and his fellow employees, and is one of the most serious barriers to combination among assistants. These additional sources of income, given as rewards for "special attention to business," are quoted to justify the low wages prevalent, and are put before the assistant as part of his possible earnings, often at a much higher figure than they can actually reach. Mr. Booth has estimated premiums in the drapery trade to be worth 5s. a week, which may be true for the firms supplying him with information, but is above the average of the trade; and in any case premiums must be considered in relation to fines and deductions.

### Compulsory Peculators.

One discreditable phase of modern trading, accentuated by the branch shop system, is that of giving short weight and selling goods of inferior value for and at the price of superior and well-known articles. It is the practice to invoice to managers of branch shops all goods at weight, length, and number specified on the wholesaler's or manufacturer's invoice, but at *retail* prices. Few firms allow for "shortage," and most of the others do not allow sufficient. Deficiencies in stock have to be made good by the manager, and frequently the only way of avoiding them is to give short weight to customers, and the assistants are instructed accordingly. Those who disobey run the risk of being discharged, while those who obey and are found out also lose their places.

### Rules, Fines and Deductions.

"What kind of men are they who work under such rules, and what work can be expected under such conditions? . . . Fines such as are enforced in English houses do not exist (in German houses), nor would a firm employ people for whom such rules are necessary." (Miss H. Jastrow, late Secretary Berlin Women Clerks' and Shop Assistants' Association, writing in the *Drapers' Record*.) Most of us who know of the petty annoyances to which the shop assistants are continually subject would share her indignation.

There are rules in every establishment, amounting sometimes to as many as 100 or 150, dealing with all the details of the business and of meal-times, etc., and often there is a fine, varying from 1d. to 2/6 or 5/-, attached to each rule. Compulsory and exorbitant deductions are sometimes made for library, piano, breakages, etc. This custom again introduces an element of uncertainty into the weekly earnings, and it also places the assistants at the mercy of the shopwalker or manager, who, in many cases, has power to fine "at discretion" without the assistant having any chance of appeal. Any good manager can keep order without these artificial aids, while the assistant who is persistently late or careless ought to be dismissed. Some of the largest firms have abolished fines, acknowledging that they are an unnecessary cause of irritation and of loss of self-respect amongst their employees; and the inclusion of shop assistants in the Truck Amendment Act, 1896, will do much to regulate and ultimately to abolish the system.

### The "Living-in" System.

From motives of economy, convenience and discipline, assistants are frequently compelled to board and lodge on premises provided by their employers. The system has, no doubt, grown out of the old custom of boarding and lodging apprentices until their period of apprenticeship had expired. It is mainly confined to the drapery and grocery trades, but it is commoner in the former than in the latter, and, as with the system of apprenticeship, it is more prevalent in the South of England than in the North. In Scotland, Germany and France the system does not exist.

To "live-in" was very advantageous for young people who had to go far from home to learn a business, when, as formerly, they lived with their employer and were treated as members of their employer's family. Now they are lodgers without freedom of choice as to the food they eat, the rooms they occupy, the person they sleep with, the time they may come and go after business hours, the opinions they may express, or the associations they may belong to. They cannot receive friends who do not work for the same firm. They are subject to supervision over act and word by managers and housekeepers. On Sundays they are often shut out from their rooms all day long, whether they have any other place to go to or not. Large numbers are disfranchised because the partitions between their bedrooms do not reach the ceiling.

Even under the best firms the system is bound to curtail the liberty and independence of the assistants; but the physical comforts of this barrack life vary, as might be expected, with the character of the employer and of his representatives.

### The Quality of the Food.

The Lady Commissioners\* say frequent complaints were made about the insufficiency and poor quality of the food supplied, and the want of cleanliness in its preparation. The Lady Commissioner who conducted the enquiry in Wales specified the complaints on the

\* C—6894 XXIII., Royal Commission on Labor Report.



quality and quantity of food supplied under five heads, as follows: (1) Weak tea; many of the witnesses said they spent money in buying tea to make for themselves. (2) Badly cooked food. (3) Nothing nourishing for breakfast, which generally consisted of tea and thick bread and butter; the girls bought bacon. (4) No variety of food; the eternal beef and mutton, with "resurrection pie," and pudding with cold meat. (5) No fruit or green vegetables, causing indigestion and poor health. One witness (No. 71) said that drapers dealt with their customers in return for bread, meat, etc., and put up with any stuff they chose to send. A shopkeeper, claiming damages from the father of an apprentice who had run away from business, was asked: "Have you given them (the apprentices) bread and cheese for dinner every Saturday?" He replied: "There was always something else on the table, such as pickles." He was also asked: "Was it true that on Saturdays, when they worked sixteen hours, they had bread and dripping for breakfast, bread and cheese for dinner, bread and butter for tea, and bread and cheese for supper?" The reply was: "No, not invariably; they have sometimes had ham and eggs for tea, or perhaps—sausages"!!

#### Inadequate Time for Meals.

The time allowed for meals varies a great deal. Where they are not provided on the premises, an hour for dinner and half-an-hour for tea is usually given, but in some cases only half that time. Where meals are served on the premises, the time allowed varies from ten minutes to half-an-hour. The assistant cannot go to a meal if engaged with a customer at the time, and he must return to the counter when required to do so and as often as he is required during the meal-time.

The *Lancet* Special Commissioner (February 27th, 1892) says: "Very often only half-an-hour is given for breakfast, dinner and tea; this is altogether insufficient in itself; but, in large establishments, it sometimes takes nearly five minutes to go to and from the counter to the dining-room, so that food is consumed in great haste . . . all this naturally tends to interfere with the process of digestion, and dyspepsia is very common among this class of workers."

The Oldham Industrial Co-operative Stores are closed from 12 o'clock to 1 o'clock each day to enable the assistants to have an undisturbed hour for dinner, although the population of Oldham is about 160,000, largely consisting of factory operatives, 70 to 75 per cent. of them being members of the Co-operative Societies, whose legitimate convenience must necessarily be considered.

#### House Doctors and Medical Attendance.

Where the assistants live-in it is customary to make them subscribe 6d. or 1/- a month to a fund for medical attendance. In many cases the system does not work satisfactorily. Complaints are made that the "House Doctor" does not take sufficient interest, and assistants often go, at their own extra expense, to some other doctor. Frequently great kindness is shown to the patient by the house-

\* Birmingham County Court, February 3rd, 1892.

keeper and the other assistants, but often the sick are shamefully neglected. In an Oxford Street house an extra fee of 3/- is charged for medical attendance; and if the assistant is ill more than three days he must go home or to the hospital. In other cases an assistant is sent home as soon as he is suspected of suffering from an infectious disease, in order to avoid the legal notification to the health authorities and the possible loss of trade. Very often the time lost during illness is deducted from wages. Such rules as these do much harm in forcing the assistants back to work before they are fit for it.

### Sanitation.

Unfortunately, there is usually only too much cause for illness amongst shop assistants. Bad accommodation, bad sanitation, and bad ventilation are the most frequent and the greatest evils which are found both in business and domestic premises. In many shops the dining-room is underground, with gas burning all day, and ventilation only through the grating in the pavement of the street. In some cases the odours of defective drains pervade both kitchen and dining-room. "In many shops there is no water-closet accommodation. In hundreds of cases in Glasgow, for instance, the nearest closet is one common to several shopkeepers, and often it is without water, owing to the shopkeepers, who are assessed for it, repudiating using it."\* In some cases "two, four, and even six assistants sleep in one room." One witness who slept "six in a room" was obliged to consult a doctor, who attributed her illness to foul air.† In one house, described as comfortable enough, there were eight assistants sleeping in separate beds in one large room; but the girls differed on the subject of ventilation. One suffered from headache, because some of the others refused to have the window open at night, even in summer-time. In the premises provided by a London firm, "which advertised itself as one of Christian workers, the rain came through the roof of the assistants' bedroom."‡ It was reported of one West End drapery house, that "the bedroom linen was not changed for months." It is no wonder that shop assistants so often are anæmic and narrow-chested, and that so many break down in health.

### Compulsory Celibacy.

Two causes condemn the large majority of shop assistants to celibacy. One is that the salary is seldom sufficient to keep a family; the second is that the "living-in" system does not provide accommodation for married assistants, so that even where marriage is possible with some degree of comfort the employers' permission must be obtained, and it is generally refused unless the assistant holds one of the higher positions. Under any circumstances, the fact that two assistants of opposite sex show a special interest in each other's society leads in many cases to the dismissal of one or both delinquents. While the men are forced to shun marriage for fear of

\* C—6894 XXIII., page 314, Royal Commission on Labor Report.

† C—6894 XXIII., page 88, Royal Commission on Labor. ‡ *Ibid.*, Witness No. 10.



losing their work, the women hail it as a means of escape from their slavery, and would, as one girl expressed it, "marry anybody to get out of the drapery trade."

## REMEDIES.

We have now given some idea of the conditions under which shop assistants do their work, and have found that their grievances are many and serious. Let us now see what has been done to remedy them, and what is the most hopeful direction for further effort.

### I.—Philanthropy.

Numerous attempts during the past fifty years have been made to form some organization to promote earlier closing, but as the method has been to combine philanthropists, employers, and assistants, few have lived beyond a season. One of these is the Early Closing Association and Traders' Parliamentary Alliance. This body did much to pass the Act now in force for limiting the hours of young persons in shops, and on their behalf Sir John Lubbock has introduced from time to time an Early Closing Bill. Where a weekly half-holiday or early closing has been obtained by voluntary effort it is always liable to be broken down by the action of even one shopkeeper who disregards it.

### II.—Organization.

With the doubtful exception of the victims of the sweated home-industries, no other class of workers have shown themselves so careless of their responsibilities towards themselves and their fellows as the shop assistants. Whether it be true or not that "God helps those that help themselves," it is certain that the general public has neither the time nor the inclination to spend energy on people who have not the wisdom to organize as other workers all over the country organize. This is the real secret of the hardships of the shop assistant's life. A factory owner who ventured to treat a single cotton operative with a fraction of the tyranny which is the prerogative of any shopkeeper would soon raise a storm about his ears. Trade Unionism cannot do everything for the worker; against federated capital it can often do but little. Yet, after all deductions have been made, it is a powerful defence of the workers' interests.

There are many difficulties in organizing shop assistants. First, it is difficult to get hold of them, because they are a nomadic class of workers. "This tendency to move from situation to situation seems to be partly due to anxiety to obtain more experience in their business, partly to the desire for higher wages or shorter hours, and partly to weariness and illness making an interval of rest or change of air and surroundings compulsory."\* Young men and women engaged for long hours in small shops find little opportunity of meeting their fellows, and, above all, the whole class is subject to the economic pressure of the crowds of young persons growing up

\* Royal Commission on Labor Report, C—6894, XXIII, p. 88.

every day, eager for employment, and able, after a little training, to fill the places of discontented assistants. Powerful as those economic causes are, they have not deterred other classes of workers from combining for mutual defence. Social status, not economic law, is the ruin alike of shop assistants and clerks. Very many of them are prevented by their sham gentility from helping in the organization of their class. These "gentlemen" and "ladies" feel that it is quite beneath them to belong to a common Trade Union like navvies or bricklayers. That doctors and lawyers—persons of undoubted respectability—are all strong Trade Unionists is a fact which quite escapes their notice. The half-conscious feeling that each one is an employer in embryo is also greatly responsible for the spirit of isolation, but the wisp o' the wisp of "a shop of one's own" burns less brightly every day as the small shops dwindle and the large stores, with their factory conditions, increase. It is due to these causes that no attempt to form a Trade Union, on lines similar to those adopted by workers in other great industries of the country, appears to have been made until 1889, when unions were started in Manchester, London and South Wales. In March, 1891, a conference was held in Birmingham of delegates from existing unions and as many associations as could be induced to attend, and the present National Union of Shop Assistants was then formed. It has now about forty-five branches in different towns. Its objects are: to reduce the hours of labor; to abolish unjust fines; to secure definite and adequate time for meals; to obtain proper supervision of the sanitary arrangements of shops, and the abolition of the "living-in" system; to give legal aid to members, financial assistance during sickness and want of employment, etc. The questions of a minimum wage and a list of fair shops have also been under consideration. The Union has 2,300 members, who are represented each year at the Trade Union Congress, and a monthly magazine, *The Shop Assistant*, is published at Cardiff by members of the Union. The United Shop Assistants' Union, founded in 1889 with similar objects, has five branches in London. The Unionists are thus a very small proportion of the 700,000 persons employed in the wholesale and retail distributive trades in the United Kingdom; but shop assistants are now beginning to recognize that they work under conditions much worse than those of many factory operatives, and that to improve their position they must organize as other workers have done.

### III.—Legislation.

Hitherto legislation has been left mainly to the impulse of sporadic philanthropy, and consequently little has been accomplished. In 1873 a Factory Commission received evidence on Shop Hours, and from 1876 to 1896 no less than twenty Bills have been considered and reconsidered by the House of Commons. For over twenty years discontent has been dulled and organization deferred by vain hopes. Year by year, up to 1896, the legislative proposals of the shop assistants' friends have been modified until the latest production of the philanthropists has been reduced to a preamble and platitudes. The Shop Hours Act, passed in 1886, and



renewed from year to year up to 1892, when it was adopted as a permanent Statute, limits the hours of young persons under eighteen years of age to 74 hours per week. This Act, up to 1893, contained no provisions to ensure its enforcement—which was left optional with the local authorities—or penalties for non-compliance with its regulations. The promoters of the measure relied upon its moral effect, and, in consequence, it remained practically a dead letter. In 1893 a few local authorities, acting under pressure from the National Union of Shop Assistants, Warehousemen and Clerks, appointed inspectors; but from the Home Office Return, August 8th, 1896, it appears that there are only 10 inspectors throughout Great Britain who devote their whole time to the duties required by the Act. Five of these are for England and Wales, two for Scotland, and three for Ireland; but there are 288 other persons, such as police officers, sanitary inspectors, school attendance officers, inspectors of weights and measures, inspectors of hackney carriages, inspectors of canal boats, *inspectors of the prevention of cruelty to animals*, inspectors under the Diseases of Animals Act, and others, who, in addition to their legitimate and onerous duties, are supposed to perform those of a shop hours inspector, under an Act which provides no power to solve the difficulties of inspection. The only other labor legislation affecting shop assistants is the Truck Act, 1896, which has for the first time given the Government inspector the right of entry into a shop. Strong Trade Union action is, however, necessary for the enforcement of this Act.

Shop assistants must turn their attention to politics. Other workers get their demands attended to because they have votes; shop assistants are almost all disfranchised. To their Trade Union campaign they must add a political campaign, and fight it through until they have full citizen rights. Agitation may not be considered genteel, but the benefits of democracy cannot be obtained unless the instruments of democracy are acquired. The State organized into central and local authorities is the modern machinery for bringing the common humanity of all to bear on the wrongs of separate classes, and in countries where the working classes control the government they can use this machinery for their own and the common benefit. In New Zealand the Shops and Shop Assistants Act, 1894, provides that all shops shall be closed at one p.m. on one afternoon in the week fixed by the local authority, and that women and young persons under eighteen shall not be employed for more than fifty-two hours in a week, excluding meal times. A carefully drawn clause requires the provision of sitting accommodation for women employed in shops, and under another clause shop assistants are entitled to one hour for dinner. In 1896 the Colony of Victoria passed a Factories and Shops Act, limiting the total hours of labor of young persons under sixteen and of women over sixteen engaged in shops to fifty-two per week. A weekly half-holiday is compulsory, and the provision of sufficient sitting accommodation for employees is required. Several of the American States make the provision of seats for assistants compulsory, and New York State in 1896 passed

a law prohibiting the employment of children under the age of fourteen, and establishing a sixty-hour week for males under sixteen and females under twenty-one, besides making useful regulations as to meal-times, sanitation, seats, etc. Even Germany affords our shop assistants a good object lesson, for there, by dint of strong organization (they have a Federation of Trade Unions numbering 130,000 assistants, both men and women, besides 70,000 or 80,000 organized who have not yet joined the "Verbund"), they have obtained a law, which will come into force in 1898, and will obviate many of the grievances which they have in common with our English assistants. It provides, amongst other things, for thorough apprenticeship, good sanitation, sick benefits, just references, and just agreements, with no "contracting out."

Dissatisfied with the principles and provisions of the Shops Early Closing Bill of Sir John Lubbock, the National Union of Shop Assistants, Warehousemen and Clerks drafted a Bill, which was laid before the House of Commons in August, 1896, by Sir C. Dilke, in the names of Mr. John Burns, Dr. Clark, Mr. M. Davitt, and Mr. E. Flowers. The Bill provides that *all shops shall close* on one day not later than 1 o'clock, on three days not later than 7 o'clock, on one day not later than 9 o'clock, and on one day not later than 10 o'clock p.m. The local authority\* must fix the closing hours for each day in accordance with the Act. No assistant may be employed for more than half-an-hour after the shop has been closed. No person shall be exempted on the ground that he is an apprentice or an improver, or a member of the occupier's family. Every shop must be provided with sufficient and suitable sitting accommodation for females employed in the shop, who may not be prohibited from using it when not actually at work, and reasonable intervals for rest must be provided. A young person or a woman shall not be employed continuously for more than five hours without an interval of at least half-an-hour for a meal. All persons employed in shops must have an interval at noon of not less than one hour, and an interval of not less than half-an-hour between four and seven o'clock in the evening. All premises used for business or domestic purposes in connection with a shop must be kept in a cleanly state and ventilated in an efficient and suitable manner, and suitable sanitary conveniences must be provided for the separate use of each sex. Every shop must exhibit an extract of the Act and a notice showing the closing hours for each day of the week, and the days when, by special permit, overtime may be worked on forty days in the year. Every shopkeeper shall furnish the inspector in his district, every year, with a return specifying, with respect to the year ending December, the number of persons employed in the shop, with such particulars as to the age and sex of the persons employed as the Secretary of State may direct. It will be the duty of inspectors under the Factory and Workshops Acts to enforce the provisions of this Act, and for this purpose Sections 67, 68 and 70 of the Factory and Workshops Act shall apply as if a shop were

\* In the Bill the "local authority" is the Town Council in boroughs, and elsewhere the County Council. It would be better if the District Council were substituted for the latter body, except in London.



a factory or workshop. The Bill has already been welcomed by Employers' Associations, and the Parliamentary Committee of the Trades Union Congress was authorized at the 1897 Congress to bring it before the notice of the Government. There is good reason to believe that a knowledge of the evils and difficulties involved by existing conditions will provide the Bill with substantial support both in and out of Parliament.

These proposals are not put forward as a final settlement of the shop assistants' grievances; rather they are only the beginning of amelioration. Even if they became law in their entirety they would still leave the condition of shop assistants much worse than that of factory operatives. Where the working classes have banded themselves together in co-operative stores, and thus by virtue of their combination into public bodies have come to recognize their responsibilities, the hours of labor are much shorter than in private firms. Some stores have conceded the 48-hour week, and the average number of hours worked by men in 1896 was 53.6 per week in England, and 54 in Scotland. If working people, who are generally credited with a passion for late shopping, can get their business done in these comparatively short hours, there is no reason why any shop should remain open longer. But so long as a greedy shopkeeper is willing to cater for the person at the margin of humanity, it will be impossible to trust simply to the moralization of the customer. The passing of the National Union's bill into law must be the signal for a fresh agitation.

### Conclusion.

There is nothing specially new in the recommendations made in this Tract. There is nothing so peculiar in the position of shop-workers as to require for them a separate treatment from the rest of the working classes. On them as on all others lies the necessity of using the democratic weapons of trade combination and political agitation for the purpose of employing the forces of the State to raise their standard of life. What the voluntary Socialism of the co-operators has given to most of their employees as a free gift can be done for the wider world of mercantile life by the extension of State control, by the establishment of common rules extending over all distributing industries, by placing the standard of life under the protection of the community. It was in this way that the sweated and degraded workpeople of the textile districts were raised to their present high position among the working classes, and it is to the application of such methods alone that the shop assistants can look for the Reform of Shop Life.

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In addition to the Reports, &c., previously cited the following should be consulted :

ACTS OF PARLIAMENT.—The Shop Hours Regulation Act, 1886, 13d. ; Amendment Act, 1892, 3d. ; ditto, 1893, 3d. ; ditto, 1895, 3d. The Truck Act, to regulate fines, 1896, 1d.

PARLIAMENTARY PAPERS.—Select Committee Report on Shop Hours (18 May, 86) No. 155, 3s. 2d. ; index, 83d. H. C. Report on Shop Hours Bill, No. 287, 1892, 2/53d. Return of Inspectors appointed under Shop Hours Regulation Act, 1896, No. 285, 1d. H. O. Memo on Truck Act, explaining law on Truck, C.—8048, 1896, 101d. ; H. O. Instructions to Inspectors *re* 1896 Truck Act, C.—8330, 2d.



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