

THE UNREGULATED LABOUR MARKET: THEN AND NOW

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Sir Henry Phelps Brown, doyen of British labour economists, insisted on the need for an historical sensitivity when seeking to analyse and understand current economic and industrial issues:

Bygone affairs were not transacted on another planet: the motives, reactions and propensities displayed in them are the same as those in play around us now. By studying them we enlarge and sharpen our knowledge ... (Brown 1986:18-19)

This article draws on neglected but valuable sources of historical information on the working lives of the 'labouring classes' around the turn of century, especially those of unorganised (non-unionised) women employed mainly in the North of Ireland in the late 1800s and early 1900s. As well as being of real interest in its own right, this information is of value for other reasons.

In the first place, we would invite the drawing of some parallels with present conditions in 'deregulated' advanced liberal-capitalist democracies. Arguably the last time the unskilled segment of the labour market in the United Kingdom was as unregulated as now was in the late nineteenth century. With the major exception of the House of Commons Fair Wages Resolution of 1891, it was only in the early 1900s that there began to accumulate the great paraphernalia of government and trade union labour market regulation that was last fully in play in the late 1970s. Is it really essential that there be what Jill Rubery (1997) has recently called the 're-regulation' of the labour market? Our second purpose is closely related, and at least as important: to point up the relevance of the historical experience of already advanced countries for what is occurring in the world of work in developing countries - in the global labour market, as it were.

The 1887-90 Select Committee

'Sweating' was defined by the philanthropist Black as "any method of work under which workers are extremely ill-paid or extremely over- worked". She wrote of the 'sweater' as:

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... the employer who cuts down wages below the level of decent subsistence, works his operatives for excessive hours, or compels them to toil under insanitary conditions. (1907:1)

So great had public concern about sweating become in Britain by the mid-1880s that the government asked a Select Committee of the House of Lords to investigate its causes, and to produce recommendations for the improvement of working conditions in industry. The main conclusion of its first Report, which focused on London, was prescient:

The evidence already taken sufficiently indicates the existence of grave evils, in connection with what is known as the sweating system, in the localities to which our investigations have been confined. [We] have reason to believe that the same or similar evils prevail in other parts of the metropolis as well as in other towns and cities, and affect various industries not yet examined. (Sweating [1st] 1888:iii)

Remarkably, the Factory Inspector for Ireland told their Lordships in 1888 that he could find no evidence of the sweating system in Irish industry (Sweating [3rd] 1889:22). Whatever the truth of that, there can be no doubt that by the early years of the twentieth century the Committee's judgement on the pervasiveness - inevitability almost - of sweating was fully vindicated so far as Ireland was concerned. In Belfast in particular the abuses to which attention was by then being drawn were almost precisely the same as those uncovered in Britain.

The Select Committee devoted most of its attention to insanitary working conditions rather than to low wages and excessive hours of work. The development of workshops and factories had resulted in both men and women working together, but little account of their differing needs as regards sanitary arrangements appears to have been taken. The Secretary of the Jewish Board of Guardians gave evidence on 23 March 1888 to this effect:

Yes; of course where the sanitary inspector visits they do not work so long hours, but, in most cases, I might say that the sanitary conditions of the workshops is very bad indeed. I interviewed a few persons on Monday last ... I gathered from them a few particulars upon this question, and I say that in every case [where] it was reported that both males and females were working together, the sanitary arrangements were very bad indeed; there was only one w.c. for the whole house, which in some cases had to supply tenements besides the workpeople themselves. (Sweating [1st] 1888:114)

A more detailed description of the sanitary arrangements in a sweatshop is given by a tailor's machinist:

There is one w.c. for all the workers; there are about 14; besides that, the sweater lets out two rooms to families consisting of eight or ten persons; altogether it might be 22; there is only one w.c. for both males and females of the workshop, also for the tenants ... The decency is of course very bad when there is a female going to the w.c. and a male also wants to use the same compartment at the same time ... (Sweating [1st] 1888:173)

Particularly worrying was the evidence given to the Select Committee that sanitary inspectors were afraid to provide accurate information about the condition of premises being used as workshops, for fear of upsetting their local government employers who did not wish it to become known that insanitary conditions existed in their council areas. This led some to argue that inspectors should be agents of central government, rather than of parishes, vestries or boards of works. (Sweating [1st] 1888:114-15)

Later Reports show the Committee dealing with the effects of conditions at work on the health of the workforce. Mr Squire of the North London Hospital for Consumption observed that:

The tailors are well known medically to be liable for consumption ... the mortality from consumption among tailors is practically one fourth of the whole number of deaths from any cause in that class ... Consumption was found more especially among those persons in whose cases the conditions in which they were living and working were insanitary; and where their pay was not sufficient to enable them to get sufficient food it would be aggravated, and the conditions would be those described as being most marked under the sweating system. (Sweating [3rd] 1889:4)

In response to a question about inspection of premises, Squire commented that it was inadequate in his experience:

First of all, the people themselves do not care very much to complain; and secondly when they do complain, the constant reply they give, when one asks, "Has the sanitary inspector been appealed to?" is "Yes, he has been, but he said he had not any power." (1889:7)

Industrial opinion was divided about married women at work. For example, Mr Homer, President of the Chainmakers Society, said in his evidence to the Committee that:

When the woman turns into the shop to work, everything in the house is entirely neglected ... as you cannot expect the woman to do two things, you will see that house most filthy and untidy in many instances ... She feels the necessity of earning every penny she can to help her husband, and then very often when night comes and they have both done work there is neither fire nor comfort in the house; and very often it drives the man to go and get a pint of beer extra to what he would have. (Sweating [3rd] 1889:70)

John Price, District Chairman of the Nailers Association, held a different view: when asked if he objected to women in his particular trade, he replied: "Far from it. We could not think of abolishing female labour; it would be destructive to the interests of the whole country, or at least that part where the nailers are." (1889:187) However, this view rested on the premise that cheap female labour enabled workshop owners to pay higher wages to men! Both of these industries were in fact composed largely of small domestic workshops, and all members of the family assisted in production. Charles Hoare, a Factory Inspector, remarked that: "The extreme poverty of [these] people make one fear that if you were driven to prosecute, you would simply be driving them to goal." (1889:438)

The Committee of Inquiry's recommendations did address the concerns raised over inspection. Noting the general inadequacy of the existing law, regulations and inspection regime as regards smaller workplaces in particular, it eventually proposed that all domestic workshops should "be treated for sanitary purposes as factories are treated under the factory law." (Sweating [5th] 1890:xiiv) It also proposed an increase in the number of sanitary inspectors, the provision of greater facilities for them to inspect the workplaces within their area of jurisdiction, and a new power enabling inspectors to enter all workplaces without a warrant.

Minimal Effects

By the turn of the century there was little evidence that the Select Committee's Reports had had any effect whatever, and the campaign against sweating was taken up by the National League to Establish a Minimum Wage. Its Secretary, James Mallon, an Irish socialist, joined with the editor of the *Daily News*, A G Gardiner, to mount an exhibition to "acquaint the public with the evils of sweating and ... cultivate an opinion which shall compel legislation that will mitigate, if not entirely remove, those evils." (Quoted in Stewart & Hunter 1964:136) Intended to shock the government into action, the exhibition began in London in May 1906 and lasted for six weeks. It gave coverage to all of the identified sweated industries and, with the vocal assistance of Bernard Shaw, presented the minimum wage as a key part of the remedy for sweating. One immediate outcome was a new 'League for the Abolition of Sweating'; but it was still to be some years before the government took any serious action to deal with the problem.

Written not long after the Mallon/Gardiner exhibition, Black's study of sweating in Britain (1907) confirmed that the evils identified by the Select Committee had not been eliminated. She nonetheless advocated the *spread* of the factory system, as a way of ending sweating amongst 'out-workers' - those who performed paid work in their own homes. She also believed that trade unions would not only assist workers in improving their wage levels, but also lead to the increased development of industry. Her ingenious (and perhaps ingenuous) argument was that the inevitable higher labour costs resulting from unionisation would force factory owners to find other and better ways of becoming efficient and competitive than keeping wages down.

Black highlighted as a major abuse of out-working the practice of some employers of imposing part of the costs of manufacture on the employee. For example:

[The out-worker] was paid 1s 2d [6p] a dozen, but bought the cotton herself. She could make in a week five dozen all but one; for which payment would be five shillings, eight pence and a fraction of a penny [29p], less the cost of cotton, machine needles, and perhaps hire of machine. (1907:10)

Black argued that despite the poor conditions in factories, at least all manufacturing costs were being met by the owner. She also preferred factories for health reasons:

Ill health, indeed, is the chronic state of the woman home worker. She misses that regular daily journey to and from her work-place which ensures a daily modicum of air and exercise; and she misses also that element of changed scene and varied intercourse which makes for health and happiness. (1907:17)

Moreover, as compared to out-working, factory "hours and conditions [were] in some degree regulated [by law]". (1907:23)

Satanic Mills in Ireland?

The late 1800s and early 1900s were marked by the rapid development of the Irish textile industry, which was to become the paramount employer of women. Located principally in the city of Belfast, it was composed mainly of large mills, factories and workshops, but also included numerous out-workers. This pattern was similar to that which had emerged in England earlier in the nineteenth century; indeed, it is of some interest that the decline of the linen industry in England coincided almost precisely with its growth in Ireland. This 'transfer' of the industry was attributed primarily to the availability of cheaper labour. According to an English mill-owner:

It was not merely a matter of cheap factory labour, but that manufacturers in Ireland could employ homeworkers for the making-up branches of the trade, at rates of pay that "wouldn't keep a rat, ne'er mind a human being." (Haslam 1911a:137)

In his Annual Report for 1909 the Medical Superintendent of Health for Belfast, Dr Bailie, drew attention to out-working by women; and he made the by now familiar connections between long hours, low pay, ill health and poor home conditions:

...the small rates of pay which numbers of these workers received necessitated their working for unduly long hours, to the injury of their health, and if, as in the majority of instances, they were mothers of families, to the neglect of their homes. (Hatch 1912:iv)

In late 1910 the *Millgate Monthly* included an article by a ‘Special Commissioner’ who had visited the mill districts of Belfast. She described vividly the miseries endured by the workers. By 1904, of 95,950 workers in the UK linen industry, 62,194 were in Ireland; the great majority were in Belfast; and almost all were female. (1910:240) Ireland also had the greatest number of young ‘half-timers’:

The Irish child who has no better fate than that of being a half-timer has a hard and cruel lot ... In Belfast they are sparsely clothed and at least one-half of them are barefooted ... They provided a weird picture - a picture of oppression, poverty and injustice ... The linen mills of Ireland ... still preserve for us some of the most appalling sights in our annals of British industry. They work under demoralising and unhealthy conditions; they live in insanitary dwellings; they have neither food nor clothing enough to keep them warm and adequately nourished. (*Millgate Monthly* 1910:141-142)

The mills employed, by the then standards, a high proportion of married women - 25% of the total female workforce. The reason was predictable: because men’s wages were below what was popularly described as a ‘family wage’, and their wives simply *had* to go to work. The writer also provided average weekly wage figures for 1906: they were as shown in Table 1 below - in shillings (s) and pence (d), with decimal equivalents in new pence (p) in square brackets:

Table 1: Average Mill Wages in Belfast in 1906

<i>Full time boys</i>	8s	11d	[45p]
<i>Full time girls</i>	7s	11d	[40p]
<i>Half time boys</i>	3s	8d	[18p]
<i>Half time girls</i>	3s	7d	[18p]
<i>Full time women</i>	10s	10d	[54p]
<i>Full time men</i>	26s	2d	[131p] *

* Few men worked in the mills, so this figure covers mainly managers and foremen. The average wage for all factory workers was 11s 9d [59p].

Source: Board of Trade Returns, cited in *Millgate Monthly* 1910

As it happens, trade was brisk in 1906, but in the slump of 1908/9 average wages dropped to 6s [30p] per week. (1910:142) Of more interest perhaps is the size of the ‘supervisory/managerial’ differential exhibited by the *Full-time men* figure.

Why did women not go elsewhere for employment? Simply because their options were highly circumscribed: the choice seemed to be farm work, domestic service, shop work, or the mills. But as the magazine’s Special Commissioner pointed out, for the great majority of women the only real choice was between the linen mills, for all their harshness, and “the more despairing lot of the home worker” (1910:143).

She was highly critical of the factory owners and middlemen who became wealthy on the back of the low wages which were paid to out-workers - especially because many of the goods which they made were sold at a premium:

...a woman took three days to embroider a dozen tea-cloths for which she received 8d. [3p], after meeting her own expenses for thread and needle; but these cloths would be sold at 15s. [75p] to 20s. [100p] each. (1910:144)

She also pointed out that these workers were subject to a range of infectious diseases "such as erysipelas, diphtheria, scarlet fever, puerperal fever, typhoid fever, and consumption." (1910:143) Doctors in Belfast were similarly concerned about the health of women in the linen industry. A 1908 Report of a Committee of Inquiry into the health and well-being of the people of Belfast noted a death rate from phthisis (a form of tuberculosis) among females aged between five and 35 which was higher than the national average, and needed thorough investigation. More to the point, the Committee said that the rate of mortality in women between 25 and 45 suggested, as it carefully put it, an "occupational influence". (Ford & Ford 1969:421)

Haslam, another contemporary commentator on sweating, chose to concentrate on the Belfast linen trade because this was where the majority of the women were engaged, and because:

...the worst conditions in industrialism are among women workers. The most disgraceful rates of pay are those earned by women and children and it is the women who, in proportion to their age, need, and experience receive the least satisfactory wage. (1911b:32)

Haslam was concerned that too many people believed sweating to have been eliminated, especially in factories and mills. He showed that not only did it continue, but that it was not at all confined to out-workers:

In the linen mills of the city there are from 28,000 to 30,000 workers, of whom about 80 per cent are girls and women. It is seldom that any of them makes more than 11s [55p] or 12s [60p] per week. Most of us know the heart of Mrs. Browning was touched in 1844 by the sight of the child workers of Lancashire. She heard the children weeping, and with pictures of their tears, and sorrows, and frail bodies, she helped to arouse the social consciousness of England. But the Belfast factory children are as badly off today. More than half are bare-footed; they have ill-nourished bodies, they work in badly-ventilated rooms; they live in slum dwellings; they attend schools that are far from being models of sanitation. There is no more heart-rending sight in the circles of British industry than that of groups of Belfast half-timers rushing - bare-footed and pale of face - through the sloppy streets, and fighting against the deadly conditions of home, mill, school, and society. (1911b:33-34)

Referring to public demonstrations against sweating in Belfast following the publication of Bailie's Report, he berated the government for not yet having dealt with the out-working issue:

What excuse can there be for the Government showing no active interest in the most regrettable conditions of the home workers of the North of Ireland? They have not been brought within the claims of the Trade Boards [which set minimum wages for particular jobs], and the Home Office has not yet granted Belfast authorities full power of control over all local out-workers. (1911a:144)

Moreover, Haslam discovered that fines for various 'offences' were commonplace, and often reduced wages quite significantly:

The weekly deductions for fines vary in amount from 3d [1p] to 4s [20p]. Girls have been fined as much as 2s 6d [12p] for one faulty piece in a great length of cloth; whilst it has been found, after making inquiry, that the error has been so trivial that it has not made the slightest difference to the selling price. When mistakes are made owing to the wrong instructions issued by foremen, the female weaver is fined all the same. And what must we think of a system of industry that will enforce deductions of 1s [5p] or 2s [10p], or even 5s [25p] - for often unavoidable offences - from weekly earnings that are already too low to provide for a proper standard of living" (1911b:40)

Out-working in Ulster was not confined to the Lagan Valley. In the northwest the reduction in farm incomes resulting from the late nineteenth century agricultural depression generated a supply of cheap female labour for shirt production, and as little as one quarter of the workforce was based in factories. The 'finishing' sewing was distributed to women in Counties Londonderry, Tyrone and Donegal as well as in Derry City itself. Although the wages were low, Rhodes comments that shirt-making "was often the recognizable feature that distinguished the economies of the poor from those of the truly destitute". (1986:178) For those who were very poor could not engage in out-working - their homes were too dirty to ensure that the cloth stayed clean. They often did knitting instead, but again the wages were very low, with an average income of between four and seven shillings [20 and 35p] a week. (1986:180) Worse still, many were obliged to accept these wages in the form of goods rather than money:

The rate of wages is very low, and the system of payment most objectionable, the work being always paid for in tea, sugar, tobacco, etc., never in money, the value besides in many cases being only a nominal equivalent for the low wages. Although the price paid for socks is normally 1s. 6d. [7p], yet since that is generally taken in tea and always in goods, 1s. 2d. [6p] is about the actual money value, and not only that but very often women are almost forced to buy goods they do not want at all. Thus this system of payment in kind is a heavy pecuniary loss to the poor people, but as a general rule they

are so deep in the tradesman's books that they cannot object to anything the dealer proposes and they have no positive check on him or his dealings. (Quoted in Rhodes 1986:181)

A Government Response

In 1911 the government was finally persuaded to establish a 'Commission of Inquiry into the Conditions of Employment in the Linen and Other Making-Up Trades of the North of Ireland'. Despite the fact that it met thirty-three times, its final report recorded that:

Considerable difficulty was ... experienced in inducing both factory workers and out-workers to come forward as witnesses, on account of a general apprehension on their part that they might lose their employment [as a consequence]. (Hatch 1912:v)

According to the Commission, up to 22,000 women were employed in factories and workshops in the linen and cotton industries in the North of Ireland at that time. But it found it well nigh impossible to obtain an accurate figure for out-workers: returns made to local authorities by employers listed 3,400 in Belfast and 1,400 in Lurgan. Given inevitable under and non-recording, the numbers must have been greater, but it is impossible to say by how much. Those concerned:

...were widows and spinsters depending upon the work for their livelihood, married women whose husbands are out of work, and women whose husbands are labourers earning small pay. There are a few workers in better circumstances, who work for pocket money [but] the larger section do it to supplement small pay. (1912:v)

In 1908 a Parliamentary Select Committee on Home Work had repeated the by then almost standard recommendation for ameliorating the position of out-workers: the establishment of new Trade or Wages Boards to set minimum wages for them. The Committee felt that it would be undesirable to prohibit home work entirely, but demanded that all out-workers be registered and that the provisions of the Public Health Act of 1875 be enforced in all workplaces, including domestic workshops. (Ford & Ford 1969:211)

The North of Ireland Linen Commission took much the same line, but was generally less sympathetic to the position of the workers than had been the 1888/90 Inquiry in Britain. It took the view, for example, that "to the making-up trades as at present organised, out-work is, on the whole, indispensable"; even if the out-workers had been ready to go into the factories, "the existing accommodation would be wholly insufficient to receive them". Furthermore, out-working offered a number of advantages to the employer:

The evidence shows that out-workers furnish the employer with a supply of labour on which, in times of pressure, he can make demands unrestricted by the Factory Acts; whilst in times of slackness he can turn them off without incurring the standing charges involved in the case of factory workers.

The Commission went further, and claimed that the out-workers too would be disadvantaged by the ending of the practice:

So long as present conditions prevail, out-work must be accepted as part of the machinery of production in the making-up trades of the North of Ireland, and any measures which resulted in a considerable reduction in the amount of work given out would entail serious suffering on the out-workers. (1912:vi)

The most obvious reason for out-workers being 'essential' was the low wages which they commanded. Table 2 below indicates levels of payment for thread-drawing at the time of the Commission's investigations - as reported by three local union officials. Perhaps the most noteworthy thing to be drawn from the table is that seven people (those earning 3d or more per hour) enjoyed earnings that were quite princely.

Table 2: Pay per Hour of Some Belfast Out-workers in Thread-drawing

<i>Rate per Hour</i>	<i>Number of Miss Agnew's Cases</i>	<i>Number of Miss Galway's Cases</i>	<i>Number of Mr Sefton's Cases</i>	<i>Total Number of Cases</i>	<i>Number of Firms employing the Workers</i>
<i>Between 5d and 6d</i>	-	-	1	1	1
<i>4d</i>	-	-	2	2	2
<i>Between 3d and 4d</i>	1	-	1	2	2
<i>3d</i>	-	-	3	3	2
<i>Between 2d and 3d</i>	5	-	1	6	5
<i>2d</i>	3	2	5	10	9
<i>Between 1d and 2d</i>	15	10	25	50	16
<i>1d</i>	5	6	11	22	13
<i>Under 1d</i>	14	8	7	29	12
Total thread-drawing	43	26	56	125	(62)

Source: Hatch 1912:viii

The evidence given to the Commission clearly supported the workers' claims that they were paid too little; but its final Report was somewhat grudging on this score:

The opinion we have formed is that cases of undoubtedly low payment to out-workers in certain branches of the making-up trades have been proved ... Accordingly, whilst we by no means exclude the possibility of errors existing in the evidence of the witnesses who investigated the Belfast out-workers' cases, we think that our Inquiry has shown that among the rates paid to such out-workers - particularly in the manufacture of the cheaper goods - there are rates which fall below a reasonable level, and that the workers, from a total want of organisation and their general helplessness are unable to secure the rising of these rates. (1912:xi)

Quite remarkable is the opinion of the Commissioners that the workers themselves were partly responsible for their plight, because of their failure to act collectively. No less remarkable is the following comment:

We are satisfied that the employers, as a body, are anxious that out-workers should receive a fair wage, and that any cause for reproach against the trade in this respect should be removed. (1912:xv)

Mary Galway, General Secretary of the Textile Operatives' Society of Ireland, had a less charitable view: "there being no fixed standard rate of wages ... small firms starting up take the work at a reduced rate in order to get the work from the larger firms". And in order to make up the resulting shortfall in wages, many factory operatives took work home after 'legal hours', with the collusion of the employers. (1912:26) Galway believed that this practice also adversely affected the health of the workers, who were not fit for their normal work the next day.

The Commission did at least take on board her point about 'standard rates', by proposing, once more, the creation of new trade boards. Acknowledging employer resistance to this proposal, the Inquiry thought this arose "from a want of familiarity with the Trade Boards Act". (1912:xv) Having a care also for the competitive position of the industry, however, the specific recommendation was that:

...the provisions of the Trade Boards Act be applied to the processes of hand embroidery ... fancy sewing ... thread-clipping ... and the stitching by machine of aprons, pinafores, and blouses in the North of Ireland; provided that the Act is similarly applied in other parts of the United Kingdom where competition with the North of Ireland exists in these processes. (1912:xxi)

The Inquiry also addressed the question of 'payment in kind' - in goods rather than money - and recommended a number of measures to deal with what it considered a serious problem:

That work distributed to out-workers through agents be marked with the rate of pay by the firms before being sent out. That action be taken by the firms to remedy the objections attendant on the employment of shopkeepers as agents - preferably in the direction of replacing such agents by salaried employers directly responsible to the firms. That out-workers should, by means of further legislation, be accorded the full protection [against payment in kind] provided by the Truck Acts. (1912:385)

Safe and healthy working conditions also received attention, albeit briefly. A factory inspector, William Williams, reported that:

In many cases the heating arrangements in particular were bad. The buildings were not always adapted for the work, and were not always good. The sanitary arrangements were certainly in many cases defective, but I think one might say that a good deal of improvement was being made. (1912:35)

Williams also had worries about the atmospheric conditions in smoothing rooms, where the women used gas irons. The lack of exhausts on the irons resulted in workers inhaling noxious fumes; moreover, in those factories where exhausts had been fitted there was a dramatic improvement in the atmosphere. (1912:36)

As regards the employment of children, the Committee of Inquiry received an abundance of evidence:

...that young children are often kept working for long hours - even until very late at night - and that the time which they should be spending in play or sleep is seriously curtailed. (1912:vi.xx)

In consequence, it called for the strict enforcement of the provisions of the Employment of Children Act, 1903. (1912:xxi) This was just two years after a Departmental Committee of Inquiry into the operation of the Act had reported that no county borough in Ireland had used the powers it had given them. (Ford & Ford 1969:232). Enforcement would have resulted in children under fourteen not being employed between the hours of 9pm and 6am.

On the efficacy of factory inspection in general, the Commission concluded:

The extent of the factory districts in the North of Ireland and the smallness of the inspecting staff appear to us to render it difficult for the factory inspectors to carry out their numerous duties as completely as could be wished... (1912:xix)

It went on to recommend that in respect of out-workers, local authorities should be careful to obtain from employers and agents "the prescribed lists of their out-workers.

which should then be placed at the disposal of the medical and sanitary authorities.” (1912:xxi) It is some measure of the ordering of the Commission’s priorities, however, that it devoted relatively few of its final recommendations to health and safety questions.

Conclusions

The broad message from all this is that it is almost impossible to adopt an other than moralising approach. Indeed it is worth observing that the discipline of industrial relations, the earliest manifestation of serious academic interest in management, was built to begin with on the twin concerns of social justice and social order - on the need for fairness at work and for order on the streets. It took an unconscionably long time to eliminate the more gross examples of sweating and its associated evils: it is surely an important message that its decline finally occurred side by side with increasing scholarly attention, with the growth of unionisation and with the extension of the franchise.

As for the parallels with today, they need not be laboured. Perhaps the first is that the willingness of entrepreneurs to cross the sea to take advantage of cheaper labour is not a new phenomenon, as the shift of the linen industry from England to Ireland fully demonstrated. Secondly, overriding all demands for labour market flexibility, there remains a deep attachment to the notion of a minimum wage as a key mechanism of social justice. Thirdly, the conditions and circumstances which meant that those employed by sweaters did not become union members are with us still, and it remains indefensible to put this down to the apathy of the exploited. Moreover, we should be more worried than we appear to be by trade union decline - by the decline of what J K Galbraith has described as “one of the great civilising influences on industrial capitalism”. Fourthly, perhaps Black was an advocate of the softer variant of Human Resource Management before her time, and thus not at all off the mark as regards higher wages improving overall performance! Finally, as a direct consequence of deregulation, the number of people out-working in the UK almost tripled to 250,000 between 1981 and 1994; and although information technology (e.g. telesales) accounts for a new element of this, remarkably the majority are still women engaged in sewing tasks. In a review of two recent research books (Felstead *et al* 1996; Stanworth 1996), Sheila Allen says

The research findings of the past two decades on the ‘sweated labour’ involved in the casualized conditions experienced by those working at home ... have so far brought no improvements. Much of the employment legislation passed in this period has had the reverse effect. These two publications may help to persuade British ministers and a majority of MPs ... to adopt and implement the ILO 1996 Convention and Recommendation on Homeworking, setting minimum standards for pay and conditions. (Allen 1997:488)

Moreover, a new appraisal of ‘first world’ evidence on the actual consequences of a range of labour market changes over which governments have policy control calls in

question much conventional wisdom. It suggests, in particular, that to spend time worrying about the effect of minimum wage rates, the strictness or otherwise of labour market regulation, and the scope and span of employment protection legislation "is probably time simply wasted" - since they have little obvious effect on either economic growth or unemployment rates. (Nickell and Layard, 1997:66)

Coming now to the developing world, surely most remarkable is the startling similarity between current experience there, and that reported in this article. Although recent evidence on third world conditions is almost entirely journalistic, its accuracy is not in doubt. We hear of insanitary conditions and poor health, of long hours and low wages, of fines and payment in kind, and of child labour and fear of authority. Above all we hear calls similar to those made by the Linen Commission for a silencing of concern, lest jobs, however exploitative they may be, disappear. The harsh choice for those involved, we are told, is between an abominable job and no job at all.

The most disturbing aspect of sweating in the developing world, however, is that the possibilities for eliminating it are not nearly so good as they were in the UK one hundred or so years ago. Britain was a wealthy imperial power which could, over time, bear relatively high labour costs at home - firstly, because of low wages in the economically retarded parts of the Empire, and secondly, because of guaranteed markets for its goods. Globalization means that only concerted international action will bring an end to sweating in developing countries. That what are called 'labour standards' - a set of basic rights and conditions to be enjoyed by all workers everywhere - may soon come to the centre of international trade negotiations is a hopeful sign. But for so long as advanced countries can defy or refuse to ratify very basic ILO Conventions, there seems little possibility of the action on a wider front that is plainly needed. Furthermore, the forces that must be faced down to ensure no general reversion to conditions such as those of the linen era in Ireland are hugely dominant:

...the growing power of stock markets to impose 'short termism' on investors, chronically high unemployment, the undermining of the collective voice of workers' organizations by neo-liberal state action and the growing credibility of the threat by capital to withhold or spatially relocate investment, across regions and among countries, should unions and local governments not agree to wage givebacks, deregulation and additional tax breaks. (Harrison 1997:366)

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