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**CHILD WAGES IN THE COTTON
MILLS: OUR MODERN
FEUDALISM**

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CHILD WAGES IN THE COTTON MILLS: OUR MODERN FEUDALISM.

A. J. McKELWAY, Washington, D. C.,
Southern Secretary, National Child Labor Committee.

"We work in *his* mill. We live in *his* houses. Our children go to *his* school. And on Sunday we go to hear *his* preacher." This is the pathetic plaint of the cotton mill workers of North Carolina, spoken more than once to our agent in North Carolina. It is refreshing to observe that at least the system of feudalism is recognized by the workers themselves. The expression we have quoted might be amplified with regard to some twenty or twenty-five mills in the South that are invariably advertised for their betterment work, with a significant silence as to the 700 other cotton mills that merely bask in the reflected glory of the "show mills." "We also go to *his* Y. M. C. A. when he has built one. We spend our leisure time, after the eleven-hour day, those of us who can read, in *his* reading room. Our children play in *his* streets. Our cow sleeps in *his* stable. We are sent to *his* store to buy our goods. When we are sick, or hurt in the mill, we go to *his* hospital. We are arrested by *his* constable, and tried by *his* magistrate. And when we die we are buried in *his* cemetery."

I have been assigned the discussion of two apparently unrelated subjects: Child Wages in the Cotton Mill, and Our Modern Feudalism. As a matter of fact, the two themes are as closely related as cause and effect, as I shall undertake to prove.

The children of the cotton mills whom we undertake to bring within the operation of the law prohibiting their employment are the children under fourteen years of age. They are employed mainly in the spinning rooms, and are principally spinners, doffers, band boys and sweepers. Children under fourteen have been found in other operations of the cotton mills, girl spinners sometimes graduating into weavers and boys occasionally found at the warping machine. The doffer boys work intermittently and much has been made of the fact that when they have replaced the empty spools

with full ones, they can go out into the mill yard and play marbles. Nothing is said of the eleven-hour day, preventing all attendance at school by day, and making the night school oftentimes an added cruelty to tired and sleepy children. And nothing is ever said of the girl spinners who do not work intermittently but must ever be on the alert to watch the spinning frames and tie the broken threads.

[Mr. R. M. Miller, Jr., of Charlotte, N. C., who recently appeared before the Ways and Means Committee of the House of Representatives to plead for protection against the competition of the "pauper labor of Europe" in the manufacture of cotton goods, once went into print to say, in opposition to a child labor bill which proposed the raising of the age-limit for girls only, from twelve to fourteen years of age, that 75 per cent. of the spinners of North Carolina were fourteen years old or under.] It is one of the traditions of the cotton mill in the South, that spinning is work for girls, not for boys or women. And that tradition of the industry is directly in the face of all the teachings of medical science, as to the necessity for the especial care and protection of young girls at that period of life. Think of your own girls, fathers and mothers, standing at a spinning frame for eleven hours a day, or sometimes a night! Of 295 spinners found under 12 in Southern mills, 246 were girls.

Children's Wages High.

Now the wages which these children get, the doffers and spinners, are not low, considering the fact that it is child's work. The wages are comparatively high, considering the ages of the children. The Federal Bureau of Labor found in 1908-9, in the Southern mills that were investigated, the agents being required to prove the ages of the children, 17 children 7 years of age, 48 of eight years, 107 of nine, 283 of ten and 494 of eleven years of age. There is not much remunerative work that children from seven to eleven years can do in the South, not very much that children 12 to 14 years can do.

In a representative South Carolina cotton mill,
 doffers of 12 years were paid \$3.54 per week
 doffers of 13 years were paid 3.92 per week
 doffers of 14 years were paid 5.04 per week
 doffers of 15 years were paid 4.75 per week

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and doffers of 20 years and over were paid \$2.52 per week, while the earnings of the spinners in 151 Southern mills were \$4.54 a week and scrubbers and sweepers \$2.96 a week. These are actual wages paid, not the wages computed for full time, which was an average of 62.7 hours per week.

Adult Wages Low.

But here is the impressive thing about the comparative wage of children and adults per week: 251 children under 12 years of age earned less than \$2 per week and 731 children of twelve and thirteen earned less than \$2 per week. But there were 1,700 workers from 14 to 20 years of age who earned less than \$2 per week. And 1,085 operatives twenty-one years of age and over who earned less than \$2 a week. There were more girls from 18 to 20 years of age earning less than \$2 per week than there were of girls from 14 to 15 earning less than \$2. There were 1,733 children under 16 who made from two to three dollars a week and there was almost an equal number, 1,712 workers, sixteen years and over, who earned the same wages. Children under 16 earning from three to four dollars a week numbered 2,426, and those from 16 to 21 and over earning from three to four dollars a week numbered 2,597.

Out of 32,409 workers in the cotton mills, whose actual wages per week were copied from the pay rolls, only 1,444 earned from \$8.00 to \$9.00 a week, and one of these was a boy and one a girl under 12 years of age. And when we come to the \$12 limit, only 54 women out of 17,066 earned from \$11 to \$12 a week, and one of these was a girl under 16 years of age, while 241 men out of 14,000 reached that wage and one of these was a boy under 16.

I know of no employment in the South for girls under 14 that pays so well as work in the cotton mill, and only one employment for boys, the demoralizing messenger service which is vile for the night shift and bad for the day shift from association with the boys who work at night. And their wages are increased by the tips they get for serving the denizens of the underworld. But the facts driven home by these unquestioned figures is that the wages of children are high as compared with the wages of the adult workers. The same general result is shown, though with higher ages for children and a slightly higher scale of wages, for the New England mills.

Here is the temptation which the cotton mill in its long child-enslaving history, in Old England, in New England, in Pennsylvania and the South has set in the way of ignorant, indifferent or poverty-stricken parents. And who are mainly responsible for this—the employers, enlightened and educated men, able to read and to appreciate the full consequences of the child-labor system to the children, to the country and to democracy itself? Or the parent who supplies the demand which the cotton manufacturer creates? Whom does the enlightened conscience of mankind hold responsible for the introduction of African slavery into America and the British possessions to-day? The African chief who sold his people, already slaves to his lordly will, or the British or New England slave-trader who bought them and transported them?

And now perhaps we begin to see the relation between the comparatively high wages that the children receive and our modern system of feudalism. Why is it that a thousand workers 21 years and over out of 3,700 earn less than \$2 a week in the cotton mills? It is because a thousand children under 14 can earn just as much. When the child can do the man's job or the woman's job, the man or woman must lose the job or take the wages that are paid the child. There is no escape from that conclusion. If there is anything the matter with the logic of the argument, I should like to have it pointed out.

When 17,517, more than half the employes whose wages were reported, earn less than \$5.00 a week, I know they earn that small sum because out of the 17,517, there are 7,825 children under 16 who earn the same wages. In any child-employing industry the wages of the adult are measured by the wages of the child.

The children are offered wages that are high for a child and the children are employed, 40,000 of them in the cotton mill industry according to the manufacturers' own figures in 1909, as reported by the Census Bureau. The labor unions have known for a long time that child labor depresses wages. They are charged with selfishness in their advocacy of child labor reform. Even if that be true, I had rather see a man selfishly on the right side of a humane question than selfishly on the wrong side of it. I pay the cotton manufacturer the compliment of supposing that he is as intelligent as the trade unionist. Then he knows that child labor depresses wages and he holds on to the children whom he employs for a double

purpose. First, because in the cotton mill, the child can do the work required. It is even claimed that the child can do it better than the adult, the work of spinning in particular. Then because he can get the children at children's wages, he naturally believes in equal pay for equal work, and the employment of children keeps down the wage-scale for all his employes. The children are members of the family. The family requires a certain amount of wages to live at all. The wages for the support of life can be obtained by the employment of several members of the family and large families of adult workers are rare. Therefore let the children work or let the family try starving for a while. So the cotton mill workers go to work as children. They get married as children. They become parents of other children while they are children themselves. Their illiteracy ranges from 44 per cent. in Georgia to 48 and 50 per cent. in the two Carolinas—children 10 to 14 years of age. Often they forget the little they have learned, and, as a South Carolina manufacturer recently confessed to me, there are practically no mill children over 12 in school. They have been condemned for life, with few exceptions, to an unskilled trade, in which there is not hope for advancement for 1 per cent. of the workers, while for 99 per cent. the maximum of efficiency is reached before manhood or womanhood is reached.

Feudalism.

Meantime, while the employes have become thus helpless the employers have grown more powerful. Forbidding their employes to organize in labor unions, the manufacturers are themselves organized in State and National Associations. And as the employes keep poor the employer grows rich and becomes independent enough to run his mill regardless of a temporary shut-down. Since the employer owns the house in which the operative lives he is landlord as well as employer. The only freedom yet retained by these helpless people is the liberty of changing their feudal lords, and there has been such bitter complaint of the migratory character of the cotton mill workers that I look to see some baronial edict put forth that no family will be employed at one mill that moves from another without the employer's consent. As for other employment, the operatives have often told me that after a few years or even months in the confinement and monotony of mill work they were unfitted for

work on the farms from which they had come, requiring the exercise of muscle and brawn.

I have spoken at this conference my individual views, for which I alone am responsible, on the tariff question as related to child labor. (At a meeting on February 13, last, in Charlotte, N. C., the Hard Yarn Spinners Association passed the following resolutions: "We are opposed to any material reduction in the present tariff that would place us in competition with the mills of Europe employing pauper labor." The same manufacturers passed resolutions against any advance in the protection of the working children. Now, disregarding the fact that with a tariff that is practically prohibitive on cotton goods the American consumer must pay a price for those goods made artificially high, the fact stands out that no part of that added profit finds its way into the pay-envelope. If the report of the tariff board is to be believed, the American cotton manufacturer, without any protection, has the advantage now against his English and German competitors. But the point I have often made is one which was recently endorsed by Miss Ida M. Tarbell in a personal letter, namely, that to make the employer more powerful through excessive profits is simply to make the employe more dependent. If the Southern manufacturer were obliged to accept the dividends that content his English or German rival, then there would be less of a sense of power over his employes. A few years ago, there was an attempt in a certain Southern mill district to organize the employes into a labor union. Some progress was made and the mills simply shut down and remained in masterly inactivity until the employes were scattered and the effort to organize them was given up. At the last meeting of the Virginia legislature the cotton mill men opposed a very slight advance in the child labor law and a manufacturer from Danville took a solid hour to tell of his benevolence and philanthropy, so far as his beloved employes were concerned, while I held in my hand a letter with the names of several girls in his mill who had been discharged because they had tried to form a union.

A book has recently been published with the help of cotton manufacturers defending child labor in the cotton mills. I do not regard it as an authority on any phase of the problem, but as one chapter of the book is devoted to the Pelzer Mill, and it seems to have been so pleasing to the manufacturer, who is called "the King

of Pelzer," that he bought 140 copies of it to present to the members of the South Carolina Legislature, I may perhaps quote a paragraph as either history, or fiction, which the manufacturer seems to have approved and enjoyed.

Says the author: "I was told a story about these people that not only aptly illustrates their spirit of independence (*sic*), but also the tyranny of the King of Pelzer. The labor unions of the North had determined to organize the down-trodden mill operatives of the South, and they sent one of their delegates to Pelzer. . . . But he had scarcely arrived in the place, when his plans and movements were reported to the King. The King, seated at his office desk, listened to the report, and then quietly looking up at the clock said: 'The next train leaves at eleven; have the constable put him on that train.'" And the veracious historian comments with approval: "The order was obeyed as effectively as though it had been a royal or presidential decree with a Swiss Guard or a company of Mexican Rurales to enforce it." This is treated as a great joke. But the point is, that the man was probably a trespasser if he set foot in that village of more than a thousand souls, and the constable, though presumably an officer of the state, was only carrying out, in rather summary fashion, the law against trespass on one's private estate.

One of our agents, a lovable and gentle Christian minister, went to a cotton mill in Georgia, two miles from the railroad. He engaged a room at the hotel. Going first to the school he took some photographs of the children. Then the president of the mill learned of his presence (he had told his name and his errand), and ordered him not to trespass further, saying that the school as well as the mill, and even the streets of the mill were his property. Further investigation was impossible, and the minister then found that his room at the hotel was forbidden him, he was warned that it would be unsafe for him to remain in the village that night, and he had to return to the railroad station.

A mill just on the outskirts of Atlanta then, within the corporate limits now, after I had made some rather searching investigations and published the results, put up signs in the streets, forbidding anyone to enter the mill community without permission. This position, however, was too absurd to be maintained long. Another of our agents wrote a little sketch once entitled, "A Little Kingdom in Cotton-Land." He described a North Carolina cotton

mill town where the whole mill community stood in awe of the superintendent, who was also magistrate and exercised all the functions of landlord, employer, and officer of the law.

I remember seeing a sign on the fence of a New England mill in Georgia, to the effect that if a boy were found with an air-rifle, the family must leave the mill as soon as the lease on their house expired, and the houses of the operatives were leased for a term of two weeks. It may have been a good thing to discourage the air-rifle and even to hold the parents responsible for the child's misdoings, but one would rather see that done by the law and the officers of the law than by the employer and landlord.

Perhaps the most pitiful example of this sort of feudalism is the petitions which are brought to the Legislature from the operatives against the enactment of laws for their own benefit. I have seen these petitions, some of them signed by one hand, as if they were simply copied from the pay-roll. But others are signed by those of the operatives who can read and write, while the majority make their mark. They petition the Legislature not to shorten the hours, not to prevent night work, not to abolish the child labor which keeps their wages down, not to authorize inspectors who will see that their limbs and lives are guarded from accident, or their buildings from unescapable flames.

Two years ago in Georgia we attempted to change the limit of 66 hours a week, 12 a day, to a 10-hour day for children. The Legislature began to receive petitions from the mill operatives protesting against any shortening of the hours. Then the manufacturers thought they had better compromise on a 60-hour week and the 11-hour day, and thereafter the operatives petitioned for a 60-hour week, but sought to be saved from the dire distress of working less than 60 hours a week. On the other hand, the only organized mill I know in the South recently petitioned a legislature for a nine-hour day for women and an eight-hour day for children.

The same feudalism existed in New England cotton mills not many years since. Eight and a half years ago I took a trip through the New England mill cities. We learned that at Lowell any operative who was found even attending a labor union meeting was discharged. Last fall, eight years afterward, I went to Lowell again. I found that the Industrial Workers of the World, generally styled the I. W. W., had called a strike at one mill, because, having

about 90 per cent. of the operatives members of that organization, they insisted that the mill should discharge those who would not join them. And now the New England mills are falling over themselves in the effort to get the American Federation of Labor to organize them and thus deliver them from the I. W. W.

This feudalism is sometimes called a benevolent feudalism, because it occasionally builds, out of the surplus made by the labor at low wages of the workers, schools, hospitals, libraries and so forth. But there is no benevolent feudalism. The expression is a contradiction in terms. The best benevolence would be to increase the pay-roll, so that the employes might do some of these things for themselves.

Yet no people of this stock has ever remained long in bondage. It is American stock, with the English and Scotch instincts against every form of tyranny. In South Carolina the manufacturers have lost the political control of their employes. In State elections the employers vote one way and the employes the other and whatever else we may say about this, the employes have recently been on the winning side. The State should and will incorporate the mill towns and the people will begin to learn the first principles of local self-government and will again be free men. Then they will organize sooner or later, if not in the regular labor unions then in the irregular. They will slowly learn that their interests lie on the side of the reform of conditions of labor for children and women. They come of the stock that fought at Kings Mountain and at New Orleans, at Gettysburg and Chickamauga. There is hardly a child of the cotton mills in the South who cannot claim descent from some soldier of the wars of the Republic. They will not always remain helpless. Compulsory school attendance laws will soon begin to influence the education of the next generation, at least, and when they learn their rights, they are of the breed that has always dared maintain them, and they will demand more hours for rest and recreation, and a fairer share of the profits of industry.

The Danger.

Nor can a democracy encourage a feudalism within itself save to its everlasting hurt. In a democracy the people all rule. Also, the people are ruled. And when it comes to the people's ruling us

by their votes, electing our governors and presidents, initiating and vetoing legislation, taxing our incomes, we grow mightily concerned over the intelligence and independence of the electorate. We do not like to trust our interests now and the lives and fortunes of our children to a mass of voters who have been deprived of all opportunity for an education, who have been held in feudalistic bondage, who have been embittered by the robbery of their childhood, who are the material for the agitator, and the prey of the demagogue. Patriotism is partly an enlightened instinct of self-preservation, and patriotism demands that we abolish the system under which large and continually increasing masses of our people are led into a bondage from which there may be no escape, save by way of a social revolution.

Abolish child labor and the child can go to school. We shall never have compulsory education in the cotton manufacturing states of the South until we abolish child labor first. Then the wage-scale will rise to the point where a man or woman can support the family, when educated and intelligent workers can make their own terms as to hours and wages and the conditions of labor. This is not theory, but history. In England, after a century of struggle, these things have happened in the cotton mill industry, and the industry itself stands on a high plane with the others. There is no reason under heaven, save that of unenlightened greed, why the same industry in the South should not be put upon a better basis than anywhere else in the world, so that it shall become one of which we may all be proud, rather than one whose profits smell of blood.

Persons who contribute \$2 or more annually toward the support of the child labor campaign are enrolled as associate members, \$25 or more as sustaining members and \$100 or more as guarantors of the Committee. Members receive the CHILD LABOR BULLETIN and other publications of the Committee and are thus kept in touch with the child labor movement throughout the country. Remittances may be sent to V. Everit Macy, Treasurer, 105 East 22d St., New York City.

