

The Listener - May 1933

By Dorothy Day

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Summary: A collection of vignettes about the unemployed, union efforts, working conditions, wages, education, companies—"The depression goes on." (DDLW #934).

BEER

Today everybody is hilariously drinking beer and on the roads from the farms the dairy farmers are dumping milk.

THIRTY HOUR WEEK

The thirty-hour week bill passed by the Senate exempts farm workers, domestic help, officers, executives, superintendents and their personal and immediate clerical assistants. Also there is an amendment to exempt canneries and establishments engaged in preparing fish, fruits and vegetables of a perishable nature. The Secretary of Labor is given power to grant further exemptions.

Senator Hugo Black (D), of Alabama, author of the bill, declared that as a result of the bill 6,000,000 unemployed would be put back to work. And then there are about eleven million left, not to speak of those who are on part time.

SCHOOL PUPILS STRIKE

In Chicago 12,000 pupils are showing unusual consideration for their teachers. They went on strike to protest unpaid salaries. Some of the teachers blandly said that the walkout was due to spring fever, and other teachers not in favor of being struck for, claim that "reds" are agitating, as they doubtless are. Whether or not the strike is due to Communist agitation, teachers should receive their pay, and there should be no reduction in the budget of the board of education just at this time when so many young boys and girls who would work if they could get jobs are going back to school to try to fit themselves for jobs when jobs are available. Schools have never been so crowded, and all over the country schools are closing, not paying their teachers, and cutting their budgets.

WOMEN IN INDUSTRY

Talked to Pauline Newman of the International Ladies' Garment Workers today. She said, "There's only two ways of bettering the condition of women in labor.

One is organization and the other is legislation. Women in industry are only ten per cent organized. So it stands to reason that legislation is the best remedy. We have legislation which promotes sanitary working conditions and better hours. Minimum wage legislation was never passed in this state up to this time. Its only opponent was the National Woman's Party. And what do they know about it? Do they know anything about hours of work or wages? They don't. I told some women at a meeting how we struck once to get an extra penny for twenty dozen sleeves. That seems like a petty thing to fight for.

"One penny more for twenty dozen sleeves!

"But girls have to consider carfare, lunch money. The Women's Party is always harking back to the old days when women were classed legally with children and idiots—in need of protection. Now they think if there is any legislation to keep women from night work they are being discriminated against. They are being protected! They don't want to be protected, they say. They have the vote now and they don't need protection. They must take their place with men in the world!

"Schooling nowadays is a farce. It certainly doesn't prepare young people for life or work. What are they taught in the way of trades? What are they taught about social conditions? Nothing. They are utterly unprepared to face conditions, and facing them to do anything about them."

"NOT A BAD OUTFIT"

Heard somebody talking about the Bell Telephone Company today. They're not so bad, they were saying. When they are laying off their men, and they've been laying them off pretty steady, they give them notice, and if a man has been with the firm fifteen years he gets fifteen weeks salary. And they always paid their men pretty good. So a man can sit down and figure out how he can live for the next decade or so during the present decay of the social order and during its ultimate reconstruction.

He can study and apply to himself some of the budgets prepared by the charities' organizations, telling how a working class family can feed itself on five dollars a week . . . Of course the Telephone Company goes on paying dividends—nine per cent. If they had cut the dividends they would have been able to keep their men on. But up to now they haven't cut their dividends. Them as has—gits.

There was rumors, however, that this quarter the dividends were going to be cut, and men were going to be kept on and paid engineers' wages even though the only work for them to do was ditch digging.

OLD-FASHIONED FAIR

The depression goes on.

Fourteenth Street, Twenty-third Street, Forty-second Street, Broadway and especially lower Broadway, have taken on the aspect of the old-fashioned fair. There are hawkers to sell toys, flowers, razor blades, shoe laces, corn cures, jig saw puzzles, neckties and self-threading needles. The toy sellers buy fruit and candy, the fruit and candy men buy razor blades, and the razor blade men buy ice cream, and the ice cream men buy neckties, and the necktie men buy toys, and so on and so on. They keep each other going. Ill-fed men walk with signs advertising restaurants and unkempt men who need a shave advertise barber shops.

All the men who are out of work picket the places from which they have been fired. Patiently all day long, month after month, they walk up and down before their former places of business, moving picture houses, garages and restaurants.

Unionism! What has become of it?

The unions have thrown up their hands in despair. They can do nothing more about wages. People will take what they can get.

TOWARD WHAT END?

Some things are getting done. As we walked down the street this afternoon we noticed that windows had been washed for the springtime. People who still had quarters were buying potted plants from a street vendor to put in their front windows.

Union Square has been refurbished during the winter, shrubs have been planted and trees set out so that the unemployed may sit in comfort in the shade instead of in the glaring sun of last summer.

The Washington Centennial building is being torn down in Bryant Park and there will be more room there for peripatetic philosophers and their listeners.

The state legislature has passed a minimum wage law for women, but not unemployment insurance, only an unemployment reserve fund.

PRESSURE ON HIS TIME

Alfred E. Smith, one of our most prominent Catholics, refused to be interviewed for this, the first number of our paper. We wrote and asked him to allow us to interview him so that we might have a few quotable remarks on Russia, unemployment, housing, the sales tax, income tax, armaments and such matters, and his secretary replied:

“The Governor regrets that he is unable to comply with your request for an appointment. The pressure on his time is so great . . . Very truly yours.”

So we must content ourselves this issue with contributions from a more humble Catholic whose address, when he is not employed outside of the city in manual labor, is Uncle Sam's Hotel, the Bowery.

In our next issue we will endeavor to get a contribution from Mayor O'Brien. (We would go to Washington and try President Roosevelt except that we need the fare to put towards the publishing bill.) And failing to reach Mayor O'Brien, we will try the door man at the city hall, or one of the unemployed sitting on a City Hall Park bench.

THE MOST BRUTAL TRADE

In the garment trade, the most "brutal" of all the trades in which women are employed, as one worker put it, Klein-on-the-Square, the famous Fourteenth Street clothier, is called the "undertaker" because he keeps his eyes open for dying concerns and buys them out.

"But he's no worse, perhaps not so bad as some of the big department stores," one young fashion editor was heard saying. "There they take a model and have it copied and they give the job to sweat shops in other states, such as New Jersey and Connecticut, where there is no law on working conditions and hours.

"And what about the wages paid by the big stores? In Stern's girls get ten dollars a week and they have to dress decently, buy shoes, stockings, presentable clothes, lunches and carfares out of that. What have they left for board and room?

"Macy boasts of taking only college girls and society girls working for 'experience' or 'pin money' and pays them ten and twelve a week. What good is a college education if it fits you for such wages?"

FOLTIS-FISCHER STRIKE

In another column of this issue we print letters from waitresses who are being done out of their salaries and forced to subsist solely on tips. For generally bad working conditions, Foltis-Fischer is one of the worst restaurants in New York. You will notice that men are picketing up and down in front of their chain of restaurants throughout the city, and the strike of employees there has been a bitter one. If the public coöperated with the workers and refused to go into a restaurant where men were picketing in front, there might be more chance for strikers to win their fight for justice.

DRIVE ON SWEAT SHOPS

And speaking of the coöperation of the public, a drive against sweat shops has been started. The campaign was decided upon April 11 at a conference

called by the Women's Trade Union League, and the aim is a label on women's garments as part of an appeal to all women buyers to shun garments made in sweat shops. The Committee for the Abolition of Sweat Shops is made up of representatives of the garment employers' associations, the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union, and national women's organizations representing the public and consumers.

Decent hours and wages are to be fought for now. Fifteen years or so ago a campaign was started by unions and women's organizations to abolish unsanitary working conditions and by means of a label the public was kept informed. Employers of women were forced to provide healthful surroundings for their employees to work in, and the old, evil-smelling and badly lighted sweat shop was done away with. Now, though the plants are better equipped, the hours and the wages are worse than they have been for decades. **D. D.**