

*"The past is prologue" said Shakespeare, and we use the phrase for a continuing department of THE SOCIAL CONTRACT. The abuse of immigrant labor is a sad part of our history and the specter of the sweatshop is still with us. The following chapter out of our history is written by Arthur J. Linenthal, M.D. of Chestnut Hill, MA, is copyright 1990 by Alpha Omega Alpha Honor Medical Society, and is reprinted by permission from THE PHAROS, Fall 1990.*

## **PAST AND PRESENT: ALWAYS THE SWEATSHOP?**

By Arthur J. Linenthal, M.D.

Once again, with "millions of new immigrants...creating a vast pool of poor and easily exploitable workers,"<sup>1,p.26</sup> we are seeing an "explosive growth of sweatshops,"<sup>1,p.26</sup> --places where "workers are employed for long hours at low wages and under unhealthy conditions."<sup>2</sup> And "it has become a national shame" that "children are among the...most widely exploited workers.":

*They live in poverty and neglect as they harvest our food, work in hundreds of dingy factories stitching "Made in America" tags into our clothes, assemble cheap jewelry in trailer homes and tenements, operate dangerous machines in restaurant kitchens and neighborhood stores....*

*Often they are scalded and burned, sliced up by food machines, exposed to pesticides in the field and choking fumes in the factory. They fall and fracture their backs, and break their arms frequently delivering and picking things up for us.*

*Sometimes, they are left badly maimed and disfigured for life.*

*Sometimes, they are killed.*

*Nearly all the time, they get tired, miss school and are ignored.*<sup>3,p.1</sup>

The situation is reminiscent of the early 1900s, when other millions of new immigrants--men, women, and children--also formed a pool of cheap exploitable labor. Tenement house workrooms, for example, where the occupants manufactured clothing...fostered dreadful conditions. Material was cut in factories and then handed over to contractors who arranged for the apparel to be finished in the tenements. The contractors found their profit by obtaining service from immigrant women whose capacity for work was limited only by the quantity of material they could get and by their endurance.

A physician serving as a state health inspector, described conditions in tenement workrooms in Boston, Massachusetts:

*One woman, for example, in addition to her housework and the care of three children, has to work from fourteen to fifteen hours a day on the sewing machine in order to make one*

*dozen pairs of overalls, for which she gets seventy-five cents. Out of this pittance she pays for the delivery of the goods both ways. Her earnings support the whole family consisting of an alcoholic, shiftless husband and three children. Not only do the women work excessively long hours, but in the evening other members of the family are drafted into service. The vitality and powers of resistance of the tenement workers are thus lowered by the unsanitary conditions of the homes and by the excessively long hours of work. They fall an easy prey to all forms of disease,...and become a public menace.*<sup>4,pp.32-33</sup>

Pulmonary tuberculosis was of particular concern. Overcrowding, overwork, poor general sanitation, poor ventilation, and lack of sunlight all contributed to the development and spread of this dread disease. Careless spitting was a common habit, and the organisms could survive in sputum for months. The physician reported a striking example of this problem:

*In September, 1907, a two-room flat in a narrow, dirty street in the North End was visited. In the two rooms there lived a young man of twenty-five with his mother and grandmother. The two women finished trousers at home--their only means of subsistence. The young man was so ill with tuberculosis that he was unable to work. A small, low-studded room used as a kitchen and workroom served at night as a bedroom for him. When the house was visited a small kerosene stove was burning and the family dinner cooking. The windows were tightly closed and the air in the room was suffocating. The young consumptive stayed at home as he was "indisposed" to go out. He was subsequently admitted to Rutland [State Sanatorium], where he stayed for several months and from where he returned, with the disease apparently arrested, to live in the same two-room flat under the same unsanitary conditions. He got along fairly well for a time, but in the spring of the current year [1909] the tubercular process became very active, ending in his death in August.*<sup>5, p.795</sup>

The legal abolition of home work would address the public health problem but would also raise complex economic and social considerations. Much of this work in Massachusetts, for example, was done by women under quite healthy conditions.<sup>6, p.582</sup> In the 1940s this striking example of the conflict between social and health goals was addressed by the federal government, and the Labor Department banned certain work in the home.<sup>7</sup> Some bans were lifted in the 1980s, however, after vigorous objections by a group of women who knitted outerwear in their homes in Vermont.<sup>8</sup>

Will this conflict of free enterprise versus prevention of the exploitation of workers ever be satisfactorily resolved? Must the sweatshop always be with us?

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