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Condition of Labor in Southern Cotton Mills. Lewis W. Parker.

Criticism of southern mill conditions is usually directed to two subjects, viz., the general character of the employees and secondly, the proportion of child labor. As to the first, it can only be said that from the evidence of well-advised and impartial students, the character of the employees is being steadily raised, and is superior to that in their former life. This is the verdict of such investigators as Miss Gertrude Beeks, secretary of the welfare department of the National Civic Federation; of Mrs. Ellen Foster, a well-known authority in sociology, who as an employee of the government, made a report to the President of the United States to this effect; of Dr. P. H. Goldsmith, the minister of the historic First Church in Salem, Massachusetts, who whilst a native of the South, has spent most of his adult years in the North. In a series of articles appearing in 1908 in the "Boston Evening Transcript," Doctor Goldsmith wrote as follows: "The only just comparison is between their present and their past state. In going through mills of the Piedmont section recently, I invariably saw the best-looking people, the most intelligent workmen, the brightest and happiest children, and cheeks possessing the most color, in the factories of longest establishment." The same conclusion is reached by Professor Few in the article referred to.

With regard to child labor, there is no doubt that at certain stages in the development of the industry the proportion of children in the mills was unduly large, and was unfortunate. The reasons for this, however, were two-fold. In the first place, when the family came to the mill village, the older members

of the family were unfit for the most skilful parts of the work. The father had acquired habits which made it impossible for him to be active and quick enough to be a spinner or weaver. His fingers had been so gnarled and roughened by agricultural work as to be unsuitable for the tying of small threads. He could earn only the wage of the common laborer, and no one could supply the places in the factory requiring an active and nimble finger, except the younger members of the family. Again, these could be secured at low wage, and many manufacturers were misled into the belief that a low wage was necessarily an incident to a low cost of production. In the progress of the industry, and in the succession of years, a new generation is growing up, and the mills have found it practicable and advisable to supplant the younger children by youths and adults. The proportion of children of tender age—say fourteen years and under—in employment in the mills now, for the reasons above, is very much less than it was five or ten years ago, and this proportion, irrespective of legislation, will continue to grow less. The child is the most expensive employee that the mill has. From the writer's experience, the mill can well afford to pay more per piece or per machine for work done by the adult than for similar work done by the young child. A spinner, for instance, who is paid by the machine, or by the "side," as it is called, taking, in print cloth numbers, say twelve sides, is a much more economical employee to the mill than a child who is paid the same price per side and who takes only four or six sides. The results to the mill of the day's work are much better in the case of the adult than the child, and experience in this has tended of itself to decrease the number of children in employment. In addition to this fact, the bettered circumstances of the family have tended to the same effect. In the pamphlet referred to by Mr. Kohn, he says, "With the increase of wage there has been a corresponding decrease of employment of children. This effect will continue until in my judgment the proportion of objectionably young children in the mills will altogether cease." I differ, therefore, altogether from those who would proclaim that there is a constant increase of the employment of children in southern cotton mills. My conclusion would be exactly the

reverse and this conclusion will be borne out by the census of the United States, I believe, as it is by careful statisticians such as Mr. Kohn. The latter, in referring to the question of employment of children in South Carolina said, "The more I study the question, the more I become convinced that the tendency of the outsider was to exaggerate the number of children in the mills, and the tendency of the mill presidents was to keep the children out of the mills, if for no other than for economic reasons."

That the manufacturers of South Carolina are sincere in their desire and intention of keeping the young children out of the mills is proven by their course with regard to legislation. No persons in the state have been more persistent in their advocacy of a general compulsory school law than have the manufacturers. With the election of each new legislature for the past six or more years, these manufacturers have presented to the legislature a petition, seeking the enactment of laws requiring the compulsory education of children. At a meeting of the Cotton Manufacturers' Association of South Carolina, held but a few weeks ago, a resolution was adopted, memorializing the legislature to pass a compulsory school law, requiring the attendance of all children under the age of fourteen years, and stating that in the judgment of the manufacturers, such a law would be the most effective child labor law which could be passed, and furthermore stating that if such a law were passed, the manufacturers would make no objection whatever to the passage of a child labor bill forbidding the employment of children, in cotton mills, under the age of fourteen. In other words, the manufacturers have believed, in common with many thinking people in other communities, that a compulsory education law was a proper and necessary incident to a child labor law, and have urged the enactment of the two bills at the same time. At the present time, the child labor law in South Carolina prohibits only the employment of children under twelve. The manufacturers of the state are willing to raise this age limit to fourteen, if legislation to this effect be accompanied by a compulsory school law. In any event, there can be no question in the mind of any impartial student of conditions that there is a steady decrease in the proportion of children employed, and this

decrease will continue for the reasons outlined. It is most unfortunate that many who are honestly seeking the prohibition of child labor should find it necessary to greatly exaggerate its present evils. For illustration, a very general impression has been created by writers upon and critics of southern cotton mills that it was usual in all the southern states to work children at night. Just criticism of this practice may be made of some states, but as to South Carolina, the incorrectness of such a view is apparent, when it is known that there are practically no mills in South Carolina operating at night. The writer thinks that he is familiar with the large proportion of mills in the state, and certainly lives and operates mills in that section in which the industry is most thriving, and in which the largest number of plants are located. Yet, to his knowledge, there is not in the counties of Spartanburg, Anderson and Greenville, in which are a large majority of the spindles of the state, a single mill operating at night, and he knows of but two plants in the whole state—and these are of but comparatively small size—which operate at night. The manufacturers have not sought to prevent legislation prohibiting the employment of children at night, and without objection on their part, and indeed, on their recommendation, there was passed several years ago a bill prohibiting the employment of children under the age of twelve, between the hours of seven p. m. and six a. m.; and there is now pending before the legislature a bill, which is meeting with no objection on their part, prohibiting the employment of children under the age of sixteen years between such hours.

The condition of the employee in southern mills is steadily improving, and the percentage and number of young children in employment is steadily decreasing. These two results must be a cause of congratulation to the people of the whole Union, as unquestionably they are to the people of the southern states. These results have been certainly to a very large measure consequent upon the work of the manufacturers themselves.

In conclusion, I would quote again from the article of Professor Few, already referred to, in which he says, "Much still remains to be done, but this is not going to be done by crude, unfair or evil-minded agitators, or by well-meaning but ill-in-

formed sentimentalists. The working out through actual experience, step by step, as is being done by the mill referred to, of the hard problems of factory life, is worth more than any amount of vague theorizings of idealists."