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THE TRADE BOARDS ACT.

BY

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The Trade Boards Act was passed in 1909 to deal with the industrial condition known as "Sweating" in trades where workers were unable to earn a living wage. The Act is applied to the scheduled trades, and is to be applied thereafter, by Provisional Order, to trades in which rates of wages are "exceptionally low." For each included trade a Trade Board has to be constituted, consisting of representatives of workers and employers in the trade, and of appointed members varying in number appointed by the Board of Trade. The work of the Boards is to fix minimum rates of wages for their trades. To that, to the furnishing of reports upon matters that may be submitted to them by Government, and to work connected with the enforcement of the rates they fix, the Trade Boards are limited. Any additional power, such as the power to limit learners in a factory, they have to claim as consequential upon the fixing of

rates. It is provided that a minimum rate must first be published, and objections to it considered at the end of three months. When the rate is fixed it remains for six months in "partial operation," during which an employer may pay a worker less than the minimum, provided he has the worker's consent in writing thereto. At the end of six months the Board of Trade, in the absence of any special reason for delay, will issue an order making the rate obligatory upon all employers, who, thereafter, will be liable in respect to each offence under the Act to a fine not exceeding £20.

The Act in the first place is applied to (1) ready-made and wholesale bespoke tailoring; (2) paper box making; (3) machine-made lace and net finishing; (4) certain kinds of chain-making.

In lace finishing, carried on mainly in Nottingham, and in chain-making, carried on mainly in Cradley Heath, the Boards have to deal almost entirely with home workers who live in contiguous streets and form communities as solid and separate as are workers in factories and workshops during their hours of employment. These workers are engaged in few and simple operations, and this simplicity, and concentration of the trades, is of material assistance to the work of the Board.

The larger trades scheduled contrast perfectly with these two. They are widely dispersed. Their organisation is intricate, the processes numerous and varied. In these larger trades, moreover, though home workers are plentiful, they are in the minority, and industry is carried on chiefly in workplaces ranging from the very small shop, in which the workers may be three or four, to huge well-equipped factories, in which there may be three or four thousand.

The question of foreign competition is of very different seriousness in these four trades. Chain-making is free from such competition, while the lace trade is competed with by at least three Continental countries. The heaviest of freight charges gives the manufacturer in the paper box trade virtual protection in respect of large rigid boxes. On the other hand, he alleges a keen competition in small, and also in folding or "collapsible" boxes, which are expected in the future to eliminate their "rigid" rivals. The tailoring industry has been marked during recent years by a rapid and splendid growth. It holds the home market in its hand, and, in addition, has a rapidly-increasing export trade of between £7,000,000 and £8,000,000. But some of the exported clothes are of low quality, and in this section of the trade, in which wages and general conditions are of the worst, there is competition in neutral markets.

Taken together, it will be agreed that the trades are representative, and, as a whole, supply an adequate test of what can be accomplished by Trade Boards. If, in respect of them, minimum wages can be fixed and enforced, they should be capable of general fixation and enforcement.

In all the trades the Boards have now fixed minimum rates for time work, an obligation under the Act, and in the two smaller they have fixed also general minimum piece lists, as to which they have an option.

All women chain-makers, and most of the men who work out of the larger workshops, have been, in the past, very badly paid, the women earning wages of 6s. or 7s. a week for full time, and the men 12s. to £1. In this trade a time rate of 2½d. an hour was fixed for women, and rates of from 5d. to 7d. for men, these sums yielding for a full week's work 10s. 10d. in the one case, and from 21s. 5d. to 30s. 4d. in the other. At Cradley Heath, however, it is the piece rate that is important, and "on piece" workers of ordinary capacity will have no difficulty in exceeding the sum stated. But the main value of the piece list is a help to administration. The chain-makers, with a copy of the piece list on their walls, are aware of the legal price for each thickness of chain, and are in the position to check any evasion. In Cradley, therefore, the success of the experiment is assured. The workers are getting rates that, in the cheapest qualities of chain, give them increases of from 50 per cent. to 100 per cent.

Nottingham lace finishers number from seven to ten thousand, and for these a minimum time rate of 2¾d. per hour (11s. 11d. per week) is now in obligatory operation. As with the chainmakers, it is the piece list that matters. The degree of improvement in the piece prices is indicated by the application to the workers of the list according to which previously the best houses in the trade paid their *middlewomen*. These middlewomen, numbering seven hundred, had sole power to decide what their services were worth, and in practice they took from the employer's payment from one-third to half of the whole. The whole now goes to the workers, the middlewomen claiming an extra 20 per cent. for their services from the employer. Not only the rates have been altered. The Trade Board has served to call attention to a great many small abuses under which the women suffered, and the removal of these will, by itself, substantially ameliorate their lot.

The remaining trades present a problem altogether more intricate than that of the two already mentioned. They are large and decentralised trades in which payments differ, not only from employer to employer, but from district to district. For these larger trades more extensive machinery is required, and numbers of District Committees are established, composed on similar principles to that of the Board itself.

In the paper box trade the minimum fixed is 3d. an hour for women and 6d. an hour for men. In the tailoring trade the minimum rate is 3¼d. an hour for women and 6d. an hour for men.

To enable us to appreciate these figures, we may profitably turn to the Board of Trade figures, from which it appears that only in two women's trades do the *average* earnings amount to 4d. an hour, and in



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nearly half of all the trades it is less than 3d. an hour. In a great many the *average* hourly rate is little in excess of 2d. It is clear, therefore, that the women's new *minimum* rates are a considerable advance upon previous figures.

A fact not yet stated is of much importance. As Trade Board rates are fixed "clear of all deductions," it follows that the expenditure of box-making home workers on glue and paste, amounting often to as much as 1s. 6d. a week, and of tailoring workers on "sewings," sometimes amounting to very much more, will in future, except where the minimum is exceeded, be a charge upon the employer.

A few remarks must be added about the treatment of young people in these trades. To protect learners, progressive rates of wages have been fixed for them by the Boards, the general principle being periodic increases of payment until, on attainment of 18 years of age in the case of women and 21 in the case of men, the full minimum is to be paid. Moreover, learners are to be certified and watched over by the Boards, and are to learn at least two processes of the trade, and are not to be employed in undue proportion.

To sum up. The Trade Boards have fixed minimum rates of wages substantially better than those previously paid. In one of the trades the minimum is operating with perfect success, and in the other similar trade a like result will follow as soon as inspection in the district becomes adequate. To the increase in mere wages must be added the removal of trade abuses, as, for instance, the debiting of the worker with the cost of sundries necessary to her occupation. Further, the limitation of the employment of young people in the trades, and the control of the conditions under which they work will react beneficially upon young workers and upon the trade.