

SOME POLICIES OF THE COTTON SPINNERS' TRADE UNIONS

THIS paper deals only with some of the most prominent¹ policies pursued by the spinners with a view to making their remuneration as large as possible; and to "policy" we shall give an arbitrary significance, distinguishing it on the one hand from the men's general aims and views as to their "rights," with respect both to remuneration and the control of industry, and on the other from the particular methods adopted in carrying their schemes into effect.

Cotton-spinning as a separate industry for men did not appear till the end of the last century, when improvements in the loom had so largely added to its efficiency that the existing rate of supply of yarn was insufficient to maintain the increased output of cloth demanded at the lower prices consequent upon diminished cost of production; and when, moreover, heavier jennies and mules, bearing more spindles, had been introduced to meet the increased demand for yarns, machines which called for greater strength to work them than that of the average woman. As soon as men, in any considerable numbers, began to drive these new appliances, spinners' trade unions began to appear; naturally, because weavers' clubs were common at that time, and so to form spinners' clubs was but to follow custom—in some cases even to follow habit, since no doubt many of the new spinners had been members of the weavers' societies. And it was equally natural that the spinners should follow the policy of the weavers. We therefore find the spinners strictly regulating apprentices, both their numbers and years of service, and even enforcing something of a patrimonial system:² and the reasons given for this policy

¹ Nothing will be said, for instance, of short-time movements, which from the first have been intimately connected with the wages question.

² See the rules of the following societies: Manchester, 1795 (in the Manchester Library); Oldham, 1796 (a reprint dated 1829 is in the possession of Mr Thomas Ashton, the secretary of the Oldham Province of the Spinners' Association, and a

always contained as the most important the preservation of wages by restricting the supply of spinners. This state of affairs continued for some years; and there is every reason to suppose that for a time the spinners were far more successful than the weavers in getting their rules observed. But improvements in machinery were year by year adding to the difficulty of maintaining an apprenticeship system. Every new spinning machine carried more spindles than its predecessors, and soon additional piecing labour on the long machines became essential. The spinners, after futile attempts to suppress the long machines,¹ met the difficulty by refusing to recognise all the piecers as "learners." Special emphasis was laid on this policy at the great Congress of Spinners of the British Isles at Ramsay, Isle of Man, in 1829.² But for two reasons this solution was temporary only. The one, that improvements in machinery were not only adding to the size of mules but also taking from the difficulty of spinning, so that in a few years an observant piecer could learn to spin without much "learning," especially on the self-actor; but the self-actor was of no use for fine counts till its winding arrangements were perfected in the sixties, when, during the cotton famine, the use of the inferior Eastern cottons stimulated the improvement of machinery to work them up economically. The other reason was, that the spirit of the times was against restrictions of all kinds. The Government had repeatedly refused to sanction apprenticeship among the weavers; and the apprenticeship rules came to be regarded as both obsolete and oppressive. By public opinion, therefore, and the new conditions on the mules, the spinners were forced into a new policy.

The new policy of the spinners consisted merely in an emphatic interference with the demand for their labour by

copy of this is among the Webb MSS.; Stockport, 1824 (printed as an appendix to the Parliamentary Report on Combinations, 1825), Glasgow (printed as an appendix to the Parliamentary Report on Combinations of 1838). Much information on the regulations imposed by the cotton-spinners' trade-unions will be found in the evidence of witnesses connected with the cotton industry given to the Parliamentary Committees on Combinations of 1824, 1825 and 1838, and to the Committee on Manufactures of 1833. No mention is made of apprentices in the rules of the Manchester Society revised and amended on the 9th March, 1837. These rules form an appendix to the Parliamentary Report of 1838 referred to above.

¹ Account of the strike at Ashton in 1830 (published in the Report of Trade Societies for the Social Science Association, 1860). See also the accounts of the Manchester strike of 1829, and the Glasgow strike of 1837, given in the evidence of numerous witnesses connected with the cotton industry to the Parliamentary Committee on Combinations of 1838.

² A long report of this congress, written by Doherty, is in the Manchester Library.

enforcing a definite proportion between spinners and machinery, and in making their supply-price firm, and insisting on their existing large share of the joint product of their labour and that of others. And so to-day there will work upon each pair of mules one highly-paid hand (the minder) and two or three hands with low wages (the piecers, with a scavenger sometimes), one of whom, the big piecer, will be roughly as efficient as the minder in many cases, especially where there are no girl piecers. I am inclined to think that had it not been for the policy of the spinners the two adults on the mule would be receiving wages more nearly alike than they are to-day. In short, the conditions of work might have resulted in short virtual apprenticeship, ending in a moderate wage, perhaps again to increase moderately; but the policy of the spinners necessitated a system of long apprenticeship, with a higher wage ultimately.

With a view to more completely understanding what the spinners have probably accomplished we must examine these contrasted systems in somewhat greater detail. Both long apprenticeship and short apprenticeship might be regulated so as to attract an equal number of hands, other things being equal. The extreme example of the one system is the calling of the barrister, of the other that of the unskilled labourer, whose maximum wage may be acquired at the age of about eighteen. The economic justification of each depends upon the number of years required for attaining efficiency. Now the fact that the period of probation in the spinning industry has become greater, while the amount of dexterity required has become less—though perhaps more general intelligence is needed to-day than heretofore—raises great doubts about the advantages of the existing relations between spinners and piecers. It is argued for the system that the enormous value of the machinery under the control of the spinner renders it specially desirable that he should be a picked man, and that the present arrangement gives a wide field for selection. It requires little thought to see that to this it may be urged in response that the spinner's work is not such that spinners are born and not made, and that a narrower field for selection would give equally good results; also that the picked men do not necessarily remain to be picked. They, the best of the field, may pass into other trades; those who remain, working at a low wage, will tend to be the immobile, who are the least enterprising and quick-witted. Next we have to observe that the long-apprenticeship system has had disastrous results on the standard of life in many of the cotton towns. An

operative will frequently marry as a piecer, and his standard of life will then be based on a low weekly wage. Ten years later fortune may elevate him to the position of spinner, and his wage will be at once largely increased. By that time his standard of life has firmly set; and even if the increased wage comes earlier, the change is so great that the standard can seldom rise to it. Moreover, when he marries, his wife continues to work in the mill, and the half home life which this custom means tends to prevent the development of the full home life in later years. The result is too frequently deplorable waste and discomfort.

The success of the spinners in carrying out their new policy is due in some part to the strength of their organisation, and to their position in forming a small but essential element in the combination of factors turning out a joint product; but it is due in some part to the peculiar weakness of the piecers. The piecers have never had a successful organisation. It is true that they have been members of the spinners' clubs from the earliest times—they were even admitted to the great amalgamation of 1829—and that since the seventies, when the spinners began to specially encourage their enlistment, they have joined in great numbers. But in these clubs, it has been asserted, they are organised in great part against themselves. They have no share in the management, and never had. Consequently in 1890 some Bolton socialists separately organised the piecers; but according to the *Cotton Factory Times* (24th Nov., 1893), the spinners induced the piecers to give up their new-born club. We may well ask here, but why did the piecers consent, why have they not since revolted, and why had they no clubs of their own before? The reasons are not far to seek. The piecers all hope to become spinners soon, and find it hard to fight against their future bread and butter. Moreover, the ablest, who would make unionism a success, are as a rule the first to be promoted; again, those who made themselves prominent in organising their fellows would run the risk of never putting off the piecer and becoming the complete spinner. And lastly all piecers are poor.

When one factor in production, engaged with other factors in turning out a joint product, is more successful than its associates in the bargain as to wages, the obvious response of the employer is to dispense with the more expensive kind of labour and substitute for it the cheaper, so far as that is possible. And the master cotton spinners were not slow to act in this way. They tried to introduce the "apprenticeship system," "the joining system" "the doffing system," "the coupling of wheels," and an

increased number of mules to a minder;¹ and when they were checked in these attempts they took care to employ the expensive labour only when it was in the very prime of its efficiency, and to promote piecers to do its work as soon as it showed decay.

A few words must now be said in explanation of these several systems. "The coupling of wheels" explains itself. It consisted in connecting two or three pairs of mules with one pair of headstocks (double- and treble-decking), so that the movements of two or three mules could be regulated at the same moment by one set of adjustments. The unions began to fight this system as early as 1835-6, and the dispute continued for many years after that;² but as the mills became larger, and so capable of holding longer mules, the system of coupling ceased to spread. But still attempts were made to place two or three pairs of mules with one minder, even when they were not connected. This, however, the men found easy enough to resist, as each mule had its own headstock, and the system meant—necessarily with the old machinery—that piecers were doing minders' work. Nevertheless a variation of it, under the title of the "doffing" system, established itself at Glasgow; but only after the excesses of unionism had led to its destruction there in 1837. Women were placed on the mules and a highly paid supervisor was set to control three or four pairs. The system will be found surviving to-day, but it shows no signs of establishing itself in Lancashire.

These were all attempts to add to the work of the highly paid hands; but the remaining schemes above referred to ("joining" and "the apprenticeship system") aim at introducing a class of labour at a lower wage. "The apprenticeship system," which followed in an attempt to achieve the same end by inducing spinners to pay premiums for their wheels,³ consisted in the promotion of a piecer to spinning on the understanding that he should receive less than a spinner's wage for a year or two, because he was in effect learning. But the scheme was so obviously an attack on wages that wherever it appeared it was immediately

¹ So far as I am aware employers have never attempted to meet the difficulty, consisting in an excess of adult labour, by placing one mule (instead of one pair) with each minder and allowing one assistant on each, since the time when, according to tradition, a spinner assisted a drunken companion by turning on his heel and putting up his friend's mule carriage after putting up his own, and thereby initiated the present system.

² *Webb MSS.*; also *History of the Marcroft Family*.

³ See, e. g., *Minute Book of Bolton Society*, Dec. 28, 1847. Extracts will be found in the *Webb MSS.*

suppressed; ¹ and it cannot be said to have got a footing at any time. Far more threatening to the men's policy is the "joining system." This is identical with the apprenticeship system in recognising another quality of labour, but it differs in that it provides a place for the new labour in the fresh combination of factors which it introduces. The same total wage is paid for the product of a pair of mules; but the residue, after payment for piecing and scavenging, is divided between the two spinners in authority, who take the place of spinner and big piecer. Naturally the unions set themselves stubbornly against "joining"; ² but the practice was not extinguished. In 1883 a general strike on the question took place in the Leigh district, where alone the system then flourished to any extent, but the strike collapsed through the refusal of the men in one mill to come out. The policy of the union after that disaster has been apparently to prevent "joining" from spreading. But, if I might hazard a guess, I should say that the union never will prevail against it. It is an arrangement which is said to have great advantages for some styles of work, among the chief of which is greater uniformity in the quality and quantity of the output to be expected from partners than from single men, for the weakness of the one in some respect may be covered up by the strength of the other. And this advantage is said to more than counterbalance the defects naturally associated with divided responsibility, on some qualities of work. The system again is better for the men than the present arrangement, where there are many adult piecers, since they gain from it a moderate wage at an earlier age in the place of a higher wage in later life. And employers have argued that it is better for the men for this other reason also, that the old spinner may be kept at work longer if his experience is linked with the vigour of a young partner. As it is, humanity and interest induce the masters to dismiss the elderly spinner when the frost of age has only slightly impaired his vitality, and promote the efficient and deserving piecer whose reward has been long in coming. This practice has given the union many uneasy moments. It is a practice which it is extremely difficult to check, because it is extremely difficult to find even moderately plausible grounds of objection. So far the union has proceeded in the following manner. It has argued that the only legitimate grounds for dismissal are inefficiency and insubordination; then,

¹ On this system see, *e. g.*, report of committee meeting of the Bolton Society for Feb. 27, 1859 (*Webb MSS.*).

² Numerous references will be found in trade-union documents after 1866.

instead of investigating each case of dismissal, it has acted on the principle that men are being turned off for other reasons if more than a certain proportion of vacancies are created each year. The Bolton union even went the length of resolving at a general meeting "that no member of this society shall render any assistance to a piecer commencing to spin at any mill where the vacancies for spinners are filled up at a less proportion than one practical spinner for every alternate vacancy."

This concludes all that can be offered here of my analysis of the policy of the spinners. While recognising the difficulty of the problem they have had to face, a difficulty consisting in a steady increase in the amount of piecing labour required, I cannot regard what I conceive to be their solution as altogether satisfactory, since it tends to keep efficient labour at an inefficiency wage. It should be remarked, however, that this solution is not universal, for in some places the difficulty has been met by the employment of many girl piecers, who, however, are not allowed to become minders. The Bolton union has recently endorsed this policy by advising that the employment of girl piecers should be encouraged. But neither can I regard this solution as generally satisfactory; especially in view of the heat of most spinning-rooms, a fact much emphasised by the unions some years ago when they sought to put a stop to the employment of women. In conclusion we may observe that in all probability future improvements in spinning-machinery will tend to lessen the difficulty we have been considering, by displacing to some extent mere piecing labour.

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