

THE REGULATION OF WAGES BY LISTS IN THE SPINNING  
INDUSTRY.<sup>1</sup>

THE payment of wages by lists in the spinning industry arises from the facts that the operative spinner used to sell his product at customary prices, and that the so-called industrial revolution, so far as it related to the spinning of weft and fine counts, generally speaking, was no revolution, but for the most part an exceedingly gradual evolution.<sup>2</sup> The position of the man who spun himself, and employed his son, and maybe one or two neighbours, in his shed at the back of the cottage, and who ran one carding engine, worked by a single gin-horse, was little different from that of the operatives who worked under his direction. But in course of time the employer's

<sup>1</sup> As the main object of this paper is to supplement the mass of information contained in the British Association's report upon the subject in 1887, no facts referred to there are restated here, except those which are essential to a consecutive exposition.

<sup>2</sup> The evidence for this statement would require too great a space for insertion here, but it may be as well to point out that the gradual evolution of the weft-spinning industry, side by side with the sudden appearance of large concerns for the production of twist, was necessitated by the differences in the machines used in each case. The jenny and mule could be easily and cheaply constructed, they occupied little space, and were for some years economically worked by hand alone, and much skill was required to use them; whereas the water-frame was dependent on the forces of nature, as its name implies, and almost independent of the skill of the minder; and further it was expensive.

control both over the quantity and quality of supplies of yarn, and over the arrangement of factors in production, increased, so that, the operative spinner being largely deprived of his choice as to the nature of the yarn produced by him, and as to the size of the machine upon which he worked, it became necessary that definite provisions for a variation of prices per pound with counts,<sup>1</sup> and with the number of spindles, should be introduced; and, moreover, that prices reckoned per unit of length should move also with counts when their production involved different skills and care. Even before this time custom had fixed a variation of prices with counts, and so rigid were customary prices at one time that yarns were frequently known by the amounts paid for weaving them—8's counts, *e.g.*, were known as "tenpenny," and 5's as "sixpenny."<sup>2</sup> The question of discounted prices on the longer mules of course could not come up until the size of the mule ceased to be the operative's concern, and it may be remarked here that it formed the favourite subject of dispute between masters and men for many years. The early strikes about 1830 had generally some reference to it, if they did not actually arise out of it.

The report of the British Association on spinning lists in 1887 declared that "the first list<sup>3</sup> known in the spinning trade was that adopted at Preston in 1859"; but the assertion is refuted by the appendix to the same report which contains a copy of a Bolton list dated 1844. Moreover, there is plenty of other evidence to show that the statement is incorrect; and it seems highly probable that it is not only untrue with reference to the trade as a whole, but even as regards Preston itself, for in the strike of 1836 the operatives made no complaint that the prices paid in all the mills were not identical, although they demanded the Bolton list, and their sole objection to the masters' terms was that they did not provide so high a wage as the Bolton prices.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, I have seen it stated in some contemporary record—though unfortunately I have since failed to find the reference—that the Preston operatives secured a list, or a new list, in 1836, but not the Bolton list. But earlier even than 1836 we find the exigencies of the new industrial conditions recognised by lists embodying prices varying with the size of the mules and with counts, even when prices were expressed by length. The lists of Manchester and Bolton are roughly described in the *United Trades Co-operative Journal* for March 20, 1830, and some figures, evidently from the Manchester lists of 1828 and 1833, are given in the *Herald of the Rights of Industry*

<sup>1</sup> "Counts" refers to the tenuity of the yarn. For instance, 30's counts is a yarn measuring 30 hanks to the lb, and 40's counts one measuring 40 hanks to the lb. A hank is 840 yards.

<sup>2</sup> Guest's *History of the Cotton Manufacture*, p. 10.

<sup>3</sup> By a list here is meant a general list as opposed to a private list.

<sup>4</sup> See Ashworth's paper on the Preston strike in the *Statistical Journal* for November, 1837—not, of course, the *Journal of the Statistical Society*.

for February 15, 1834. The Bolton list is traditionally said to date back to 1813, but corroborative evidence is lacking, though a Bolton list is referred to (by one Jones, before the Select Committee on Combinations) as early as 1824. The first direct mention of the Manchester list occurs in 1823, when the masters admitted in the *Manchester Guardian* that they had drawn up a new scale of prices. There was, then, a list in use in Manchester before 1823, and by 1824 lists of some kind were apparently somewhat common, for a Mr. Bolling declared to the Committee just mentioned that it was the general practice to pay wages by printed lists. It seems quite likely indeed that district lists were in existence so early as 1810, for we are told that "the principal object which the workmen" (the strikers of 1810) "had in view was to raise the wages in country districts to a level with those in Manchester."<sup>1</sup>

Both private and district lists seem to have existed together in these early days, and the question arises as to which came first. But this is a question to which I can only offer in answer surmises, for in the earliest period we discover both. I should suppose that where the factory system established itself on the ruins of the cottage industry a district list expressing prior district customary prices would emerge, but that where the factories found no survivals the private list would be the first to show itself. And we can say, with a fair approximation to certainty, that in some cases district lists were formed by an averaging of the prices in private lists, though sometimes the list of another district was adopted bodily, or piecemeal, instead. The operatives even went so far in the way of generalising lists as to demand a universal list. And they actually drew one up in 1830<sup>2</sup> for submission to the masters, but its future history is shrouded in mystery.

The forces tending to the adoption of general lists in the place of private lists came from both masters and men: from the former because they desired to prevent, as far as possible, casual differences in the costs of production of those dealing in the same market, and from the men because they thought it unfair that those who did the same work should not be paid the same wage.

During the later thirties, and in the forties, district lists seem to have fallen somewhat into disuse, if not to have actually disappeared, in some places. Conclusive evidence is, however, wanting; but if the absence of records goes for anything there was no agitation in this period either for the adoption, extension, or development of lists. The next we hear of them is their re-birth, in Preston in 1859, in Bolton not later than 1844, and in Oldham not until 1872. As late as

<sup>1</sup> *Trades' Unions and Strikes*, an anonymous pamphlet dated 1834.

<sup>2</sup> See resolutions adopted at the Congress of Spinners held at Manchester in 1830, which are printed as an appendix to the pamphlet *Combinations of Trades* (London, 1830).

1875 many places were without lists, and many firms disregarded them where they did exist, and used private lists.<sup>1</sup> These later lists were formed, just like those earlier general lists which were not original, by averaging private or district lists, or by adopting parts of existing lists; except at Oldham, where a departure from tradition was taken, and it was agreed that wages should be paid on a new principle.

One condition powerfully tending to bring about the decay of the lists at the end of the first third of this century was the extension to jenny and mule spinning of the large-scale industrial system, which had previously been chiefly confined to the working of the water-frame and kindred machines. The early lists, it must be remembered, did not apply at all to those operatives who were employed on the latter machines. Accompanying the large-scale industry there appeared notions as to the nature of wages, on the part both of masters and men, by no means conducive to the development of piece-lists. The new capitalists thought of the price of labour as they thought of the price of coals; and the men for their part, under the extraordinary influence of Owen, began to despise all lesser ends than New Moral Worlds.

The lists after their re-birth rapidly developed. It would be tedious to trace the steps in detail. Suffice it to say that most incidents in the mill tending to increase or decrease the weekly wage are now allowed for in the lists,<sup>2</sup> the most developed of which even include agreements as to holidays. A survival of the fittest has taken place among the various elements in the lists, as witness, for instance, the wide-spread adoption of payment by length of yarn spun (a system said to have been in use in Preston sixty years ago) instead of by the pound.<sup>3</sup>

It is commonly said that as Oldham's is the only speed list<sup>4</sup> it alone encourages improved machinery. But the division of gains from increased speeds under the Oldham list only applies to "quick speeds," which technically refer solely to movements faster than three draws in fifty seconds, speeds which are possible only on Oldham counts, and where these counts are produced the Oldham list is almost always used. Apart from the arrangements for quick speeds, however, there are several important differences between the Oldham list and

<sup>1</sup> See answers to questions sent out by the Oldham Union in 1875 (Webb Collection).

<sup>2</sup> Prices used to be expressed in pence and fractions, but the more minute grading of the lists has since necessitated the employment of decimals.

<sup>3</sup> The length is now automatically registered by an instrument known as the "indicator." How the number of "draws," *i.e.*, stretches of the mule carriage, were determined at Preston in early days, I have not been able to discover. It is just probable that so many draws to the pound were assumed for different counts, and that payment was, therefore, really made by weight.

<sup>4</sup> By a "speed list" is meant one which provides for a division between masters and men of the gain accruing from the increased speed of machinery.

others. The former takes as its basis a definite weekly wage, the others a definite price per hank. Hence all gains from improved machinery, or better cultivated or prepared cotton, it would be thought, must go to the masters at Oldham, but to the men elsewhere. But as a matter of fact a minimum wage is assumed as a basis everywhere. The spinners' amalgamation has declared that it is an understood thing that the men must not suffer if machinery is antiquated or cotton bad, and the actual weekly wage is taken to indicate whether materials are or are not up to the standard. This means in effect the adoption of the Oldham system, *i.e.*, of a minimum weekly wage as a foundation. Nevertheless the Oldham system is the better because it is the more automatic. It has actually diminished the number of trivial disputes, and, moreover, it undoubtedly encourages improved machinery. Hence the go-ahead Limiteds of Ashton are anxious to have it adopted there, whereas the more stagnant of the private firms continue to prefer their own Ashton list. But enterprising Ashton firms prefer their own list as well, for another reason, however, namely, that it is less detailed and not so rigid, and so less liable to hamper experiments.

There is one peculiar difference in the results given by the Oldham and Bolton lists which calls for notice. The Oldham list provides a lower wage for Bolton counts than the Bolton list, and the latter provides a lower wage for Oldham counts than the Oldham list. One explanation offered is that Oldham definitely decided, in 1872, that under their list the coarser the counts the higher should be the wage, instead of the lower as at Bolton, because they held that the coarser counts entailed more work on the part of the operative than the fine counts. They asserted that the fine counts did not require so much greater skill, if any, than the coarse counts, after the invention of the self-actor; and that the Bolton system was in all probability largely a survival; certainly that it would be a survival within the range of counts produced at Oldham. The explanation is adequate to meet this particular case, but we find on further investigation that the highest wage earned on any particular counts is frequently given by the list peculiar to the district within which those counts are chiefly produced. The reason for this general fact can only be that the cost of production of particular counts is less in those districts in which they are specialities, and that therefore other districts can only compete with them at the expense of wages. There are other dissimilarities in the structure of the various lists, *e.g.*, in the discounts on long mules, which are only to be expected when we bear in mind that the lists were constructed at different times.

Natural selection has operated among the lists as well as among their elements. Those of Oldham and Bolton, especially the former, have tended to supplant others, just as those of Blackburn and Burnley did in an earlier period.

The victories of the Oldham list have suggested to many the idea

of a universal list; and the *Cotton Factory Times* has frequently advocated one on the ground of discrepancies between lists. But some of these discrepancies must exist, since they merely express the money value of specialisation. And for other reasons a universal list is undesirable. A dead-level list implies a dead-level population. The actual lists differing as they do, labour segregates according to its delicacy, skill and versatility: the most dexterous at Bolton, the next in dexterity at Chorley and Preston, coarser hands at Oldham and Royton, and the roughest in the Whitworth valley. To force a universal list might necessitate the complete reversal of trade-union policy. It is only possible to preserve district lists because the hands less efficient for the work of one district may be driven away to live under other lists. Moreover a universal detailed system of distribution is well-nigh impossible in an industrial organism, whose parts exhibit various stages of development. The spinning industry has stiffened in set forms in Oldham and Bolton, but it is more plastic in other spots. Growth and change marking advance are more likely to come from the more amorphous industries of the outlying districts. It is only to the finished and finite, and, on their productive side, the almost automatic businesses which are typical of Oldham and Bolton that minutely detailed and inelastic lists are suitable. They could not be applied to the small industrial concern which is pliable and enterprising and full of promise as to half a dozen possibilities at least. The best list for this business is one which, in the words of a prominent trade-union official, is "a fool of a list," that is one which leaves much to private arrangement, and to unwritten custom in its application, for unwritten custom is more easily modified than the tangible printed lists. I am strongly inclined to think that the adoption of a universal list would be followed by general dissatisfaction and disputes; that a check would be imposed on the parts of the organism showing the most originality in their growth; and that finally correction would come by the re-establishment, practically speaking, of the old state of affairs, through the medium of customary application, which by its local variations would prevent a universal list enforcing universal systems of distribution.

It should be observed that the system of paying wages by piece is spreading in the spinning industry. From the drawing-frame to the ring-frame piece-rates are now almost universal. The workers on ring-frames, indeed, have in many places a detailed list, according to which their wages vary as the speed of the spindle, the number of spindles, and the size of the twist-wheel.<sup>1</sup> Piecers' wages, however, are still definite weekly amounts; even at Oldham, in practice, although the masters in 1876 forced the spinners to pay the piecers a definite proportion of their weekly takings, for the Oldham spinners

<sup>1</sup> The larger the twist-wheel the greater is the quantity of twist put into the yarn, and consequently the less is the length of yarn turned out in a given time.

were strong enough after the dispute of 1876 to retain all extras for themselves, and so to leave the piecers in much the same position as before. There is no doubt that the piecers have been hardly dealt with.

It may seem remarkable to many that after the lists had grown so complex and yet remained so satisfactory, no attempt was made to express wages as a function of the margin between the cost of materials and the price of the product, *i.e.*, to introduce a sliding scale. Space forbids any full discussion of this question, but we may rapidly glance at some of the chief causes which have prevented the sliding-scale system developing in the lists. Firstly, the determination of the margin is no easy matter, especially when the costs of other instrumental goods used in spinning, besides raw cotton, are taken into consideration. Secondly, the men recognise that variations in margins are due to different causes, and they believe that they therefore call for different policies on their part. They think they are wise in preserving the right to say that wages shall not fall except by compulsion under certain circumstances, when margins have run down. And when margins have increased they like to have the power to bargain as to their share. The position of the men on one of its sides may perhaps be stated somewhat thus. They hold that the ratio of wages to profits is not necessarily ultimate, and that changes in margins afford excellent opportunities for altering it without incurring the onus of creating disturbances in a *status quo*, alleged to be satisfactory because it had been so at one time. The masters within the district covered by the federation are, however, protected now against exorbitant and frequent demands by the clause in the Brookland's agreement, which terminated the dispute of 1893, providing that all movements in wages must take place by five per cents. only, and that twelve months at least must intervene between each adjustment of wages.

There used to be a sliding arrangement of another character (one between the lists) in operation some few years ago, of which a brief mention should be made. It was customary for agreements to be made in several districts between masters and men that wages should rise and fall there with advances and reductions in some other district. Wages at Oldham in this way came to be the standard for many places. But both masters and men at Oldham suddenly awoke to the fact that their city had become the Belgium of the cotton industry, much as Preston had been years before, and that they were fighting the battles of the trade. Other masters outside Oldham also objected to the arrangement on the ground that their trade might not afford increased wages even if the Oldham trade did; and the system thereupon fell into disuse. The increasing specialisation of districts, with respect to the yarns produced in them, was no doubt instrumental in rendering unworkable an arrangement which had at least been possible, if not desirable, some time before. What had been one market for yarns, roughly speaking, became many markets: and the prices for

different ranges and qualities of yarn beginning to move more independently rendered any sliding arrangements between the lists unsatisfactory.

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