

Westminster Review. 172: 406-9. October, 1909.

Half-Timers in the Factories. Elizabeth Sloan Chesser.

Half-timers are girls and boys of over twelve and under fourteen, who have obtained a labour certificate, and are consequently permitted by the law to work half a day in the mills or factories, if they attend school the other half. They are employed either in morning shifts from six or six-thirty till mid-day, or in the afternoon from one o'clock till five or six in the evening. The morning sets attend school in the afternoon; those who work in the factories in the latter part of the day have to go to school until dinner time. In some cases they work on alternate days—Monday, Wednesday, Friday, in the factory; Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday, in the school. They are living a treadmill existence from day to day, from week to week. They are doing work which involves a double strain. The mental effort of school life is combined with the physical strain of factory life. At twelve years of age, the period when normal

growth is most rapid, they have to go through a strain which results in arrested development for life. It is the age when children require regular nourishing meals, exercise in the fresh air, combined with an extra allowance of rest and sleep.

What sort of life is led by the half-timer? He has to rise at five or five-thirty summer and winter. He has often to walk a mile to the factory in all weathers with, perhaps, a crust to sustain him till the breakfast half-hour arrives. He spends his morning in the greyness and gloom of the factory, amidst the roar of machinery, the dust and heat of the rooms. He walks home again for dinner, which it is safe to say is far from being the ideal meal for a growing child working beyond his strength. The majority of half-timers are the children of factory mothers, who have had neither the time nor the opportunity to learn cooking. Fried fish and chips from the fish shop, or bread, pickles, and cheese would form a sufficient repast from the point of view of the child or his parents; the ideal child's food, milk, being conspicuous by its absence from factory homes. After dinner there is school to attend, and the evidence of school teachers and educational authorities generally as to the evil effects of the half-time system on the children is overwhelming. The children come to school worn out nervously and physically after six hours' work in the factory. They are generally dull and languid, or nervous and irritable, subject to habit spasms, to chorea, or St. Vitus' dance. Very often they fall asleep at their work, an effort of nature to counteract over-fatigue. Whenever a child becomes a half-timer the teacher can see mental, physical, and moral deterioration. The mental proofs are provided by copy book and exercises, and the deterioration of manners shown by both girls and boys after a few weeks' factory life is evidence of the moral evils of children being allowed to work in the factories.

It is not difficult to collect evidence of the physical evils of child labour in the factories. A few years ago an examination was made of the sight and hearing of 250 boys in a Lancashire school. It was found that 27 per cent. of the half-time scholars, and only 4 per cent. of the whole-time scholars suffered from defective hearing. Also that defective vision existed in 37 per

cent. of the half-timers, compared with only 6 per cent. of the full time scholars. After the first two months in the factory the children show signs of physical deterioration, they become pallid and lose flesh. They suffer from headaches and other signs of nervous strain. They show every indication of over-strain and over-fatigue. From one week to another they never have their due allowance of rest and sleep. They go to bed late compared with children of a higher social standing and they rise, perhaps at five a. m. Lack of nerve rest and sleep is one of the chief causes of mental defect in after life.

The danger is, perhaps, greatest to the girls. From twelve to fourteen years is the critical period of a girl's life, and undue strain at this age affects her whole life for the worse. From the medical point of view there is something criminal in a system that permits girl children to work on their feet all the morning in a machine shop, and spend their afternoons at hard mental work when their bodies are aching with fatigue, and their brains are dulled and stupid from the noise and strain of the factory. What chance have they, child-women, who have had no youth, young girls exposed to all the moral pollution of life in the factories? Many of the older women exercise a bad moral influence on the half-timers and the younger full-timers. At twelve, thirteen, and fourteen years these young girls are women with a knowledge of the evil of life which is pathetic in the extreme. At the same time, this is the receptive age from the educational point of view, the period of life when the future mothers and housewives ought to be learning the A B C of a woman's education. What chance have these girls to gain a knowledge of cooking, housewifery, and economical expenditure, if their education is checked at twelve, is finished entirely at thirteen or fourteen by the half-time system?

The majority of thinking people are opposed to the half-time system. The sentimental argument that if legislation interferes with child labour in factories, the poor widows with only sons will have to bear the brunt is not borne out by facts. In remarkably few cases, according to school authorities, is poverty on the part of the parents responsible for the applications for half-time certificates. Very often the father of the child is getting

good wages, but does not see why an extra few shillings a week should be given up because the teacher thinks the child is better at school. Cases of absolute callousness on the part of the parents are plentiful enough. They will often insist upon having the half-time papers, even when strong representations are made as to the consequences on the future health of the child.

Opinion is unanimous that the cotton factory operatives are strongly opposed to any interference with the half-time system. They cannot be convinced that limitation of child labour will prove advantageous to themselves in the end by raising the general wage. It is only by legislation that the half-time system can be swept away. Comprehensive legislation would mean raising the age of half-timers to fifteen, and reducing the working hours of young people under eighteen years of age in factories. By the establishment of trade schools for the industrial training of boys and housewifery classes for girls between thirteen and fifteen years of age the children would have a chance of acquiring knowledge which would help them to secure a living wage in after life. Child labour in factories does not qualify the workers for future well-paid employment. The raising of the school age would provide them with the opportunity of obtaining a wider moral, mental, and industrial training. Under the present system the children leave school just at the age when they profit most from the discipline and teaching of school life. The girls go straight from grappling with elementary arithmetic and geography to the manual labour of the factory. It is impossible for them, exhausted after a hard day's work, to attend technical classes in the evening. So they are unfitted for any life but the factory. Even when they marry, the factory draws them back; they are happier in the card room than in the home. They have never learned to cook, to care for the simple homely arts of the housewife—in a word they have never had a chance. Let them have their chance. Abolish half-time and married women's labour. Teach the girls and the women hygiene and housewifery. And so strike at the root of the physical deterioration of the nation.