

LINEN THREAD

The people of the United States use as much linen thread as the inhabitants of all the other countries of the world combined. As in the woollen, glass, and a dozen other industries, the bulk of the linen thread business, of the distribution at least, is partially controlled by a combination. This is the American Thread Company, operating ten plants. In the mills of the combination, and in the four or five large independent mills, about ninety per cent of all the linen thread used in this country is manufactured. Instead of making the yarn here, it is more profitable to have tow spun in Ireland, and to import the yarn. Nearly all the flax used in American mills is imported.

The following testimony regarding labor conditions in the thread mills was given by the president of the American Thread Company before the Industrial Commission: We pay our labor weekly. We do not adopt a sliding wage scale, nor make the payment of labor dependent upon business success, nor impose fines or penalties. At Holyoke, Massachusetts, we have factory tenements sufficient to accommodate about one-eighth of the persons employed there. The relative rate of wages has advanced and employment has become more regular since the organization of the thread combination. In a way, the

social condition of our labor has improved. By this I mean that the general situation of employés with reference to the amount that they can earn, the conveniences which are within their reach, the necessaries which they can provide, and the comforts and luxuries which are possible, has improved. In one respect, however, the social conditions of labor in our line has not improved. Fifty years ago a large proportion of employés came from native families of farmers and persons of more or less independence of position and means. That class of employés has considerably diminished.

The number of persons employed in the thread industry has largely increased notwithstanding that improvements are continually being made in machinery, and that the work is largely done by machinery. All such improvements lower price, consequently increase output, and so create an enlarged necessity for labor. Our employés, on an average, work for nearly 300 days in the course of a year. In Massachusetts they work 58 hours a week; elsewhere 60 hours a week. We do not employ Sunday labor. With reference to the workday movement, it is my opinion that if a man wishes to work, he should be permitted to do so, and to work as many hours a day as he likes. Few good workmen will take a holiday, or will ever wish to shorten hours unless they can do so at the expense of their employers.

We have never tried coöperation, premium payments, profit-sharing, or industrial copartnership. Our employés prefer a satisfactory, definite payment rather than a less amount, with a possibility of an increase dependent upon the success of the business. Workmen are suspicious of their employers. Under an arrangement of the kind referred to, they would always be in doubt whether they were receiving everything to which they were entitled. In saying this, I make no reference to a class of very superior employés who, under a profit-sharing system, would receive large payments. Such men would have the intelligence to see it, and would be sure to take care that their interests were looked after in a way that would be satisfactory to themselves.