

## CHAPTER VIII

### WAGES AND HOURS

As we have seen in earlier chapters, about twenty-five years ago the clothing workers of this country inaugurated a series of strike movements. The most important outcome of these actions was the establishment of permanent and effective unions through which the workers in the various branches of the industry increased the size of their pay envelopes to the point where average weekly earnings of \$35 to \$60 during the season were not uncommon.

In the *dress trade* in the New York market, where the bulk of the manufacturing takes place, the strike of 1909, and the general activity which followed it, raised average wages in the industry nearly 150%. Within a ten-year period cutters raised their weekly averages, during the periods of employment, from \$25 to \$44; operators jumped from \$15 to \$40; pressers, \$20 to \$28; examiners, \$10 to \$22; finishers, \$8 to \$20; cleaners, \$6 to \$17. For these typical occupations the average increased from \$14 to \$30.62, or just under 119%. This ten-year period was marked by a sharp increase in the cost of living, but the rise in wages exceeded this increase.

In the *cloak and suit industry* average weekly earnings rose from \$10.50 in 1914 to \$21.40 in 1919 for the entire industry—organized as well as unorganized. The following table indicates the minimum scales established in the New York market as a result of activities in 1919 and the point to which these had risen by 1929:<sup>1</sup>

| CRAFT          | 1919    | 1929    |
|----------------|---------|---------|
| Operators      | \$44.00 | \$55.00 |
| Cutters        | 39.00   | 52.00   |
| Upper Pressers | 36.50   | 50.00   |
| Tailors        | 38.00   | 48.00   |
| Sample Makers  | 32.00   | 45.00   |
| Under Pressers | 32.00   | 46.00   |
| Finishers      | 35.50   | 46.00   |
| Examiners      | 30.00   | 50.00   |

It must be remembered that these were minimum scales. Actual earnings for most workers were considerably higher. A study made by an Advisory Commission, appointed by Governor Smith of New York State, revealed that, in 1925, 67% of the workers in the New York cloak and suit industry received wages in excess of the established minimum scales. The increase in dollar wages following 1919 was even more remarkable than for the period preceding, for after 1919 the cost of living began to decline.

In all occupations for the country as a whole the average weekly wage of *men's clothing* workers, according to the U. S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, rose from \$13.06 in 1914 to \$33.50 in 1924 and receded slightly to \$32.16 in 1928. In the latter year the average in New York was \$43.45 for men and \$23.83 for women.

All of the above figures represent wages when employed and do *not* mean, of course, a weekly average throughout the year. All clothing manufacturing is highly seasonal in nature. Thus, for example, the average weekly wage for the year ending May, 1928, in the Chicago men's clothing market was \$40 but the average *actual* annual earnings that year were \$1,563 which, distributed over 52 weeks, would reduce the weekly average to about \$30. Computed on the latter basis, annual averages in work clothing were approximately \$700 in 1929. In the same year shirt workers averaged \$737, cloth hats and cap workers \$1,320 and furriers \$2,116.

*Wages During the Crisis*

The capitalist crisis, which began in 1929, completely shattered these standards. Although never unduly high even in the best times if computed on an annual basis and considered in relation to the high cost of living, they constituted a "golden age" by comparison with what followed.

William N. Sherman, men's clothing manufacturer of Louisville, Ky., was only one of many who openly voiced the sentiments of the employers during this period. "The labor element," he publicly stated, "must be educated to understand the meaning of 'real' wages and to take its money losses. . . . It is time for the 'high wage hounds' to give up their foolish blood draining fight."<sup>2</sup>

Wages in the garment industry ordinarily constitute only about 15% of the price of a garment. But most other factors are either fixed or beyond employer control. Therefore, with employers vying with each other for a share of the rapidly dwindling market, labor costs became their chief target. And with labor constituting so small a portion of total costs, the cuts perforce were deep. A point was reached, where, according to investigators of the Women's Bureau of the U. S. Department of Labor who conducted a survey of the "sewing trades" of Connecticut, the total labor cost of making a \$10.75 dress was only 54 to 59 cents and the labor cost of making \$1.00 children's dresses was 13 cents. One Portland, Oregon, cloak manufacturer could boast in the fall of 1932 that "labor was the most insignificant item in his production budget."<sup>3</sup>

The ruthless wage cutting campaign after 1929 soon gained momentum. Work was diverted to shops in which sweat-shop conditions prevailed. Every wage cut whetted the employers' appetites for more and larger slashes. Production in "inside" shops almost came to a standstill, while among the contractors, piece work prices were virtually bottomless.

The established, old-line unions maintained the fiction during this entire period that old standards were being officially

continued, with only slight concessions. The Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America, dominating the field of men's clothing, adopted a policy of "individual adjustments" with employers and maintained the illusion of its continued control over standards. It merely made the modest admission that, "Our organizations in Chicago, Rochester and Cincinnati have been obliged to take a ten per cent wage cut,"<sup>4</sup> with individual special arrangements in New York and elsewhere. The International Ladies Garment Workers Union continued to carry articles in its publications bearing such headings as, "Cutters to get minimum of \$42 and \$35—Five day week."<sup>5</sup> The 1932 collective agreement in the New York dress trade established minimum hourly rates of \$1.10—on paper. In the cloak and suit industry, weekly official scales ran from \$23.50 to \$50 for the various crafts in the trade.

But such continued protection, as well as many other favorable clauses in the agreements, existed on paper only. In practice, employers, knowing that they had the starved workers at their mercy, conducted individual bargaining with the shops, forcing the organized workers into collusive deals. The situation became so bad that the workers openly scoffed at the unions' pretenses. To such an extent did this take place that the official organ of the Amalgamated was compelled to admit: "earnings of the average clothing worker have reached a point dangerously close to dependence on charity for any kind of living. There is nothing left in the workers' pay envelope that can yet be cut or reduced."<sup>6</sup> The I.L.G.W.U. had to make similar admissions such as: after 20-odd years of unionism, "Present wages of New York dressmakers have been reduced to such starvation levels that they would be considered sub-standard even prior to 1911."<sup>7</sup>

*Wage Cutting Methods*

A common method of deflating wage scales was for the employers merely to announce the fact to their workers on a "take it or leave it" basis. In describing one such cut handed

to the workers during the early months of 1933, the Cincinnati section of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers frankly admitted its helplessness. "The notice was placed on the bulletin board," the union leaders wrote in their official organ, "and they were made to like it. This makes four reductions that they have taken totaling 40%." This method was used especially in the contract market.

In most organized sections of the industry, however, the employers "dealt" with the unions and secured official sanction for their ruthless slashes. The trade press was full of articles bearing such headlines as "Union Confirms Cutters' \$5 Wage Reduction," "United Garment Workers Offers 20% Compromise Cut to Garment Makers," "I.L.G.W.U. Raincoat Workers in N. Y. Accept Wage Cut," "Philadelphia Clothing Workers Wages to be Cut 10%," "Wage Cut Reported Granted Union Made Garment Manufacturers," etc.

The response of the workers to their officials' acts was expressed in a letter from a worker which appeared in the October, 1932, issue of the *Needle Worker*, organ of the N.T.W.I.U. "Hillman gave a May-Day present to the Chicago Clothing Manufacturers, a 10 to 15 per cent cut in wages," wrote this tailor. "From Chicago, Mr. Hillman came to Rochester and told us workers that we will have no chance to get any work because the cost of production in Chicago is cheaper than in Rochester. Therefore the Rochester workers must also accept a wage cut. . . . It will not be an exaggeration to state that without the assistance of the Hillman machine the bosses would not succeed in putting over so many wage cuts. More wage cuts were put over in the men's clothing trade, which is supposed to be an 'organized' trade, than the open-shop manufacturers would dare to put over."

A more indirect wage-slashing device, also involving union collaboration, is the so-called "change in grade of work" or "change in line." Wage scales are not horizontally uniform for all workers within a given craft or occupation but vary for the same craft, depending upon the "quality" of the line

of work. In both men's and women's clothing practically every manufacturer has at one time or another requested union permission to work on "cheaper lines" with corresponding reductions in wage rates. The workers soon learned that the new "cheaper" garment was identical with the old one.

Aside from these devices, individual manufacturers resort to additional methods of "chiseling." Failure by the unions to enforce standards has resulted in varying scales—even among employers doing the same grade of work. As a result constant bargaining takes place. Prices are being adjusted constantly. Much of this is arranged between union officials and employers; some of it—when the latter have the workers at their mercy—is put over directly on the workers.

Still another slick method of wage cutting was devised by Amalgamated officials. In February, 1933, arrangements were entered into between this union and the firms of Hart, Schaffner & Marx, B. Kuppenheimer Co., and Alfred Decker & Cohn, who together disburse about 70% of the annual men's clothing payroll in the Chicago market, providing for unchanged wage rates but allowing the employers to withhold 20% of the workers' wages each week "as a loan."

This arrangement resulted in a deduction during 1933, by these three firms alone, of over a million dollars out of a total payroll of \$11½ million. But the plan did not stop with them alone. The *Daily News Record*<sup>8</sup> reported that "the union from time to time has come to the aid of manufacturers in individual cases with a similar plan whereby a group of workers contributed a portion of their wages." In May, 1933, the plan was officially extended to the Rochester market, in this case a "loan" of 15% being provided for.

So-called "impartial arbitrators" have also helped to compel the workers to hitch their belts a notch or two tighter. Many wage reductions have been granted by these gentlemen. The decision of Impartial Chairman Horace Stern in the Philadelphia men's clothing market is only one case in point. Stern awarded the employers a wage decision in the



name of an elusive phenomenon called "equalization of costs"—a pretext supposed to enable them to maintain a competitive position with other centers.

In spite of either tacit or open acquiescence in reduced rates by union officials, many employers decided to take advantage of the depression to break with unions entirely and operate non-union factories in centers far removed from union control—where wage rates were lower even than the drastically crippled scales in union shops. In the work clothing field, for example, two-thirds of the organized concerns withdrew union recognition in order to operate non-union shops and cut their labor costs. This proved to be a simple step, inasmuch as the United Garment Workers did not contest these moves and simply quit selling them the union label.

#### *Payrolls and Workers' Earnings*

Wage cuts and unemployment had combined to reduce the total payroll of the wearing apparel industry in December, 1933, to 40.3% of the 1923-25 average, as measured by the index numbers of the Federal Reserve Board. Figures published by the U. S. Bureau of Labor Statistics show that up to 1932, the drop in total payrolls was sharper in the men's clothing industry than in women's clothing. In 1933 (June) the payrolls for workers on women's clothing were down to 54% of their 1929 average as against about 41% of 1929 in the men's clothing industry. The payroll trends up to and including June, 1934, are shown in the following figures, taken from the Bureau of Labor Statistics indexes (Average 1923-1925 = 100):

#### JUNE PAYROLLS

|      | <i>Men's Clothing</i> | <i>Women's Clothing</i> |
|------|-----------------------|-------------------------|
| 1929 | 100.8                 | 133.1                   |
| 1930 | 76.1                  | 111.0                   |
| 1931 | 62.1                  | 99.0                    |
| 1932 | 29.3                  | 61.2                    |
| 1933 | 41.8                  | 56.6                    |
| 1934 | 54.6                  | 72.6                    |

With the decline in numbers employed, payrolls have, of course, fallen more sharply than the earnings of individual workers who still have jobs in the industry. How individual earnings had fallen since 1929 is seen from the following yearly averages computed from the *Census of Manufactures*:

|                          | 1929    | 1931   | 1933   |
|--------------------------|---------|--------|--------|
| Men's and boy's clothing | \$1,200 | \$ 943 | \$ 774 |
| Women's clothing         | 1,301   | 1,089  | 799    |
| Work clothing            | 698     | 616    | 472    |
| Shirts                   | 726     | 582    | 485    |
| Cloth hats and caps      | 1,321   | 1,145  | 732    |
| Furs                     | 2,116   | 2,006  | 1,401  |

Census and other data, upon which our figures are based, are for the most part compiled from the more stable and permanent establishments. But the bulk of production during this period was diverted to sub-standard and more elusive establishments—most of which are never reached by census forms or government labor department questionnaires. The real picture of wage conditions became much more tragic than that indicated by the figures cited above.

Testifying before a sub-committee of the U. S. Senate in February, 1933, Stephen Raushenbush, then Director of Industrial Relations of the State of Pennsylvania, demonstrated how far the wage collapse had actually proceeded. "There are sweatshops in Pennsylvania paying \$2 and \$3 for 54 hours work exactly as there are in Connecticut. The same situation prevails in New York. . . . The labor commissioners of New Hampshire, Rhode Island, New Jersey and Maryland, and other industrial States pointed out that exactly the same situation prevails there. The men's clothing industry in November, 1932, showed minors averaging \$3.31 a week, with 78 per cent getting under \$5 a week. The average for women was \$7.54 with 61.1 per cent getting under \$10 a week. Half the minors and women received less than \$3.31 and \$7.54 respectively. Nor is the \$3 wage the low level. Two days ago one of the factory inspectors came in

and informed me that in a factory not far from York, Pa., women were working and were getting \$1.08 a week."

In August, 1933, Frances Perkins, U. S. Secretary of Labor, made public the results of a comprehensive survey of conditions in the shirt industry of Massachusetts, New York, Pennsylvania, Delaware, Connecticut, New Jersey, Maryland, Missouri and Indiana. "Of the 18,378 women workers studied in nine states," the report stated, "only 10 per cent earned as much as \$12 a week, and 35 per cent earned less than \$6 a week."

#### *The Cost of Living*

To add to the ravages of collapsing wage scales, the cost of living began to mount steadily during 1933. Between December, 1932 and December, 1933, according to the figures of the U. S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, food increased in price 9.1%; clothing, 11.5%; fuel and light, 7.2%; house-furnishing goods, 11.6%.

In December, 1929, the Labor Bureau, Inc., in discussing workers' budgets showed that for the average sized family "no yearly earnings which fell below \$2,069 in any section of the country can be considered a living wage, since the total represents the lowest cost of the meager budget allowed by the government as the bottom level of health and decency."

Adjusting this figure to December, 1933, according to the cost of living index numbers of the U. S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, we find that the minimum amount essential for the preservation of ordinary health and decency in that month ranged from \$1,633 yearly in Schenectady, N. Y., to \$2,080 in San Francisco, California.

From what we have seen of needle trade wages following 1929 it is obvious that clothing workers had their incomes cut very considerably under this minimum figure and that wages decreased much faster than the slight fall in the cost of living.

Instances of workers in dire want while working are nu-

merous. The Consumers League of New York presented "ample evidence that charity is being relied upon to pay the difference between wages and what it costs to keep alive."<sup>9</sup> Or, as one employee of the Rhea Dress Manufacturing Co., of Milwaukee, Wis., told a public official of that city, "If I eat I can't pay my room rent. If I pay my room rent, I'll have nothing left to buy food with."<sup>10</sup> In Pennsylvania a legislative committee found "Montgomery and Chester counties and the nearby territory honeycombed with factories paying such ridiculously low wages that even full-time workers are forced to get assistance from the county relief agencies."<sup>11</sup>

A similar state of affairs was reported from virtually every section of the country. Of course in most cases public and private agencies refused to consider relief pleas from workers employed at starvation wages.

#### *The NIRA*

When industry and banking in the U. S. had come to a stalemate in the early months of 1933, American capitalism resorted to the National Industrial Recovery Act. When Roosevelt came to office, banks were closing in every state of the Union, clothing workers' wages were dropping to near-starvation levels, and 17 million workers were unemployed in the United States.

Under the NIRA, passed in June, 1933, codes were drawn up for the various needle industries. The following minimum wages were decreed:

*Men's clothing:* For unskilled labor, 40 cents an hour in the North and 37 cents an hour in the South; workers on single-knee pants and single pants, 37 cents an hour in North, and 34 cents an hour in South; cutters, \$1 per hour in North and 85 cents in the South; off-pressers, 75 cents an hour in the North and 60 cents an hour in the South. Maintenance of the existing amounts by which wages in the higher-paid crafts, up to those receiving \$30 a week, exceed wages of the lowest paid groups. Guarantee of minimum wages whether time or piece work.



*Cloaks and suits:* Rates so computed as to yield minimum wage scale for a full week's work as follows: coat and suit cutters, \$47; sample makers, \$40; examiners, \$36; drapers, \$29; bushelmen, \$36.

For other crafts, piece-work rates so computed as to yield minimum hourly rates varying from 60 cents an hour for skirt basters and finishers (the lowest groups) to \$1.30 hourly for machine pressers, with other occupational groups varying between these two.

These rates apply only in New York and Philadelphia. Manufacturers in other localities in the eastern area are permitted to pay a scale 10% lower. A further differential is provided for the western area, with rates in the latter region 15% lower than in the eastern.

In the New York and Philadelphia areas, women operators' scales are fixed at 10 cents an hour lower than those of men.

*Dress manufacturing:* In New York City, on higher priced garments, cutters \$45 a week, machine cutters \$37, stretchers \$27, sample makers, \$30, examiners \$21, cleaners and pinkers \$15, operators 90 cents an hour, pressers \$1 an hour, finishers 65 cents an hour. On lower priced garments in New York City: cutters \$45 a week, machine cutters \$37, stretchers \$27, sample makers \$30, examiners \$20, cleaners and pinkers \$15, operators 75 cents an hour, pressers 85 cents an hour, finishers 57 cents an hour.

In the eastern metropolitan area outside of New York City scales of 90% of the above rates, but pinkers and cleaners to get \$15. For the lower-priced garments in the eastern area, examiners to get \$17 instead of \$20 a week, operators 63 cents an hour, pressers 70 cents and finishers 50 cents an hour.

In the western area the minimum scale was set at 85% of the New York City low scale, except for cleaners and pinkers whose scale was set at \$14 a week.

*Cotton garments* (includes such items as work clothing, men's and boy's shirts, wash suits, pajamas, wash dresses and suits, cotton pants, etc.): Minimum rates of not less than \$12 a week in the southern section of the industry and \$13 a week in the northern section. Rates of \$14 a week for manufacturing employees, 45 cents an hour for operators and 75 cents an hour for short-knife cutters in the sheep-lined and leather garment division of the industry.

An amendment later fixed scales on pants and men's wash suits

at 34 cents an hour in the South and 37 cents an hour in the North.

*Cloth hats and caps:* 32½ cents minimum for any worker in the industry; 55 cents an hour minimum for cutters, blockers, operators and lining makers in the eastern area and 37½ cents for these crafts in the western area; 25 cents as hourly minimums for apprentices during the first six weeks of employment in the industry.

*Fur garments:* Minimum rates of 40 cents an hour; for cutters, operators, nailers and finishers graded scales running from \$50.60 to \$44 for first class and second class cutters respectively down to \$38.50 and \$30.80 for first class and second class finishers. This for "Area A," in which are most of the eastern states as well as for "Area B," defined as including the state of Illinois and the city of St. Louis. Specific rates, below these, are further enumerated for three additional areas. In the lowest paid area the scale provided is \$40.50 for first class and \$35.20 for second class cutters, graded down for the other enumerated crafts to \$30.80 for first class and \$24.60 for second class finishers.

It was emphasized that these were to be *minimum wages* and in no sense of the word maximum scales. The unionized sections of the trade immediately negotiated collective agreements on the basis of the codes.

The resulting scales varied, of course, in different centers throughout the country. In men's clothing, for example, raises varied from 10% in the shops of the New York Clothing Manufacturers Exchange to a flat 20% increase in the shops of the Single Knee Pants Manufacturers Association. In Cleveland the announced increase was 35%.

In the cloak industry piece-rate scales were promulgated on December 22, 1933, which were supposed to guarantee the code scales or higher. Guaranteed dressmakers' wages ranged from \$15 a week for cleaners to \$30 for sample-makers and \$45 for cutters with variations in many centers such as Chicago, where scales ranged between \$14 for cleaners and pinkers and \$39 for cutters, and St. Louis where the finishers and thread cutters' scale was set at \$12 and cutters at \$35.



The wage agreement announced between the United Garment Workers and the Union Made Garment Manufacturers' Association, embracing the field of work clothing, lifted the rate to \$32.50 a week for cutters and set the minimum scales at \$15, somewhat above the NRA code minimum of \$13 in the North and \$12 in the South.

Such scales looked well enough on paper. They even fooled many of the workers who expressed at least temporary enthusiasm. However, disillusionment was not far off. As we shall see, before many months had passed the new scales were being violated on all sides.

### Hours

Behind the question of hours in the needle trades lies a long story of struggle, defeats, victories.

Before 1910, the work week was in most shops officially set at 56 to 60 hours. Those shops in which 8 A.M. to 6 P.M. on week days and 8 A.M. to 5 P.M. on Saturdays, with half hour lunch periods, were the prevailing schedules were the best in the trade. In many of the "outside" shops 84 hours was the rule, in both men's and women's wear.

In point of fact, working hours during the "rush" seasons were indefinite. It was not uncommon to work 15 or 16 hours a day, beginning as early as 5 A.M., and workers frequently were even required to take bundles home with them when they left at nine or ten o'clock at night. Old workers in the trade will tell you how they often slept in the shops in order to save time and carfare.

The strike and unionization movements following 1910 resulted in a steady improvement in this state of affairs. Reductions to 56, 50, 49, 44, 42 and finally 40 hours are contained in the agreements covering most branches of the industry. By 1928, 40 hours a week had been won by the major crafts in the largest centers with 44 the rule in the less important areas and 48 prevailing in many factories manufacturing work clothing and other cotton garments. Obviously,

however, the actual enforcement of agreed hours of work depended upon the strength and policies of the local unions and in times when jobs were scarce the workers were compelled to work longer hours than their agreements permitted.

### *The Crisis and Working Hours*

This became particularly true about 1929 when all existing agreements were shattered. The bosses, seeking to get the most work possible out of the workers for the lowest wages, had cut pay in many instances to as low as \$1 a day. When the bottom had finally been reached where further cuts could not very well be effected, the employers began increasing the work hours. The I.L.G.W.U. was forced officially to admit that in the dress industry "although the contracts call for a work week of five days—a six day week is the rule rather than the exception and the hours of work are often unregulated and practically unlimited."<sup>12</sup> "People who know," wrote the *Daily News Record*,<sup>13</sup> "say there are garment manufacturing plants in New York City that work their help as much as 20 hours a day."

From all over the country during this period came official and unofficial reports of increases in the working hours. For example:

I work in a dress shop on Seventh Avenue near 37th St. [New York City]. . . . When it is busy the cutters work until nine and ten o'clock and also on Sunday. But when it is slow they are laid off. (*Young Worker*, August 1, 1932.)

Am writing in regards to a factory. It is the — shirt factory in Shelton [Conn.]. . . . They start work at 7:30 and work until 6 or 7, with the exception of Saturday, when they work until 4 o'clock. (*The Nation*, November 16, 1932.)

Such reports became general. The official survey of the "sewing trades" of Connecticut by the Women's Bureau of the U. S. Department of Labor disclosed instances of more than 70 hours work a week and some cases where "work has continued even through seven days of the week." The Kansas

City survey of the same governmental agency showed well over a fourth of the workers toiling more than 50 hours a week—some in excess of 60. The government's national investigation of the shirt industry in the summer of 1933 also revealed that 77% of all of the workers in the industry worked over 48 hours.

In New York the 50 and 60 hour week again came into its own. The Pennsylvania Department of Labor and Industry revealed that in the clothing industry of that state, "The customary plant hours reported for the last week in October [1932] were 50 or more a week for two-thirds of the women and nearly as large a proportion of the men." Some even worked "60 and over."

Professor Hollander's report on conditions in men's clothing factories, already referred to, pointed out that "In much of the Baltimore industry there are no regular hours and no extra pay for overtime. During the busy season employees frequently work 65 hours per week." The West Virginia House of Delegates passed a resolution in March, 1933, to investigate conditions in garment factories of that state when reports became public that workers were being forced to labor "10 to 15 hours a day at very low and inadequate wages."<sup>14</sup> In the Piedmont section of the South, 55, 60, 65 hours a week prevailed.<sup>15</sup>

#### *Hours in the NRA Codes*

With widespread publicity the National Industrial Recovery Act announced its determination to end such practices once and for all. The "New Deal" for the worker was to give him "guaranteed leisure" and all of the codes contained clauses fixing maximum hours.

The men's clothing code decreed that those employed in the shops might not work more than 36 hours a week or eight hours a day; with provision for overtime only in shops "tailoring to the trade" or manufacturing uniforms. The cloak and suit code provided for a maximum of 35 working

hours weekly, divided into five working days with no overtime except that "the Administrator may grant an extension of hours in the busy season when and if, in his judgment, labor in the industry is fully employed." The dress code similarly fixed a five day workweek maximum of 35 hours. The codes of the cotton garment industry set an eight hour day maximum and a 36 hour week and the cloth hat and cap code an eight hour day and 40 hour week. The fur code decreed a maximum seven hour working day and 35 hour week with no overtime allowed except by special permission of the Code Authority, which might grant overtime up to a maximum of ten hours per week for eight weeks a year.

#### *Actual Wages and Hours Under the NRA*

For several months after the adoption of the NRA codes, and the new labor agreements which followed, many workers found their wages substantially increased and their hours reduced to the legal maximums.

Then came a breakdown in standards. By the summer of 1934 all of these illusions were shattered. The revived and improved conditions were being systematically taken away by the bosses while the union officials put up no effective resistance. Minimum scales began to collapse, except in a small percentage of the shops. Only the lowest paid and unskilled workers were still paid according to the code minimum.

For many crafts "scientific schedules" of piece rates were promulgated, supposed to guarantee to the worker of average speed the code minimums. These schedules were largely Chinese puzzles to the workers. All that they realized was that even though paid the proper piece rates they could not earn the established minimum weekly scales. One case was called to the writer's attention of a St. Louis cotton garment plant employing over 200 workers of whom 70% fell below the "minimum" wage by from one to six dollars weekly.

A considerable amount of "chiseling" was done in connec-



tion with the "learner's" provision of some codes. The Cotton Garment Code, for example, provided that the number of learners in any one plant "shall not exceed 10 per cent of the total number of manufacturing employees in said plant," and that "any member of the industry may apply to the Code Authority for a modification of this provision, and upon showing of extreme hardship they may grant such modification." Other codes had varying provisions for this group of workers.

These provisions were circumvented in various ways. Exemptions, as provided for above, were applied for and obtained. Often learners were fired after six weeks and a new group hired, in order to avoid paying the former the full scale. Some plants kept a padded number of names on the payroll. This enabled them to hire an additional number of learners on the basis of the size of the staff theoretically employed. Full production schedules were required from those taken on in this capacity.

In December, 1934, the U. S. Women's Bureau revealed that in an investigation of workers in 70 Pennsylvania cotton garment plants, two out of three "learners" questioned had over the maximum allowable six weeks' experience. They even discovered a worker with 12 years' experience who was listed on the firm's records as a "learner."<sup>16</sup>

It was openly charged that in the southern needle trades it "would require more than 50 inspectors in the field all the time. Some say there ought to be over 100, if the policing is to be effective. As it is, they say, their understanding is that about three men will be doing the policing." As a result, "there is a great deal of chiseling going on."<sup>17</sup> In Maryland and Pennsylvania, many who did not earn the minimum scales were signing for 30 hours for every 40 worked—in order that it might appear on paper that they were earning the prescribed minimum hourly rates.<sup>18</sup> Among the Negro needle workers of Chicago, hours were being worked in excess of the maximum and the "minimum wage is being sys-

tematically whittled down with or without pretext."<sup>19</sup> In many leading centers workers were compelled to "take home some unfinished work to complete after factory hours."<sup>20</sup>

Long before the Supreme Court declared the Recovery Act unconstitutional, evidence began to pile up of either complete disregard of the codes or of "legal" evasions. For example, many dress firms manufacturing low-priced garments were using cotton fabrics exclusively and operating under the cotton garment code, with its lower wage levels, instead of under the dress code, where they actually belonged. Work pants, likewise, were put under the cotton garment code, instead of being classed as men's clothing. Western dress manufacturers obtained an amendment to the dress code granting them a wage differential of 30% and 40% below their competitors in the East.

A meeting of the fact-finding commission which gathered data on the coat and suit industry for the Recovery Administration was held in Cleveland on May 31, 1934. There it was publicly charged that "the code has done nothing to reduce the chiseling in the industry, that the code is not conscientiously enforced in the East; that the recent grading system established for wages in New York is unworkable."<sup>21</sup> Such charges were confirmed by many cases. For example, the Perfect Coat & Suit Co., a \$125,000 firm of Camden, N. J., was exposed in a Federal Court as paying a certain group of its employees 47 cents an hour instead of the code's minimum of 81 cents for that particular category of workers. Similarly, it was revealed that the Paramount Tailoring Co., Passaic, N. J., had paid its workers "only half the minimum NRA code wages and had obtained affidavits from them that they had received the full minimum. . . . They had received \$13 to \$14 a week instead of the minimum of about \$28."<sup>22</sup>

When investigators for the New York division of the NRA decided on May 10, 1934, to "check up" through a series of "raids" in the city's garment district, they affected surprise at finding wholesale violations. "The investigators have dis-

covered a number of tricks by which employers manage to cut wages while at the same time attempting to present the appearance of full compliance with code regulations," reported the *New York Times* the following morning. Among these were: "Hiring experienced workers at the wages of apprentices; deducting part of the wages as dues for so-called 'beneficial projects'; 'punching out' employees on the time clocks at 4:30 P.M., the regulation closing hour, only to have them return to work immediately afterward; and contracting outside work at code prices and then forcing the contractors to take a much lower price when the work has been finished."

*Women's Wear*, on May 11, 1934, disclosed that up to that date the Dress Code Authority had received complaints of hours and wage violations against 974 dress shops. Undoubtedly these involved at least 30,000 dressmakers. The Code Authority admitted that they found 318 firms violating the code. They still had 656 pending complaints.

In the dress, cloak and suit, and men's clothing industries, manufacturers began slashing scales by "lowering their price lines" in order to get the benefit of lower scales provided for in the agreements for "cheaper grades of work."

It was admitted by men's clothing union officials that in the production of what they term "Class I garments" in the New York market, with the exception of cutters and pressers, "earnings covered only 29 weeks out of 52 . . . and that the average was 35 or 36 cents an hour."<sup>23</sup> There were wide regions of the country where "the minimum wage has apparently become the maximum wage"<sup>24</sup>—an actual wage cut below the pre-NRA era.

At the convention of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers held in Rochester during May, 1934, the lid was ripped off the hypocrisy surrounding NRA accomplishments and the discontent of the masses was expressed. In spite of every effort of the officialdom of the union to gloss over such embarrassing revelations, rank and file delegates rose to tell

"tales of privation, chiseling, code violations and wholesale unemployment in union shops." The complaints were many and included most of the schemes and tactics we have mentioned.<sup>25</sup>

Typical of the general picture of the needle trades throughout the country during the NRA period was the situation in Boston and vicinity described by the New England Labor Research Association in their bulletin of June, 1934. The report read, in part, as follows:

In the men's clothing trade . . . wages above the minimum have been reduced; workers have been reclassified and fired and rehired at the minimum price. Maximum hour limitations are evaded by working after punching the time clock and the double card system. . . . Bosses sign the code but keep on paying workers \$6 and \$7 a week for 9 to 10 hours work a day. Workers are afraid to complain lest they be fired immediately. . . .

Both in the dress and cloak industry employers find many ways of not paying workers even the minimum wage established by the code. Workers who should be getting a minimum wage of \$23 "sweat their blood away," as one woman put it, and only get \$15. Tremendous speed-up is used and the "race horses" or those earning more than the minimum are retained. Workers not doing enough work to earn the minimum are fired or else put into the "subnormal" class and paid \$5 or \$6 a week. This is affecting 65% of the workers in the industry. . . .

The furriers' code, in the words of the union organizer, has done the workers "no damn good" . . . wages above the minimum have been reduced and workers have been reclassified. Maximum hour limitations are evaded by working before and after punching the time clock. Nothing is being done about the many complaints that are sent to Washington.\*

The same type of evidence comes also from various employer sources. The Board of Directors of the United Association of Dress Manufacturers, representing dress contractors, on March 12, 1934, indicted the National Dress Manufacturers Association, representing the dress jobbers

\* It is important to note that Boston was one of the few fur markets still under the control of the right-wing.



and manufacturers, before "The Court of Public Opinion" on the ground that "the jobbers are willfully and selfishly, to the detriment and loss of all the contractors and workers, sabotaging the collective agreements. . . . Standards have collapsed in all branches of the dress industry . . . [and] violations of wage scales, hours of work and sanitary conditions are legion." In the shirt industry the contractors have testified before the Code Authority to the effect that, "Not only shirt contractors but contractors generally coming within the scope of the Cotton Garment Code Authority have been flagrant violators of that code . . . 85 per cent of the contractors have been violators."<sup>20</sup>

It was evident, as reports came in from all directions, that the NRA failed to benefit workers generally in the needle trades. And now the NRA has been declared unconstitutional by the U. S. Supreme Court, thus abolishing even the pretense at regulation. The men and women who toil in the needle trades have learned that only through their own organized militancy can they effectively improve their conditions.