

WORKING-CLASS ATTITUDES TO SOCIAL REFORM: BLACK COUNTRY CHAINMAKERS AND ANTI-SWEATING LEGISLATION, 1880-1930

SUMMARY: Historians have recently paid serious attention to the roles of working-class groups in the creation of British social policy, but have largely ignored involvement by sweated workers. This article reveals among chainmakers long-run campaigns against sweating – successively demanding state action to abolish domestic workshops, regulate hours, restrict female work, fix rates for the job, and institute co-operative production. Failure in these campaigns led, with major initiatives from female workers, to advocacy of a statutory minimum wage. The Trade Boards Act (1909) reflected such pressures for state aid, though the form the legislation took brought only limited benefits.

In recent years, the role of the working-class in the making of British social policy has been the subject of much debate. Prior to 1968, it was confidently assumed that the rise of labour and the enfranchisement of the working-class were intimately connected with the development of social policy. Sidney Webb's famous assertion that political democracy would inevitably lead to collectivism was generally held to be self-evident.¹ In the late 1950s, not surprisingly, John Saville, although he referred to businessmen's desire for an efficient labour force, nevertheless stressed how the British Welfare State was largely the product of working-class pressure. According to Saville, "the pace and tempo of social reform have been determined by the struggle of working-class groups and organisations . . ." ² Similarly in 1967, Arthur Marwick castigated those scholars who under-estimated the Labour Party's historic contribution to social policy.³ Even Bentley Gilbert, who insisted that social reform was not an electoral issue before 1914, nevertheless linked middle class acceptance of social reform to suspicion and fear of the lower classes.⁴

In 1968, however, Henry Pelling argued that the British working-class, far from supporting social reform, were actually hostile to it. The workers, he maintained, associated state intervention with the police, the Poor Law,

¹ Sidney Webb before the Royal Commission on Labour. Cited in J.R. Hay, *The Development of the British Welfare State* (London, 1978), p. 14.

² J. Saville, "The Welfare State: An Historical Approach", *New Reasoner*, I (1957-8), p. 6.

³ See A. Marwick, "The Labour Party and the Welfare State in Britain, 1900-48", *American Historical Review*, LXXIII (1967), p. 403.

⁴ B. Bentley Gilbert, *The Evolution of National Insurance in Great Britain. The Origins of the Welfare State* (London, 1966), pp. 13, 448-450.

and with unwelcome compulsion in the areas of education and housing. They viewed the state as an organisation run by and in the interests of the rich. The result was that working-class pressure for social reform was politically negligible before the First World War. As Pelling commented:

The members of the working-class as a whole, cynical about the character of society as they knew it, were yet fearful of change which they thought would more likely be for the worse than the better. They advanced into the twentieth century with little expectation of social improvement being engineered by political means, and none at all of the "Welfare State" as we know it today.⁵

More recent studies, however, have stressed how working-class opinions on welfare were a good deal more intricate and ambivalent than was commonly supposed.⁶ Eric Hobsbawm, for instance, has suggested that, whilst the skilled working-class was interested in social reform, the poorly organised and sweated, those at the bottom of the social ladder, were not.⁷ As J.R. Hay commented:

Hobsbawm feels that Pelling's hypothesis might apply to the "ordinary, unskilled, uneducated and unorganised masses", but that it is misleading if applied to the organised labour movement.⁸

Similarly, Pat Thane has shown in her research that a wide range of views existed as to the feasibility of welfare reform. Whilst the working-class welcomed some reforms, they also rejected those measures which were deemed either inquisitorial or involved bureaucratic form filling.⁹ More specifically, in relation to pensions, Thane points out that, throughout the 1880s and 1890s, the labour movement was considerably divided over this issue. Some opposed state pensions entirely on the grounds that they would under-mine labour and perpetuate existing inequalities; others considered pensions to be a beneficial means of alleviating poverty. Still others saw

⁵ H. Pelling, "The Working Class and the Origins of the Welfare State", in Pelling (ed.), *Popular Politics and Society in Late Victorian Britain* (London, 2nd edn. 1979), p. 18.

⁶ See, for example, J. Hinton, *The First Shop Stewards' Movement* (London, 1973), pp. 23-55; J. Harris, "Did British Workers Want the Welfare State? G.D.H. Cole's survey of 1942" in J. Winter (ed.), *The Working Class in Modern British History* (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 200-214; N. Whiteside, "Welfare Legislation and the Unions During the First World War", *Historical Journal*, XXIII (1980), pp. 857-874.

⁷ Oral contribution to 1975 Labour History Conference on state welfare. For conference report, see *Bulletin of the Society for the Study of Labour History*, XXXI (1975), pp. 6-11.

⁸ J.R. Hay, *The Origins of the Liberal Welfare Reforms, 1906-14* (London, 1975), p. 26.

⁹ P. Thane, "The Working Class and State 'Welfare' in Britain, 1880-1914", *Historical Journal*, XXVII (1984), pp. 877-900.

pensions as a palliative, an excuse for not paying higher wages to enable working men to retain their independence.¹⁰

Recent interpretations of working-class attitudes have, however, one major weakness. Although they are undoubtedly correct to stress that the working-class was not a homogenous group with uniform views, they either ignore unskilled and sweated workers or, like Hobsbawm, make judgements which are far too premature. The truth is that we do not know what the very poor thought about social reform. As Thane remarks, it is "difficult and perhaps presumptuous to try to estimate the views of the mass of the unorganised and 'voiceless' . . ."¹¹ Nevertheless, despite the problems, the effort needs to be made. In particular, it is time that the activities and motives of the sweated were investigated.

This article argues that, notwithstanding the growing literature on sweating, the existing studies either do not focus on social policy formation (as instanced by Stedman Jones, Bythell and Schmiechen) or, as in the case of Morris, concentrate on employers' activities.¹² The present article maintains that, if we are ever to reveal what the sweated thought about social policy, more research is required on both a regional and occupational level. Only then will we be able to understand the precise context in which social policy proposals were either supported or rejected by different groups of workers divided by skill, geography and gender.

The article takes the example of sweated workers in Black Country chainmaking and their struggle to solve sweating in their trade culminating in the 1909 Trade Boards Act. This latter piece of legislation was the New Liberal Government's answer to the persistent problem of low pay, and provided for boards comprising representatives of the employers and workers in an industry, together with independent members. The boards were empowered to fix legal minimum wage rates and applied, initially, to four trades: tailoring, paper-boxmaking, machine-made lace finishing and domestic chainmaking.

The chain trade was a highly localised industry primarily concentrated in the town of Cradley Heath, South Staffordshire. In contrast to the other, more widely dispersed trade board industries, the impact of sweating, the reaction of trade unions to the sweating problem and the effects of the trade board on this small community are readily apparent. Moreover, although

¹⁰ P. Thane, "Non-Contributory Versus Insurance Pensions, 1878-1908", in Thane (ed.), *The Origins of British Social Policy* (London, 1978), p. 95.

¹¹ P. Thane, "The Working Class and State 'Welfare', 1880-1914", *Bulletin of the Society for the Study of Labour History*, XXXI (1975), p. 8.

¹² See G. Stedman Jones, *Outcast London* (Oxford, 1979); D. Bythell, *The Sweated Trades* (London, 1978); J.A. Schmiechen, *Sweated Industries and Sweated Labour. The London Clothing Trades, 1860-1914* (London, 1984), and J. Morris, *Women Workers and the Sweated Trades* (Aldershot, 1986).

the male chainmakers were sweated, they nevertheless possessed some trade union organisation, albeit of a very tenuous nature. Additionally, from the 1880s, they were considerably involved in campaigning for state reform of sweating in their trade. Yet, like their skilled and better organised counterparts, the male chain trade unionists were ambivalent about what they saw as acceptable legislation. Although the male chainmakers substantially understood the underlying causes of sweating in their trade, they accepted laissez-faire ideology because they were unable to articulate a persuasive critique of orthodox economics. They also found it very difficult to break away from their traditional Liberalism to recommend legal control of low pay.

The article discusses the remedies which the chain trade unionists, between 1886 and 1905, advocated in order to try and combat sweating. It also indicates that the solutions which the chainmakers demanded were not without their defects. The chainmakers, it will be submitted, instead of advocating state control of low pay chose, initially, to recommend palliatives, proposals which did not really touch low wages, the crux of sweating. It was only after 1905, when they finally acknowledged that their proposed solutions were inadequate, that the chainmakers seriously began to campaign for state control of low pay. By then, shifts in economic and social thought had provided a new ideology concerning state intervention in the wages bargain. A legal minimum wage had become acceptable, not only to the chainmakers, but to the business community and the nation as a whole.

The article concludes that the 1909 Trade Boards Act can be attributed to labour pressure, as evidenced by a case study of the Black Country chainmakers. However, the act cannot simply be interpreted as a direct or sole result of labour's demands. The responses of the chainmakers to minimum wage legislation, for instance, predictably varied over time, and the act also owed much to the initiatives of employers. The legislation, too, was far from being a complete labour victory, and was granted very much on Liberal Party terms. Indeed, it contained many controls and restrictions placed upon it by Board of Trade administrators. Hence, after 1909, although the chainmakers continued to support trade boards, they stressed their inadequacy and pressed for improvements to achieve further gains.

I

In order fully to comprehend the role which the chainmakers played in the anti-sweating movement, it is essential at the outset to outline the nature of the chain trade, and to delineate the types of workers and unions in the industry. Chainmaking was a product of Black Country industrialisation, and was largely centred in Cradley Heath and district, situated about five miles to the west of Birmingham. Before the First World War, this region

had a virtual world monopoly of the product. Despite her significance to the British economy, however, this small community was a by-word for sweated labour and for the oppression of womenhood.

The trade, itself, was divided into two branches, a well paid, highly organised and skilled sector based in factories, and a sweated branch located in domestic workshops. Whilst factory chainmakers were male and mainly produced large chains and cables, the sweated workers were predominantly female, and were chiefly engaged upon smaller, lighter chains such as cow ties, horse traces and gate chains. This domestic sector, however, was not an anachronism, a relic from the industrial past. It continued to expand until the early twentieth century, and served the needs of a mature economy not through mechanisation, but through the exploitation of casual labour.¹³ The chief symptoms of this exploitation or sweating in domestic chainmaking were long hours, poor working conditions and, above all, low pay.

Wages were low within domestic chainmaking for two interrelated reasons. Firstly, the freedom of access into domestic chainmaking caused an over-supply of labour, a “reserve army” competing for work which led to barely sufficient piece rates for the workers. Domestic chainmaking was easy to enter because of the minimum of skill required, and the almost complete lack of apprenticeship qualifications. Initially, there was the problem of children’s employment. Prior to the more stringent application of the Education Acts, children, to the chagrin of the workshop inspectorate, were extensively engaged in the chain trade and worked long hours.¹⁴ Even after 1870, there is substantial evidence to show that the Education Acts continued to be evaded.¹⁵

There was also the greater problem of the over-supply of adult labour within domestic chainmaking, particularly that of women. In Cradley Heath and district, until the First World War, few alternatives to chainmaking were open to females, apart from the conventional one of domestic service – an occupation intensely disliked by girls in the region.¹⁶ Once they had entered the trade, the women stayed, since not only did they lack

¹³ The over-riding principle in the study by Bythell, for instance, is to emphasize the so-called transition from the “antiquated” domestic system to the “progressive” factory. He fails to realize that many domestic industries, in fact, expanded to serve the needs of industrialization. See Bythell, *Sweated Trades*, passim.

¹⁴ Select Committee on the Sweating System (hereafter S.C.S.S.), *Third Report*, (P.P. 1889, XIII), QQ. 17, 645-7. See also R.H. Tawney, *The Establishment of Minimum Rates in the Chainmaking Industry Under the Trade Boards Act of 1909* (London, 1914), p. 14.

¹⁵ E. Orme, “The Employment of Women”, *Royal Commission on Labour* (hereafter R.C.L.), (P.P. 1892, XXXVI, Pt. 1), p. 574. See also, J.J. Mallon, “Chains and Slavery. A Note on Cradley Heath”, *Labour Leader*, 23 Sept. 1910.

¹⁶ *County Advertiser for Staffordshire and Worcestershire* (hereafter C.A.), 5 Aug. 1905. See, also, S.C.S.S., *Third Report* (P.P. 1889, XIII), QQ. 22, 267-8.

opportunities and skill for other work, but migration away from the Black Country was virtually impossible. Until the advent of cheap urban transport travel, even to Birmingham, the nearest large city, was too expensive.¹⁷ Unable to read or write, moreover, the majority of female chainmakers were ill-equipped to seek other employment, and a day from work to investigate the possibilities meant the difference between a week of subsistence and starvation.¹⁸

In addition to the problem of female and child labour, there was a continuous stream of labour into chainmaking from the declining local industries, namely the miners and the puddlers. The employment of both these groups of workers was subject to violent fluctuations, and the Black Country practice of sharing work out, instead of laying workers off, meant that the men had plenty of opportunity to encroach upon the chain trade to supplement their wages. This ability of the miners and puddlers, when partially employed, to turn to chainmaking was greatly facilitated by the fact that the majority of those born in the district had been taught, when young, the art of chainmaking.¹⁹ More significantly, many female chainmakers were the wives of miners and puddlers and, thus, the domestic workshop and requisite equipment were near at hand.²⁰ In the same way, those like white stone getters, disabled at an early age by lung disease, entered chainmaking, lost their old craft skills, and were forced to remain in their adoptive trade.²¹ In essence, as Alan Fox points out, domestic industries like the chain trade were a form of outdoor relief, whereby workers were able to avoid outright starvation by earning the minimum to keep body and soul together.²² Virtually anyone could turn their hands to chain manufacture, and this chance to earn a meagre wage, even during severe depression, by simply applying to the middleman for employment, intensified the already over-stocked labour market.

The large supply of labour competing for work within the domestic chainmaking sector, however, was only one cause of low wages. The second crucial factor was the domestic chainmakers' lack of bargaining vis à vis the middleman. Owing to the small amount of capital needed to establish a workshop or warehouse, the numbers of middlemen in the trade had

¹⁷ See summary report of enquiries made in Cradley Heath, Public Record Office (hereafter P.R.O.), LAB2/LTB 119/8/1925.

¹⁸ For illiteracy amongst the chainmakers, see *R.C.L.*, (P.P. 1892, XXXVI, Pt.1), QQ. 17,253; 17,273-5.

¹⁹ Tawney, *Chainmaking*, p. 50.

²⁰ *County Express for Worcestershire and Staffordshire* (hereafter *C.E.*), 22 Sept. 1910; 11 Dec. 1911.

²¹ See *Report of the Chief Inspector of Factories and Workshops for the Half Year Ending, 31 Oct. 1968* (P.P. 1868, XIV), p. 296.

²² A. Fox, "Industrial Relations in Birmingham and the Black Country, 1860-1914" (unpublished B. Litt. thesis, University of Oxford, 1952), p. 218.

expanded out of all proportion to the needs of the industry. The competition between the middle people was so keen that they were often tempted to take orders for chain that could not be profitable unless wages were beaten down. Since these middlemen occupied a unique position, standing between the worker and the market price, the wage earner was ignorant of the amount the middlemen received from the manufacturer, and was thus obliged to bargain individually and in the dark. Each worker, therefore, could be separately persuaded to accept low rates by the middleman. Of necessity, the chainmakers were obliged to take whatever they were offered to gain work, and were thus pitted one against the other.²³ Poverty, in fact, meant that the workers could only exert intermittent pressure on their employers. The constant force needed to maintain wage rates was beyond their financial ability.

Despite these handicaps, though, trade unionism amongst the domestic chainmakers was not unknown, but it was always weak. Between 1886 and 1905, there were three principal unions connected with the domestic chainmakers of Cradley Heath – the Cradley Heath and District Chainmakers' Society, the Midland Counties Trade Federation (M.C.T.F.), and the National Amalgamation of Chainmakers and Chainstrikers. The first of these, the Cradley Heath and District Chainmakers' Society, was the oldest, having been in existence from at least the late 1850s.²⁴ During its early years, the secretary to this society had been Noah Forrest, who was succeeded in 1886 by Thomas Homer. The other two domestic chainmakers' associations were later developments. The M.C.T.F. was founded in 1886 by Richard Juggins, a boltmaker who served as its first secretary from 1886 until his death in 1895. The aim of the Federation was to embrace as large a number of the craftsmen in the small metal trades as possible, in order to redress the balance between employers and small isolated groups of workers.²⁵ Finally, the National Amalgamation of Chainmakers and Chainstrikers was founded in 1889. This was an umbrella organisation embracing all chainmakers' associations, whether factory or domestic workshop based, with the purpose of raising funds for mutual support.²⁶ By 1893, however, the well organised factory workers who were enrolled in the

²³ S.C.S.S., *Third Report (P.P. 1889, XIII), Q. 17,946.*

²⁴ See N. Forrest, "The Chain and Tracemakers of Cradley Heath and its Vicinity and their employers; or Union and Disunion, and their Consequences", in *Transactions of the National Association for the Promotion of Social Science* (1859), pp. 654-655.

²⁵ E. Taylor, "The Midland Counties Trades Federation, 1886-1914", *Midland History*, 1 (1972), p. 32. See also, J.A.C. Baker, "Richard Juggins and Black Country Unionism in the Late Nineteenth Century", *Transactions of the Litchfield and South Staffordshire Archeological and History Society*, IX (1967-8), p. 71.

²⁶ C.A., 10 May 1890. See also, E. Taylor, "A Craft Society in the Age of General Unions. The Chainmakers' and Strikers' Association of Saltney, Pontypridd and Staffordshire, 1889-1914", *West Midland Studies*, V (1972), p. 29.

Chainmakers' and Chainstrikers' Association, finding the domestic chain-makers a drain on their funds, withdrew their support from the Amalgamation. Although subsequent attempts were made to revive the philosophy of the Amalgamation, they did not amount to very much, and its secretary, James Smith, eventually replaced the ageing Thomas Homer as secretary of the Cradley Heath and District Chainmakers' Association.²⁷

Prior to the 1880s, the Cradley Heath and District Chainmakers' Society, in order to rid the trade of sweating, had followed aggressive remedies, particularly rattening (which mainly took the form of bellows cutting, or occasionally, at the height of a protracted strike, the gunpowdering of offending chainshops).²⁸ From the mid-1880s, under the influence of the M.C.T.F. and the Amalgamation, however, the Society turned to more respectable tactics. Although the M.C.T.F. and the Amalgamation had both been born in an age of general unions, they were craft conscious, Liberal in politics and cautious in outlook.²⁹ Yet, despite their "old trade" union psychology, they were prepared to flirt with Socialists like Annie Besant and H.M. Hyndman, in order to curb sweating, and were finally persuaded to campaign for legislative solutions to the problem.³⁰ Indeed, the very weakness of their industrial position made such actions necessary.

But until the turn of the century, the male chain trade unionists could not bring themselves to break entirely with orthodox political economy. They knew only too well that the problem of sweating in their trade was one of low pay, yet rather than recommending the legal control of such wages, they suggested remedies which were already well worn. This was not altogether surprising considering the establishment's belief, at the time, that intervention in the wages contract would be disastrous for the British economy. Indeed, there was no sphere of economic life in which it was considered more vital to allow economic forces unrestrained freedom than in the settlement of wages. In this respect, the chainmakers had learnt a hard lesson from bitter experience. On the one occasion, for instance, in 1889, when the chainmakers had hesitantly proposed a legal minimum wage

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *C.A.*, 11 Sept. 1869; 2 Oct. 1869.

²⁹ The senior partner in the Amalgamation, the Chainmakers' and Strikers' Association, eschewed strikes, conserved its funds and remained ambivalent towards the growth of the Labour Party. The Association reached its peak of just over 2,000 members in 1922. By 1939, its membership had slumped to 1,000. The M.C.T.F. shared the Chainmakers' and Strikers' attitude towards strikes and politics. This society reached its zenith of 19,500 members in 1900 and, by the late 1930s, had become increasingly insignificant in the industrial life of the Black Country (see Taylor, "A Craft Society", pp. 30-31, and Taylor, "The Midland Counties Trades Federation", pp. 32-39).

³⁰ For Mrs Besant's activities in Cradley Heath, see Baker, "Richard Juggins", p. 71, and T. Besterman, *Mrs Annie Besant* (London, 1934), p. 125. H.M. Hyndman, leader of the Social Democratic Federation attended several chainmakers' meetings. See *C.A.*, 28 March 1885.

for their industry, it was made plain to them that Parliament viewed state control of low pay as ridiculous.³¹ Unable to mount a coherent critique of the existing system, and anxious not to be seen as subversive, the chainmakers and their leaders, not unnaturally, restricted themselves to less ambitious proposals.

As a result of this reluctance, the male chain trade unionists' solutions to the problems of sweating during the period 1886-1905 were, predictably, neither new nor revolutionary. Primarily, the chain trade unionists desired to abolish the domestic workshop as a productive unit, and to replace it with factory manufacture. This was to be achieved either directly through co-operative production, or indirectly by legally regulating the domestic workshops so that they would cease to be advantageous to the masters, thus encouraging the latter to centre production in the factories. The legal restrictions were twofold: the registration of domestic workshops, and uniform hours within the chainshops. Alternatively, the male chain trade unionists hoped to reform sweating from within the domestic workshop sector through boards of conciliation, "particulars notes" and through the abolition or restriction of female labour. Let us deal with these proposals in turn.

The male chain trade unionists supported co-operative factory production because they believed that it would do away with the middlemen, get rid of the individual bargaining, curb the fierce competition for work amongst the operatives, and thereby raise the wage rates. As Richard Juggins pointed out in 1889 ". . . the competition is greatest [sic] amongst the domestic workshops than it is in the factories. It is not at all carried on in factories, but is carried on to an alarming extent in the domestic workshops."³² John Lincoln Mahon, a Socialist, a practical engineer and an adviser to the chainmakers, described to the S.C.S.S. how the scheme was to be implemented in Cradley Heath. Parliament was to intervene and create a local board of management elected by the chainmakers. This board was to be composed of practical working chainmakers with power to co-opt on to it men with commercial experience. Once the board had been established, the State was then to advance capital, up to £ 20,000, in order to construct factories and to establish agencies for carrying out the manufacture and sale of chain. Ultimately, the intention was to transfer the shares to the workers. For security, Mahon intimated, the State would have a claim upon the stock and buildings and, if the scheme failed, the government would have forfeited only a few thousand pounds.³³

³¹ S.C.S.S., *Third Report* (P.P. 1889, XIII), QQ. 18,090-2. Significantly, even in 1897, the Webbs thought the recommendation of a minimum wage an advanced proposition. See, S. and B. Webb, *Industrial Democracy*, II (London, 1897), p. 774.

³² S.C.S.S., *Third Report* (P.P. 1889, XIII), Q. 17,946.

³³ *Ibid.*, QQ. 21,636-769.

Short of co-operative factories, the male chain trade unionists were also prepared to accept alternative remedies which they believed would gradually lead to the extinction of the domestic workshops, namely the registration and uniformity of hours within the chainshops. Juggins explained to the Sweating Committee how registration of the domestic workshops would bring them under greater supervision by the factory and sanitary inspectorate. As it was, the authorities had no means of locating the shops since they were so numerous, and very often the only access to them was through the dwelling place.³⁴ He also told the Royal Commission on Labour that these home workshops were situated down alleys or courts and were almost impossible to find for inspection. Even the more conspicuous shops, moreover, could expect to be visited only once every year, since priority was given to the inspection of factories.³⁵

The second popular legal restriction was that of enforcing uniform or factory hours of work within the chainshops, so that they all, even family workshops, commenced at the same hour. Thomas Homer, President of the domestic chainmakers' society, explained to the S.C.S.S. why his union wanted the State to regulate the domestic chainmakers' hours. He described how voluntary agreements amongst the outworkers had persistently broken down. Several meetings had been held, and men sent round to see whether the shops were closed after an agreed time, but as soon as one worker violated the agreement, the rest quickly followed suit. Homer especially favoured uniform working hours for females, since very often their husbands, after working at another occupation, would make chain in the domestic workshops until nine or ten o'clock at night. He thought that this practice would be curtailed if the shops were legally closed after seven o'clock.³⁶ James Smith, secretary to the National Amalgamation of Chainmakers and Chainstrikers, additionally suggested that from six to six was the best limitation of hours, since these were the most convenient for the inspectorate, and thus for detection.³⁷

Failing the abolition of the domestic workshops and their replacement by factories, the male chain trade unionists were prepared to suggest remedies which they considered would reform sweating from within the outwork sector, to wit, conciliation boards, the legal furnishing of particulars notes to each worker, and the abolition or restriction of female labour. A board of conciliation composed of masters and men, linked with a list of prices mutually agreed upon, was especially welcomed by Homer and Smith. Homer declared that conciliation was infinitely preferable to a strike.³⁸ Mr

³⁴ *Ibid.*, QQ. 18,023-4.

³⁵ R.C.L. (P.P. 1892, XXXVI, Pt. 1), QQ. 17,811-2.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, Q. 17,254. See also S.C.S.S., *Third Report* (P.P. 1889, XII), QQ. 18,203-4.

³⁷ R.C.L. (P.P. 1892, XXXVI, Pt.1), Q. 17,254.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, Q. 17.049.

Smith was even more enthusiastic. As he told the R.C.L. “if they [conciliation boards] could be established in our trade, I think it would be one of the best things we could have.”³⁹ Mr Smith also spoke in favour of particulars notes – these being sheets of reckoning describing the size of iron and the piece rate per hundred weight of chain the worker had been commissioned to make up, and were to be issued to the chainmaker when collecting the iron to be made into chain. Armed with such a note, James Smith declared, the chainmakers would not be so easily defrauded, and it would act as a check on employers reducing workers’ wages below the recognised rates.⁴⁰

Of all the male chain trade unionists’ solutions to sweating, the most often proposed and possibly the most desperate, however, was the prohibition or restriction of females in the trade. It is essential to deal with this aspect of the male policies at some length, since it was the women chainmakers who ultimately became the centre of the sweating controversy. The first instance of opposition to female labour emerged from Walsall, a community based on agricultural chains and the saddlery trades, and situated six miles to the north of Cradley Heath. The small chain industry witnessed a serious setback during the agricultural depression of the 1870s, and early in 1875 the trade suffered from a dearth of orders.⁴¹ In the following year the female nailors, dispossessed of their own trade by machinery, flooded into the chain trade. The Walsall men felt the added competition the most keenly.⁴² They had never allowed women to work in their trade and believed they were being undersold by the women chainmakers of Cradley Heath.⁴³ Matters reached a head when cheaper Cradley Heath chain was being sold in Walsall whilst the Walsall men themselves were idle. Thus, in 1876, when commissioners visited the district to take evidence on the consolidation of the workshop and factory acts, the Walsall men were unanimously in agreement that women should be restricted or prohibited from making chain. The commissioners, however, were not unaware of the Walsall men’s interests and refused to recommend legislation restricting female labour.⁴⁴

³⁹ Ibid., Q. 17,253.

⁴⁰ Ibid., Q. 17,253. Particulars notes also had the added advantage that they could prove the worker was a creditor and not a debtor.

⁴¹ C.A., 25 July 1885.

⁴² S.C.S.S., *Third Report* (P.P. 1889, XIII), QQ. 2,704-6.

⁴³ The Walsall men believed that female competition had reduced the rates by 15 per cent. See *Reports of the Commissioners Appointed to Inquire into the Working of the Factory and Workshops Acts With a View to their Consolidation and Amendment*, (P.P. 1876, XXX), Q. 5,693.

⁴⁴ The Commissioners, in fact, reported “there is a good deal of natural irritation felt by the men on account of the depreciation of their labour by the competition of women.” Ibid., (P.P. 1876, XXIX), pp. 1xxxii-1xxxiii.

Despite petitions from the Walsall Trades' Council and deputations from the Parliamentary Committee of the Trades Union Congress (T.U.C.), and despite support from Lord Shaftesbury who requested that the 1878 Factories and Workshops' Bill be amended to prohibit girls under 16 making chains or nails, the activities of the Walsall men were completely nullified.⁴⁵ At the Third Reading of the Bill, Lord Balfour of Burleigh was quick to note

that the great mass of the evidence they received in favour of extending the restrictions to those young women engaged in those trades [nail and chain-making] came from men. The men felt that the women were competing with them, and they openly admitted it was a wages' question.⁴⁶

Hence, in August 1882, on the formation of the South Staffordshire and East Worcestershire Trades Council, the Walsall men were still demanding the limitation of female labour.⁴⁷ In fact, the Trades Council subsequently became the major pressure group behind a Bill of 1883 designed to prohibit the employment of females under 14 in iron works and at forges.⁴⁸ The intention of this Bill, as Ada Heather Bigg of the Womens' Trade Union League (W.T.U.L.) pointed out, was to prevent the training and thus the entry of women into these trades.⁴⁹ The Bill, however, was an abysmal failure. 124 votes were registered against it and only 44 in favour.⁵⁰ The designs of the Walsall men to restrict women entering the iron trades were circumvented, and the Bill was rejected because the number of children it related to was too insignificant to merit legislation.⁵¹ Following the failure of the 1883 Bill, the Trades Council disintegrated.⁵² The issue, however, was not allowed to rest. Richard Juggins, the spokesman for the council, formed the more durable M.C.T.F., pledged to the eradication of females from chainmaking and other Black Country metal trades.

Wholehearted support for the M.C.T.F. was not long in coming from the male chainmakers of Cradley Heath. Initially, the male chainmakers of Cradley Heath had remained aloof from the activities of the Walsall men,

⁴⁵ *Hansard* (Commons), 3rd ser. cciv, 16 May 1878, cols. 1-2. See also *Hansard* (Commons) 3rd ser. ccxxxviii, 7 March 1878, col. 882 and *Hansard* (Commons), 3rd ser. ccxxxiv, 9 Ap. 1878, cols. 947-8.

⁴⁶ *Hansard* (Commons), 3rd ser. ccxxxv, 16 May 1878, col. 4.

⁴⁷ E. Taylor, "The Working-Class Movement in the Black Country, 1863-1914", (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Keele, 1974), p. 273.

⁴⁸ The Trades Council wished to abolish all female labour in iron works and forging, but when they realised that such a bill would not gain Parliament's support, they modified their demands. See, for instance, *C.A.*, 24 Feb. 1883; 12 May 1883.

⁴⁹ A.H. Bigg, "Female Labour in the Nail Trade", *Fortnightly Review* new ser. xxxix, p. 830. See also Broadhurst's remarks, *Hansard* (Commons), 3rd ser. cclxxix, 9 May 1883, col. 344.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, col. 354.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, cols. 353-4.

⁵² Taylor, "The Working Class Movement in the Black Country", p. 273.

but the severity of the small chain trade depression in 1885, eventually converted even the Cradley Heath men to the Walsall point of view. Hence, in 1886, we find many of the male domestic chainmakers affiliated to the M.C.T.F., and the Federation backed them financially to fight the strike of 1886-7, one of the longest chainmaking disputes of the century.⁵³ The success of the 1886-7 strike meant that for the ensuing two decades the M.C.T.F., instead of recognising that the women were in the industry to stay, followed the same myopic policy inherited from the Walsall chainmakers. But since it had been demonstrated that no government would concede the regulation of the supply of females to the trade, purely because the men wanted to remove an unfavourable competitor, the male trade unionists now attempted to prove that the occupation was detrimental to the health and morals of women workers. Women, they submitted, were not strong enough to make chains, the work impaired their "natural" function for motherhood and the mixing of the sexes in the workshop was conducive to immorality.

In 1887, at the annual conference of the T.U.C., Richard Juggins proposed the following resolution:

That it be an instruction to the Parliamentary Committee to introduce such amendments to the Factory and Workshops Act as shall prevent the employment of females in the making of chains . . . or any other such articles that are made from iron or steel, such work not being adapted to their physical constitutions; at the same time it is demoralising in its tendency.⁵⁴

Two years later Juggins requested the S.C.S.S. to restrict women by law to iron of no more than 1/4" in diameter.⁵⁵ Thomas Homer, in his evidence before the same committee, reiterated this demand, although he set the maximum size of iron suitable for women slightly larger, at No. I or 9/32".⁵⁶ Homer also went a stage further, at the 1892 R.C.L., explaining the tactics of the male trade unionists. The men, he said, did not want to prohibit young girls or widows from the trade, but they did wish to exclude married women. The loss to the home through married women working, Homer contended, was not compensated for by the money earned in the workshop, since:

⁵³ Taylor, "The Midland Counties Trades Federations", p. 32. In 1885, Juggins promised the Cradley Heath men that, if female labour was abolished, their rates would be increased by fifty per cent. (C.A., 5 Sept. 1888).

⁵⁴ *Report of the Twentieth Annual Trades Union Congress* (Manchester, 1887), p. 42.

⁵⁵ S.C.S.S., *Third Report* (P.P. 1889, XIII), Q. 17,987.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, QQ. 18,245-6. No. 1 gauge was iron as thick as a pencil. Nevertheless, John Burnett, the labour correspondent to the Board of Trade, found few women working on a larger size. *Report as to the Condition of Nailmakers and Small Chain Makers in South Staffordshire and East Worcestershire* (P.P. 1888, XCI), p. 45.

all little domestic duties are neglected, and when the man goes in to his little place, his little castle as it should be, there is nothing clean and tidy. It drives him off to the public house . . .⁵⁷

The woman's place, he insisted, was in the home, living not by her own labour, but the labour of her husband. Many men, he alleged, also used force to make their wives work. Women, he therefore concluded, should be prohibited or restricted from the craft, for "the man pleases himself where the woman cannot . . ."⁵⁸

An additional plank in the male trade unionist strategy was racial degeneration. In the Commons in December 1888, C.A.V. Coneybeare, the Socialist M.P., used information furnished by Richard Juggins to describe how women chainmakers worked at their forges at nine in the morning, and were confined the same afternoon at five o'clock.⁵⁹ Before the S.C.S.S., Homer also stated that he had lived in Cradley Heath and district for fifty-two years and that during this time, there had been a noticeable decline in the physical condition of the children born to chainmaking mothers.⁶⁰ The discovery of the injurious effect of chainmaking upon the health of the woman worker and on her children was, however, as the *Pall Mall Gazette* pointed out, an afterthought.⁶¹ The main anxiety of the male chainmakers was the lowering of their wages by female competition. To have restricted married women's labour, as the male chainmakers knew, would have been equivalent to removing the majority of females from the trade. By prohibiting the married women, too, the male chain trade unionists would have removed the opportunity of the women's husbands who worked at other trades from doing a stint in the domestic workshop after their own day's work. Thomas Homer made this quite clear when he commented in 1892 of the women chainmakers:

Some of them are the wives of chainmakers and the daughters of chainmakers. We should not care if we had no one else besides these to work at the trade, but we have so many other women working at the trade who perhaps worked at it when they were young but who have married somebody else outside the trade. Their husbands work at other callings and very often when they have done their day's work they go home and they try their hand and begin to learn to make a bit of chain to the detriment of the regular chainmakers. Lots of women I am sorry to say do that.⁶²

⁵⁷ R.C.L. (P.P. 1892, XXXVI, Pt.1), Q. 17,114. Tawney, for example, found that of 579 women chainmakers interviewed in 1913, 70.6% (401) were married or widowed; and 29.4% (170) were unmarried. See Tawney, *Chainmaking*, p. 9.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, Q. 17,140.

⁵⁹ C.E., 15 Dec. 1888.

⁶⁰ S.C.S.S., *Third Report* (P.P. 1889, XIII), Q. 18,256.

⁶¹ Cited in the C.A., 25 April 1891.

⁶² R.C.L. (P.P. 1892, XXXVI, Pt.1), Q. 16,936.

The restriction of the married women, however, would have been only the first step to the removal of the unmarried as well. This was clearly demonstrated by the men's allegations that the employment of young girls in the domestic workshops resulted in gross immorality. The greatest propaganda was reserved for the girl bellows-blowers. Both Mr Smith and Mr Homer told the R.C.L. that they objected to girls working in shops for middlemen, over whom the parents had no control.⁶³ Mr Smith stated that very often young girls were employed to blow bellows from an elevated platform almost on a level with the chainmakers' elbow. This practice, he alleged, had resulted in the ruin of many girls previously "as pure as morning dew." In one shop, he maintained, the men had refused to work when the master and his wife removed the girls on moral grounds.⁶⁴

II

From 1886 to 1905, then, the male chain trade unionists of Cradley Heath attempted to solve sweating in their trade by advocating moderate and conventional remedies. These solutions, though, were inevitably bound to fail. Each one fell short of dealing with the main cause of sweating, low pay, and each had its own inherent flaw, as the following sections will show.

Firstly, in the case of co-operation, the chainmakers did establish several small co-operative factories, but without state aid. These co-operative ventures were feeble initiatives and, as R.H. Tawney noted, "their end was the ordinary one of the [economically] righteous, and in less than two years they had ceased to exist."⁶⁵ It was unimaginable that a parliament comprising mainly landlords and capitalists would vote the necessary funds. Indeed, when Mahon laid before the S.C.S.S. his scheme for co-operative factories, with capital advanced by the state, several of the Lords recoiled in horror.⁶⁶ Without state aid any co-operative venture on the part of the chainmaker was doomed to failure. There was little hope, in fact, of the sweated, as wretched, isolated and poverty stricken as they were, raising themselves by their own efforts. Such a pious hope for the sweated worker was, as Beatrice Potter remarked, little more than a "very grim joke".⁶⁷ Even if the domestic chainmakers had received the necessary capital, however, it is highly unlikely that co-operative production would have worked. The rank and file chainmaker lacked not only capital, but the

⁶³ *Ibid.*, QQ. 16, 949-51; 16, 995-8; 17, 167-9, 17, 259. See also S.C.S.S., *Third Report* (P.P. 1889, XIII), QQ. 18, 355; 18, 368.

⁶⁴ *R.C.L.*, (P.P. 1892, XXXVI, Pt. 1), QQ. 17, 255, 17, 259.

⁶⁵ Tawney, *Chainmaking Industry*, p. 23. See also, *C.A.*, 3 Jan. 1888.

⁶⁶ S.C.S.S., *Third Report* (P.P. 1889, XIII), Q. 21, 715.

⁶⁷ B. Potter, "The Lords and the Sweating System", *Nineteenth Century*, XXVII (1890), p. 896.

management skills, commercial experience and education to embark on such a venture.⁶⁸ An insuperable bar was the widespread illiteracy amongst the chainmakers. Even Mahon admitted, although inadvertently, that the middlemen had so ground down the chainmakers, “that they have no spirit and intelligence left in them”.⁶⁹ Also, as recent studies on the New Worker Co-operatives show, state aided co-operation provides no immediate solution to the problem of low pay. Indeed, the New Worker Co-operatives tend to hold their producers’ wages down, in order to enable the co-operative to succeed.⁷⁰

Secondly, the registration and uniformity of hours within the domestic workshops proved to be no more successful. Attempts were made to provide registers of outworkers in the Acts of 1891, 1895 and 1901, but they were of little value. The Act of 1891 laid down that every occupier of a factory or workshop, including men’s workshops, must, if so required by the Secretary of State, keep lists of all the outworkers employed by him. These lists were open to inspection by local sanitary officers and the factory inspectorate. The Act of 1895 made it compulsory for lists not only to be kept by the occupier, but to be sent twice yearly to the factory inspectorate. The last Act, that of 1901, made it compulsory for the occupier or contractor to send lists of outworkers to the district council in which the factory or workshop was situated. The district council then forwarded the names and addresses of these outworkers of firms within its districts to the councils of districts where the outworkers lived.

Whilst these Acts possibly caused some improvements to be made in large towns like Liverpool or Manchester, where municipal authorities took their responsibilities seriously, in small towns like Cradley Heath practically nothing was done. Indeed, in May 1904, the Rowley Regis Urban District Council (which included Cradley Heath) received a letter from the factory inspectorate pointing out that, despite the fact that there were numerous outworkers in the region, only three lists had been received on February 1st, and that the same had occurred in the previous year. The Council tried to excuse its laxness by arguing that workers in Rowley Regis were generally engaged by several employers, and that they were not often regularly employed, therefore there had been difficulties in compiling the lists.⁷¹ The fact was, however, that members of small town councils were reluctant to interfere with fellow tradesmen, lest they made themselves unpopular. The same myopic attitude also applied to the sanitary inspection of the workshops. The Act of 1891, in an attempt to discover

⁶⁸ J.A. Hobson, *Problems of Poverty* (London, 1891), p. 107.

⁶⁹ S.C.S.S., *Third Report* (P.P. 1889, XIII), QQ. 21,713; 21,746.

⁷⁰ See, for instance, K. Coates (ed.), *The New Worker Co-operatives* (Nottingham, 1976).

⁷¹ C.A., 21 May 1904. See also, B.L. Hutchins and A. Harrison, *A History of Factory Legislation* (London, 3rd edn. 1966), p. 219.

unnotified workshops, made local authorities responsible for supervising the sanitary conditions of the shops, for it was felt that sanitary officers in their house-to-house calls were the most likely to bring such shops to light. Few of the small town councils, however, were prepared to accept the odium of increasing the rates to finance additional officers, and the number of sanitary inspectors was rarely adequate to permit thorough or systematic inspection. Naturally, where inspection was not regular, and where no special inspectors were appointed, no registers were kept and workshops were only visited, as in the past, upon complaint.⁷²

Ironically, the male chain trade unionists, despite their eagerness to curtail sweating in their trade, seldom utilised this complaint procedure to report breaches of the acts. They believed that such activities would provoke the masters, and that it was not their duty to dabble in such questions. Hence, they left the matter to the officers concerned. As Thomas Homer remarked in 1892: "For one thing it would be a great deal of trouble for us to do it, and it is out of our province so to speak."⁷³ Likewise, uniformity of hours within the chainshops was no final remedy for sweating. Although a step in the right direction, it relied too heavily on the correct registration of workshops, and would have required an army of inspectors to carry it out effectively. More importantly, it entirely overlooked the fact that the root of long hours was low pay, that the real cure for sweating was increased wages. As Henry Mayhew had pointed out, almost four decades earlier, underpay led to overwork, and conversely, overwork led to low pay.⁷⁴

Thirdly, with reference to conciliation boards these operated successfully in the better organised trades, like iron and steel, but not in a disorganised trade like domestic chainmaking. In 1892, Homer, himself, gave the reasons for this failure. It was infinitely difficult, as he pointed out, to persuade employers to meet together on a board of conciliation because the more respectable members of their body would not associate for this purpose with the smaller men who were really sweaters. One such attempt to form a joint committee composed of workers and masters was an abysmal failure and substantially decimated the union's funds.⁷⁵

Fourthly, with regard to particulars notes, this clause of the factory acts was applied to chainmaking in 1897. It was secured for the trade by the joint

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 241. The career prospects of a sanitary inspector, moreover, did not attract first class recruits. According to Mess, the profession was a cul-de-sac. See H.A. Mess, *Factory Legislation and its Administration, 1891-1924* (London, 1926), p. 6.

⁷³ *R.C.L.* (P.P. 1892, XXVI, Pt.1), Q. 17,121.

⁷⁴ E.P. Thompson and E. Yeo (eds), *The Unknown Mayhew* (Harmondsworth, 1973), p. 467.

⁷⁵ See E. Taylor, "The Origins and Early Years of the Midland Wages Boards", *Man and Metal*, XL (1972), pp. 100-103; *R.C.L.*, 1982, XXXVI, Pt.1), Q. 17,052. Conciliation boards differed from trade boards in that their proceedings were voluntary. Independent members on trade boards were empowered, legally, to settle wage rates.

efforts of the M.C.T.F. and the Chainmakers' and Strikers' Union, not without a great deal of effort and expenditure. As the souvenir booklet of the Chainmakers' and Strikers' Jubilee noted: "The lobbying which had to take place in the House of Commons before this clause became law was prodigious; hundreds of interviews had to be held with M.P.s. . . ."76 Nevertheless, the Particulars Clause amounted to very little. It applied to all classes of workers except men in male workshops, and it was supposed to regulate sweating indirectly by partially regulating wages. In 1902, however, James Smith condemned the Particulars Clause for not being sufficiently broad or comprehensive, and criticised it for not applying to everyone engaged in the outwork sector.⁷⁷ Informed witnesses before the Select Committee on Homework (S.C.H.) in 1907 condemned the Particulars Clause wholesale. The professional women's trade union organizer, Gertrude Tuckwell, for instance, regarded it as entirely insufficient, whilst Mr Evans, a London Factory Inspector's assistant, pronounced it almost a dead letter. As he pointed out, "[I]t certainly cannot prevent . . . sweating in any degree . . ."⁷⁸ The Clause failed for the simple reason that individual workers could be intimidated. More importantly, it did not solve the problem of low wages. H.A. Mess, an expert on factory administration, clearly recognised this when he stated in 1922:

To know the amount of wages due and to be sure of getting it in hard cash, are both important. But more important still is to have an adequate wage, and to be protected against the unfair terms which an employer in a strong bargaining position can often enforce on an employee.⁷⁹

Lastly, the policy of restricting female labour in domestic chainmaking was likewise a failure. The women chainmakers, themselves, were not unaware of the male trade unionists' motives, and the majority deprecated the actions of the men. A special correspondent to the *Pall Mall Gazette*, in search of a titillating article, was surprised to find that, although the women condemned their low rates of pay, they actually liked their work. One female "amazon" told him:

I don't know whether it hurts women more than men . . . But I do know it doesn't hurt a woman a bit more to stand at the forge than to stand at the wash tub . . .⁸⁰

⁷⁶ *Souvenir of the Semi-Jubilee of the Chainmakers' and Strikers' Association* (Stourbridge, 1914), p. 29.

⁷⁷ *C.A.*, 21 June 1902.

⁷⁸ *Select Committee on Homework* (P.P. 1907, VI), QQ. 2,349; 3,715.

⁷⁹ Mess, *Factory Legislation*, p. 11.

⁸⁰ Cited in *C.A.*, 25 April 1891.

At the national level, a deputation of the women, under the leadership of Mrs Fawcett, “stormed” London in 1891 to protest to the Home Secretary.⁸¹ The women were particularly critical of the amendment to the Factories and Workshops Bill which the men had persuaded Lord Dunraven to introduce, restricting the thickness of iron and size of hammer which females would be allowed to use.⁸² The women also expressed their feelings unreservedly at the local level. At one meeting called to ballot the women’s future in the trade, the women

claimed that the men had no right to interfere in the proceedings, and demonstrated in unmistakable fashion accordingly. A good deal of chaff was indulged in by the women . . .⁸³

Others defiantly enquired of social investigators visiting the region what they thought of the white slaves of Cradley Heath, now that they had seen them.⁸⁴

Undoubtedly, many of the male chain trade unionists’ allegations were without substance. As far as the charges of immorality were concerned, there was little evidence to substantiate the assertion. Walter Bassano, a magistrate for the district and himself an opponent of female labour, nevertheless testified to the S.C.S.S. that illegitimacy rates in chainmaking circles were comparatively low.⁸⁵ The charge that girl bellows-blowers caused wholesale debauchery in the workshops was also widely exaggerated. As Inspector Charles Hoare noted before the Sweating Committee, these girls had never been numerous, and their numbers were rapidly diminishing.⁸⁶ It would also seem that the close-knit nature of the community tended to prevent promiscuous behaviour in the workshops, for, as one observer remarked,

in the chainshops, sometimes ten will work in one shop belonging to one man, the wife or the man’s own daughters may not work in it, but he is

⁸¹ Ibid. The women chainmakers were not impressed by their meeting with Henry Matthews, the Home Secretary. As they were about to leave, one woman turned to Mrs Fawcett and said: “‘It’s very ’ard upon the pore gentleman to ’ave to make the laws, and not know nothing about it’” (cited in R. Strachey, *The Cause* (London, 1928), pp. 236-237).

⁸² The Bill was withdrawn. See *Hansard* (Commons), 3rd ser. cclv, July 1891, cols. 1015-8.

⁸³ C.A., 4 April 1891.

⁸⁴ Bigg, “Female Labour”, p. 831.

⁸⁵ For a six-month period between October 1888 and March 1889, for instance, Bassano found that there had been 26 illegitimate births out of 500 in the parish of Rowley Regis and, of that number, only three related to chainmaking girls. See S.C.S.S., *Third Report* (P.P. 1889, XIII), Q. 22,742.

⁸⁶ Girls took up blowing when the coal trade was brisk and the supply of male labour was short. Ibid., QQ. 23,007; 23,132. Hoare, in fact, maintained that he had seen more indecency, with regards dress, in London theatre stalls than in chainmaking workshops! Ibid., QQ. 20,247; 23,010.

almost sure to have some of his sons in it, and they are all neighbours round about, so it is impossible for anything to be done that is wrong in these shops.⁸⁷

The male chain trade unionists stood on slightly firmer ground with the issue of heavy work and infant mortality. The chain trade was not in its actual work process, necessarily an unhealthy trade, and it was never scheduled as a dangerous occupation (unlike the lead or hollow-ware industry).⁸⁸ But the nature of the work was such, that the women needed long periods of rest and proper food for the maintenance of the body. Generally, because they were low paid, they had neither. The infant mortality for the area was also extremely high.⁸⁹ Yet child mortality was related to other factors than the occupation of the mother alone. A great deal of the infant mortality was due to the ignorance of the mothers, poor medical and sanitary facilities, and the inability of Medical Officers of Health to contain infectious diseases.⁹⁰ Above all, however, the high infant mortality could be linked to the poverty and low pay of the chainmakers. As the *Lancet* remarked in 1889:

The . . . chainmakers do not earn enough to rent suitable dwellings or to clothe and feed themselves sufficiently . . . The result manifests itself principally in the very high infant mortality. The present generation was brought up at a period of comparative prosperity, when wages were 40 to 50 per cent higher than at present, and the mortality among adults is consequently much lower. Also it may be argued that when a child has survived the neglect, bad sanitation, and starvation to which it is exposed in this district, it can endure almost anything.⁹¹

Finally, as to the men's desire to see the married women chainmakers become full-time housewives, these "noble" sentiments were also nullified when Homer, in an emotional outburst, tactlessly admitted that he wanted women prohibited from making chains, not because it meant the ruin of the home or neglect of the children, but because they lowered the wage rates.⁹² The male chainmakers' campaign merely resulted in a great deal of wasted

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, Q. 21,110. Bassano succinctly summarized the middle-class attitude when he stated that, in view of the chainmakers' crowded dwelling places, it was a miracle that they were as moral as they were. *Ibid.*, Q 22,744.

⁸⁸ J. Arlidge, *The Diseases of Occupations* (London, 1892), p. 185.

⁸⁹ The parish of Rowley Regis registered a high birth rate with an exceedingly large death rate amongst children under five. Thus, whilst the annual birth rate (1841-95) ranged between 36.2 per 1,000 and 47.8 per 1,000, roughly thirty per cent of all deaths were of children under one year, and fifty per cent were of those aged 0-4 years. (*Annual Reports of the Medical Officer of Health for Rowley Regis*, Poor Law Correspondence, P.R.O. MH12 13958-95.)

⁹⁰ "The Employment of Women", *R. C. L.* (P.P. 1892, XXXVI, Pt.1), p. 574.

⁹¹ *Lancet*, 16 March 1889, pp. 540-541.

⁹² S.C.S.S., *Third Report* (P.P. 1889, XIII), QQ. 18,313-4.

time, effort and money. They had simply made what was essentially a wage issue into a sex problem. They had failed to recognise that outwork or unfit work for women arose from low pay, that restrictions on women's labour would have made their pay even lower, and that the proper cure was an increase in wages.⁹³ The male chainmaker, in fact, despite his advocacy of the domestic ideal, could not afford to allow his wife or daughters to devote themselves to home duties. Small as his wife or daughter's earnings were, they still made a valuable contribution to the family income. John Burnett pinpointed this issue exactly when he stated in 1888:

On the one hand they seem to feel that the cheaper labour of their wives and daughters is forcing them to lower and lower wages, while on the other their earnings are so miserably low, and their state so bad, that they fear to give up the few shillings which the female workers add to the family income. They are between the devil of cheap labour competition and the deep sea of family poverty.⁹⁴

Not surprisingly, the lady commissioner, Eliza Orme, found only one male chainmaker amongst the workers she interviewed in 1892 who allowed his wife to devote herself to home duties. She therefore concluded that the male chainmaker did not attempt to put his theory into practice.⁹⁵ The removal of female labour, moreover, even if it had been a viable proposition, would not have solved the problem of sweated labour in chainmaking circles. The difficulty of the large reservoir of casual male labour, such as under-employed miners or puddlers, individually competing for chainmaking work with the middleman, would still have remained.

The first real step by the male chainmakers to curb the problem of sweated labour in their industry did not, in fact, occur until 1905. In that year, the male chain trade unionists finally recognised that the women were in the industry to stay and decided to organise them into a separate union, the Cradley Heath and District Hammered and Country Chainmakers' Association.⁹⁶ By this stage, however, the women were so hostile to unions which had decidedly not supported their interests, and so distrustful of the

⁹³ See *Women's Union Journal*, VIII (1889), p. 9. For the effects of women's expulsion from the mines, see A.V. John, "Women Workers in British Coalmining, 1840-90 with Special Reference to West Lancashire" (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Manchester, 1976), *passim*.

⁹⁴ Burnett, *Report as to the Condition of Nailmakers and Small Chainmakers* (P.P. 1888, XCI), p. 44.

⁹⁵ See, "The Employment of Women", *R.C.L.* (P.P. 1892, XXXVI, Pt. 1), p. 575.

⁹⁶ See Tawney, *Chainmaking Industry*, p. 25. By this date, both Noah Forrest and Richard Juggins were dead, and Thomas Homer had left the district in 1902 (see *C.A.*, 30 May 1908, and 1 March 1902). Leadership of the men's unions passed to Thomas Sitch aided by his third son, Charles Sitch.

men's motives, that the male trade unionists had to enlist the services of the professional women's organiser, Mary Macarthur.⁹⁷ The women chainmakers subsequently became, in June 1907, one of the first branches to affiliate to the newly formed National Federation of Women Workers (N.F.W.W.).⁹⁸

Mary Macarthur brought a broader perspective to the problem of sweating, whilst, at the same time, the British public were being gradually won over to the minimum wage campaign for the low paid. The male chain trade unionists were now convinced that a minimum wage was a viable proposition and, from 1907, threw all of their weight behind the mounting national campaign for a minimum wage. In April of that year, a resolution was passed by the M.C.T.F. calling for the implementation of a national minimum wage and requesting Labour M.P.s to take up their cause for the protection of all workers against the evil of sweating.⁹⁹ At the subsequent annual meeting of the M.C.T.F. it was resolved:

That this conference, believing that the low rate of wages in sweated industries is a constant menace to organised trades, calls upon the Government to promote legislation to establish a legal minimum wage in selected trades.¹⁰⁰

In April 1909, James Smith, at a meeting of the Cradley Heath and District Chainmakers' Society, declared that the minimum wage was "the most important thing they would discuss that year", that its application to their industry "would be one of the most beneficial things that could happen to the chain trade".¹⁰¹ At the same time, the domestic chainmakers' campaign to secure a minimum wage received the full support of the factory operatives belonging to the Chainmakers' and Strikers' Association. This support was secured not only for humanitarian reasons, but because the domestic chainmakers were a reproach to the industry and, according to the Chainmakers' and Strikers' Association, "made one blush for one's trade". The general public, it thought:

cannot be expected to differentiate between the various branches of the trade. To those to whom chainmaking is but the description of a trade, there

⁹⁷ For biographical details of Mary Macarthur, see M.A. Hamilton, *Mary Macarthur: A Biographical Sketch* (London, 1925).

⁹⁸ Tawney, *Chainmaking Industry*, p. 25. Earlier attempts to organise the women into the Women's Trade Union League had failed because of the men's attitude to married female labour (see *C.A.*, 19 Oct. 1889). The N.F.W.W. was formed on the model of a general labour union, membership being open to all women in unorganised trades, or not admitted by men into their appropriate union.

⁹⁹ *C.A.*, 6 April 1907.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ *C.E.*, 10 April 1909.

is no distinction drawn between the maker of “slapdash” and the skilled artisanship which calls into being a gigantic Admiralty Cable.¹⁰²

Thomas Sitch, the secretary of the Chainmakers’ and Strikers’ Association accordingly lobbied and wrote letters to M.P.s and conducted them around the blackspots of Cradley Heath.¹⁰³ The results delighted Mary Macarthur, leading her to say of the above organisation:

If all the Trade Unions in the country had rendered as much service to women workers as the Chainmakers’ and Strikers’ Association has, women’s industrial organisation would leave much less to be desired than it does today.¹⁰⁴

But the chainmakers’ support for a legal minimum wage was not without problems. Originally, Churchill’s trade board bill scheduled four industries and, omitted domestic chainmaking, despite its national notoriety. Moreover, additional trades could only be scheduled as board industries by a provisional order requiring a special act of Parliament. The chainmakers mobilised quickly and held mass demonstrations requesting Churchill to include their craft in his bill. At the same time, Mary Macarthur and the National Anti-Sweating League (N.A.S.L.), urged the necessity of making domestic chainmaking a minimum wage industry. The aid of the Liberal M.P. for the region, A.G. Hooper was also enlisted, whilst Arthur Henderson moved an amendment in the Commons to replace ready-made blouse making with domestic chainmaking in the schedule.¹⁰⁵

The chain industry, it was argued, was ideal for the new experiment: it was localised, and comparatively free from foreign competition; the administration of the board would be easy; the workers were the most abject and pathetic in the country; and the good employers in the industry welcomed the chance to pay fair wages. Churchill acknowledged the strength of these arguments, and thus dropped the blouse trade from the schedule in favour of domestic chainmaking.¹⁰⁶ As a result, in October 1909, the domestic chain trade was scheduled as the first minimum wage industry since the repeal of the Statute of Artificers in 1823.

III

The chainmakers had first suggested, albeit tentatively, a minimum wage

¹⁰² *Souvenir of the Semi-Jubilee*, p. 15.

¹⁰³ *C.A.*, 10 April 1909, 22 May 1909, 19 June 1909; *Annual Report of Chainmakers’ and Strikers’ Association* (1909), pp. 6-7.

¹⁰⁴ *Souvenir of Semi-Jubilee*, p. 15.

¹⁰⁵ *See C.A.*, 10 April 1909; 22 May 1909; 19 June 1909. The N.A.S.L. was an all party pressure group founded in 1906 to eradicate sweating.

¹⁰⁶ *Hansard* (Commons), 5 ser. v, 24 May 1909, col. 962.

for their trade in 1889. Two decades later, and after much needless suffering, their industry became the first trade board concern. Far from being indifferent to social reform, the chainmakers had been interested in a whole series of state linked measures to curb sweating in their trade and, as we have seen, they played an active role both in lobbying for the Trade Boards Act, and for the inclusion of their craft. Indeed, the major obstacle for the chainmakers had not been lack of concern with socially reforming ideas, but rather how to persuade the state that anti-sweating measures were required.

Social reforms, it is also implied by Pelling, only became popular with the working-class *after* the measures were implemented.¹⁰⁷ However, as the following section demonstrates, the chainmakers, despite their desire to combat sweating, were by no means impressed with their long-awaited trade board. On the contrary, after all the years of struggle, the Chain Trade Board (C.T.B.) failed to come up to the expectations of the workers.

In fact, after only a few months' contact with the C.T.B., Thomas Sitch, secretary to the factory chainmakers' society and a man renowned for his moderation, told his union that he was bitterly disappointed with the lack of progress. The source of this trade union dissatisfaction was the employers' desire to keep wages as low as possible by resorting to delaying tactics, and by threatening to mechanise the trade if their demands were not met. In other words, as Sitch remarked, the employers intended to use the Act as "an instrument of legalising sweating instead of using it as a means to stamp out an evil that has blighted the district throughout its whole history".¹⁰⁸ Even when a minimum rate for the chainmakers was eventually established, the chain employers believed that it had been forced upon them by the independent members on the board. They attempted, therefore, to wreck the board entirely by stock-piling chain during the six months' waiting period laid down by the Act before the new rates became legally operative.¹⁰⁹ There was, as Arthur Henderson told a meeting of the chainmakers, no justification for fixing such a period. It merely reflected the fight which the working-class still had to wage against vested interests.¹¹⁰ The chainmakers, in fact, had to strike twice, in 1910 and 1911, to obtain their minimum rates, and they ensured by their struggle that the Trade Boards Act would be applied, not only to their trade, but to other industries, rather than remaining a dead letter.¹¹¹ However, despite this victory, chain trade board rates remained pathetically low. Indeed, chain trade union officials,

¹⁰⁷ Pelling, "The Working Class", p. 13.

¹⁰⁸ *Annual Report of Chainmakers' and Strikers' Association* (1910), pp. 7-8.

¹⁰⁹ For further details, see S.C. Blackburn, "Sweated Labour and the Minimum Wage" (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of London, 1983), ch. 5.

¹¹⁰ *C.A.*, 27 Aug. 1910.

¹¹¹ Blackburn, "Sweated Labour", esp. pp. 138-151.

with much justification, attributed the post-war dearth of learners in the trade to the inadequate wages.¹¹²

A further dissatisfaction on the part of the unions was the inadequate level of inspection. When introducing the Trade Boards Bill, Churchill had insisted that the boards would not become a burden on the state.¹¹³ Other statesmen, encouraged by the Treasury, followed his parsimonious example. Thus in July 1915, when inspection figures first became available, there were six trade boards covering approximately 500,000 workers employed in some 12,000 firms, whilst the staff of inspectors numbered only 12.¹¹⁴ This position, although it was slightly improved during the ensuing two decades, remained far from adequate.¹¹⁵ Not surprisingly, with the onset of depression in the chain trade in the 1920s, complaints were legion that the trade board rates were being evaded. Some of these complaints were in the form of anonymous letters to the Ministry of Labour, and were undoubtedly written by rank and file chainmakers victimised after refusing to accept below the minimum.¹¹⁶ Complaints were also forwarded to the Ministry by members of the C.T.B., and by the professional trade unionists for the industry. The chain trade unionists were especially bitter that, even where under-payments were discovered, the perpetrators were not always prosecuted. The acceptance of arrears out of court caused particular friction between the Trade Boards Inspectorate (T.B.I.) and union representatives. The chainmakers' unions, in fact, adopted a policy of non-co-operation with the T.B.I. if they thought that criminal proceedings were not likely to be taken.¹¹⁷

Chainmaking trade unionists, too, frequently complained that the board, far from stimulating trade unionism amongst the domestic chainmakers, as they had hoped, often had the reverse effect. In 1914, for instance, Thomas Sitch could refer to the male outworkers as weak both financially and numerically.¹¹⁸ One year earlier, Mr Bloomer, President of the Chainmakers' and Strikers' Association, categorically discounted the possibility of one union for the trade since the male outworkers were content to accept pathetically low wages.¹¹⁹ The women's organisation, although more resilient, was reduced in size by the war. Women chainmakers who left the craft

¹¹² For further details of C.T.B. rates see C.T.B. Minutes, 1917-29, p. 248, P.R.O., LAB 35/75; C.T.B. Minutes, 1930-9, p. 24, P.R.O. LAB 35/76.

¹¹³ *Hansard* (Commons), 5 ser. v, 24 May 1909, col. 961.

¹¹⁴ D. Sells, *The British Trade Boards System* (London, 1923), p. 40.

¹¹⁵ D. Sells, *British Wages Boards. A Study in Industrial Democracy* (Washington, 1939), esp. p. 213.

¹¹⁶ For examples of anonymous letters received by the Ministry of Labour, see P.R.O. LAB2/1604/TBIA12394 Pt.2; P.R.O. LAB2/982/TBIA1119.

¹¹⁷ See P.R.O. LAB2/1618/TBIA1593/Pts.2 and 3; C.A., 4 Feb. 1928.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 25 July 1914.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 19 July 1913.

for better paid war work rarely returned to the trade. Indeed, as Ellen Wilkinson of the National Union of Distributive and Allied Workers told a conference on the minimum wage, whilst the establishment of a trade board in chainmaking initially sparked off enthusiasm for trade unionism, this euphoria quickly evaporated and "as soon as the Trade Board got into working order the opposite tendency took place".¹²⁰

Additionally, the final blow to any trade union solidarity of the chain-makers was administered by the severe inter-war depression. During this period, workers through sheer poverty, colluded with employers to evade the minimum rates. Since outworkers were not eligible to pay unemployment insurance contributions, their only resource, when out of work, was parish relief. Rather than apply for this, with its humiliating means-test, individual chainmakers resorted to under-cutting the rates. The collusion of workers with employers became so great, in fact, that the T.B.I., in desperation would frequently request that trade union officials visit erring workers and lecture them on the error of their ways.¹²¹

On the other hand, as chain trade unionists remarked, the trade board had probably stimulated organisation, most of all, amongst the employers. The chain manufacturers were directly strengthened by the application of the Trade Boards Act to their industry since it simplified, so far as they were concerned, action of a collective nature. In the years following 1910, the middlemen were gradually squeezed out of the trade and became workers solely dependent on their labour. The divisive effect of the middlemen was thus largely dispensed with, and the nature of wage bargaining, in respect of the employers, thereby rationalised.¹²² There is no doubt that the chain-makers viewed the increasing power of the chain manufacturers' association with apprehension. As early as 1914, for instance, Thomas Sitch had warned the Chainmakers' and Strikers' Union that the manufacturers' organisation embraced nearly all the chain employers. Whilst the chainmasters negotiated as a uniform body, he pointed out, the chainmakers, despite the Trade Boards Act, still bargained separately for the different branches of the trade.¹²³

IV

Whilst the argument that social reform legislation arose simply out of working-class enfranchisement is no longer tenable, the assertion (advanced, for example, by Pelling), that the working-class was unconcerned

¹²⁰ League of Nations Union, *Towards Industrial Peace* (London, 1927), p. 43.

¹²¹ P.R.O. LAB2/982/TBIA18657; P.R.O. LAB2/982/TBIA1119.

¹²² See report on inspection and enforcement for 1923 in C.T.B. Minutes, 1917-29, P.R.O. LAB 35/75.

¹²³ C.A., 25 July 1914.

with welfare measures is also unsatisfactory. It is now being realized that working-class attitudes to social reform are very ambiguous. As Pat Thane has pointed out, in one of the few direct replies to Pelling, working-class organisations at the turn of the twentieth century welcomed some reforms, but eschewed others.

Nevertheless, recent studies on workers' attitudes to welfare suffer from one major flaw – they neglect or make unsubstantiated judgements about the very poor, the unskilled and sweated workers. Similarly, historians of sweated labour tend either not to be interested in the creation of social policy, or emphasize the role of the business community.

This article has argued that a full historical analysis of workers' perceptions of state welfare is only possible if research is undertaken on an occupational and a regional level. A study, for instance, of Black Country chain-trade unionists clearly shows that sweated workers did embark on a number of extensive campaigns to end sweating in their industry. And, far from shunning state aid (as Hobsbawm suggests), these sweated workers were quite prepared to harness the support of official agencies in their fight against sweating. Indeed, it was the very weakness of their situation as workers generally considered to be unskilled, together with previous self-help remedies which tempted them to seek state legislation to control sweating in their trade. But the anti-sweating campaigns waged by the male chainmakers were not without their contradictions. As we have seen, the chain trade unionists had, for two decades, advocated state aid for such schemes as the setting up of co-operative workshops, and the restriction or prohibition of female labour. Constrained, however, by the weight and influence of prevailing *laissez-faire* ideology, and by the establishment's traditional hostility to intervention in the wages contract, they were slow to recommend state control of wages.

The chain-trade unionists' first real initiative in seeking state regulation of low pay in their industry came only after 1905. And, although pressure from labour was highly important in obtaining legislation on low pay, the support of other groups, including the business community, was also significant. From 1906, the British public, like the chainmakers, was gradually being converted to state control of exceptionally low wages. In 1909, as a result, Black Country chainmaking became the first minimum wage industry for over seventy years.

But the chainmakers were by no means totally satisfied with their board. Contrary to Pelling's belief that the working-class eventually accepted the social reforms when they arrived, the chainmakers, at times, could scarcely conceal their impatience with the C.T.B. They were especially critical of restrictions placed upon the legislation by the New Liberal Government and Board of Trade administrators, particularly the six months' waiting period. The niggardliness of the Treasury and politicians in not allowing

sufficient funds for adequate inspection also caused widespread discontent amongst the chainmakers. The fact that the board failed to stimulate trade union organisation, in the long term, whilst assisting the formation of a powerful employers' association was especially regretted and deeply-felt by the chainmakers' professional organizers.

Probably the greatest tragedy, though, was that after decades of needless suffering, the chainmakers only benefited from their board for a few years. Prior to the First World War, the chain trade had been dependent on foreign markets, particularly Germany. The war severed the ties with these pre-1914 customers, many of whom began to perfect the production of small chain by electric-welding machinery. By 1930, consequently, domestic chainmaking had virtually become extinct. No doubt the secretary of the General Federation of Trade Unions, W.A. Appleton, had such problems in mind when he stated that the Trade Boards Act demonstrated, if nothing else, the futility of attempting the millenium merely through Acts of Parliament.¹²⁴