

# an end to homeworking?

BP 161511 (L436)

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fabian tract 436

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Fabian Society, 11 Dartmouth Street, London SW1H 9BN.  
September 1975 ISBN 7163 0436 8

# 1. introduction

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BP 161511 (436)

The idea behind this pamphlet is, firstly, to set out the history of homework and the attempts to put stop to it, and to illustrate the way in which today's demands differ very little from those of the past. The historical summary is not just an interesting story but a demonstration of the context in which the different aspects of the homework problem originated. Without this understanding the "cures" are likely to be less than effective.

This is followed by a portrait of the contemporary situation with the pamphlet concluding with suggested changes in the law and practice to prevent continuation of the worst abuses.

Running through the whole pamphlet is the theme of women in society. The overwhelming majority of homeworkers are women, and despite many legislative attempts at change, women are still second class citizens in the labour market as well as in the rest of society. Those who have paid lip service to International Women's Year should give consideration to these points.

Neither the trade unions nor the political parties of the left can afford to ignore any longer the plight of these people who are doubly exploited by industry under one of the "unacceptable faces of capitalism".

How many people would be prepared to work for 4½ pence per hour? The answer is, one suspects, not many. Nevertheless 20 per cent of the sample of homeworkers covered by the recent report of the Low Pay Unit were earning this—if not less. (*Sweated Labour, Low Pay Unit, 1975*). It is hardly conceivable that in 1975 we should find weekly incomes that would be considered insufficient well before the first world war. But if the available evidence is representative of the country as a whole, then this is just the case. There is no reason to doubt that the accumulated facts are not a guide to the national situation especially given the industrial and geographic spread of the enquiries.

What is homework, why do people do it

and what can be done about the misuses? It is hoped that this pamphlet will contribute to the discussion. In the course of this discussion, a case requiring an answer is made: that homework does have a social value that cannot be measured in purely monetary terms. Other apologists frequently refer to its therapeutic value. What is found, by and large, is an inequitable form of exploitation that bears most hard on that section of the community which has little articulate strength: women in their own home. Given that the majority are also obliged to do housework (also inadequately remunerated) one has a sorry picture of the house-locked homeworker.

Homework is defined by the Commission on Industrial Relations as: "receiving work and payment directly from a manufacturing establishment for work done in the home". (CIR, *Report 77*, HMSO, 1974). However the practice goes deeper than this. "Work in the Comfort of Your own Home" the adverts in newspapers and periodicals read. Frequently this is for envelope addressing or the like but often it is merely a cover for a particularly vicious form of pyramid selling, now supposedly illegal.

For thousands of people doing boring jobs in overcrowded, badly lit and ill-ventilated offices and factories, the prospect of working in the "front room" must appear attractive. It is, after all, the response most often hurled at women who suggest that the labour expended in housework should be accorded some exchangeable use value. However the problem merely begins there. For instance many houses are less than adequate for living let alone as industrial undertakings, yet the poor who are most vulnerable to the homework idea are also often those living in bad housing.

Social contact in factories can be a compensating factor and in terms of organisation it is essential. Isolated in their homes, surrounded by familiars, the level of alienation merely increases. The mere domestic adjuncts to a woman's daily lot assume very different proportions when they are impeded as a form

of social interaction. The comment of many homeworkers in this respect is interesting in that they say that they would far rather work in a factory.

Other questions are raised given that a considerable proportion of homeworkers are immigrant women who have cultural barriers preventing them from real contact with the outside world. All these points have to be considered and the future course of actions and policies related to them.

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The idea behind this pamphlet is to set out the history of homework and attempts to put it to an end. It is a very different way of looking at the homeworker's story but a demonstration of the context in which the different aspects of the homework problem originated. Without this understanding the "cures" are likely to be less than effective.

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How many people would be prepared to work for 44 pence per hour? The answer is one suspects not many. Nevertheless 6 per cent of the sample of homeworkers surveyed by the recent report of the Low Pay Unit were earning this - if not less. It is hardly conceivable that in 1972 we would find weekly incomes this low. A country which is a member of the European Community should not be in this position. The reason for this is that the country is not a member of the European Community. The reason for this is that the country is not a member of the European Community.

## 2. historical background

The history of homework is a long, complex and not always "dishonourable" one. In the pre-capitalist era, the overwhelming majority of people worked in the village and in their own homes. The volume of production created in this way gradually decreased, initially under the influence of the mercantile factories. It declined further with the intensive capitalisation of the cotton and wool industries. In those days homeworking was called "cottage industry" or "outwork." Often it was integrated into a factory process: some cloth, for example, would only go "inside" to be dyed or fulled.

There was little incentive to work in a factory then and the misery suffered by those who did is well documented. Gradually however the less efficient methods began to feel the draught from the introduction of the newer, factory based, machinery and at some point in time outworking became the exception rather than the rule in one sector of the economy after another. The "cottagers" (who had been all but wiped out by enclosures) were literally starved out of existence. The early 1830s saw the hand loom weavers sink into a plight, the degraded nature of which was hardly to be relished. 'By 1835 the hand loom cotton weavers were mostly employed by large manufacturers, who in many cases had power loom factories as well. Thus the hand loom weaver fell into two classes—those who could compete . . . and those who could not. The former were the worst off. They formed a fringe around the factory, a reserve of labour to be utilised when the factory was overworked. Thus they were employed only casually, but helped, with the aid of doles out of poor rates, to keep down the general level of wages for weaving in and out of the factory" Mark Hovell, *The Chartist Movement*, (MIUP, 1925).

It would be less than honest to suggest that the condition of these weavers as described by E. P. Thompson (*The Making of the English Working Class*, Penguin, 1972) pertain in the houses of homeworkers today but then the relative standards of support have also changed! Some researchers are now suggesting that

the "standard of life" of low income households does fall below acceptable minimum and again the Low Pay Unit has done some valiant work here. Homeworkers are by and large more vulnerable because it is frequently the case that they are engaged in homework because of the deficiency of income they already suffer.

The situation in other aspects is however all too similar today. The homeworkers are still adjuncts to the factory process doing work that could just as easily be performed inside but doing it for lower rates. It has been impossible to fix proper rates for homeworkers because those established by Wages Councils apply to specific grades with certain skills doing a certain volume of work in a set time. There is no measurement, and many trade unions are hostile to homework because they see it as a continuing threat to factory wages. The linking of homeworkers' wages to those of the lowest factory grade takes little or no account of the effort expended, the time involved or the skill content of the job. One of the facets of "industrial revolution" outwork was that the workers by and large managed to control the pricing even as it sank ever lower. Today's homeworkers have no such control. They are invariably *told* in advance what the rate is, but this rate is seldom publicised and frequently one hears of homeworkers doing similar jobs being paid vastly different rates. There appears to be little opportunity for negotiation. Thus a vicious circle is created with organised and unorganised workers cutting each others' throats. One of the worst areas is clothing where earnings for the whole industry are well below the national average. The presence of a vast "reserve" of homeworkers helps to perpetuate this. It is still in the textile and clothing industries that the greatest number of homeworkers are found and it is there that the misuse is at its greatest.

As the 19th Century wore on, the gradual separation of the homeworker and the outworker became more obvious. The scale of factory production increased across all industries and the rapacious demands for increased output eliminated

most of the remainder of the cottage industries. However in areas such as lace-making, large parts of the clothing industry, and even iron puddling and chain making, work continued to be performed in small shops in villages and communities, and increasingly by individuals in the home. Alongside this grew up the less formal, but important phenomena of people doing parts of a process in a back room. This was the reverse of the previous situation where the process was controlled from the village whereas now it is run from the factory. This perhaps provides a clue towards the resolution of the problem. Many of these mid-century changes are reflected today with sectors like Harris tweed and Yorkshire broadloom being essentially outwork while homeworkers continue to operate, as did their immiserated weaver forebears, on the basis of receiving their materials from a merchant or commissioner and returning them to him after processing.

In 1867 the conditions of domestic workers, servants and maids were regulated by statute but the lot of the homeworker remained undisturbed. Some areas of work were "controlled" under the aegis of the Wages Boards, but for homeworkers the greatest protection was often lost when trades were "exempted" as, for example, was straw plaiting in 1878. The elimination of protection by the very same legislation that was designed to protect is as much a feature of today as it was 100 years ago.

Hand in hand with industrial development, came changes in factory structure. Not only was it ceasing to be a productive unit and becoming one geared to consumption but the extended family networks were breaking down as the patterns of migration became more intense. The established practice of members of the family supporting each other began to fail. Thus in order to survive it became necessary to seek alternate forms of income. During the "great depression" many homes (and not just those in rural areas) turned to "outwork" or "homework" as a way of keeping the wolf or the debt collector from the door. It was in fact the only way, short of the

workhouse. The patterns of homeworkers that hold true today were also established in this period. Older women separated from their kin, younger mothers trying to support a family, the under employed and the disabled—all were likely contenders. The only really big section that has been added in the latter part of the 20th Century is the immigrant families.

### proposals for reform

Despite the perpetuation of the practice with its attendant depressing effect on wages, the trade union movement in general was pre-occupied with other issues. This factor has constantly dogged attempts at change, as by the time sufficient momentum has been gathered, another issue loomed on the horizon and the homeworker again plunged into obscurity. At each stage, *ad hoc* groups one stage remote from the official trade union movement are left with the tasks both of demanding reform and of educating those with the industrial and political power to enact that reform. In this context it is interesting to note the strength of the campaign mounted by the Women's Trade Union League (WTUL) at the turn of the century to get homework and outwork strictly controlled. The WTUL was active in publicising the abuses and used both organisation in the sweated industries and the promotion of parliamentary action to push for change. This was also the period of considerable growth in the strength of women in trade unions generally, such growth reaching its peak in the formation of the NFWW (National Federation of Women Workers).

In April 1897 the WTUL said of the Clothing Wages Board: "... the Victorian experiment at crushing out sweating is in full swing, though it is early yet perhaps to criticise results, yet its effectiveness ought not to fail from lack of proper representation of the employed" (WTUL, *Women's Trade Union Review*, 1897). The working class representatives on the Board at the time were the Pressers, the Tailors, the Cutters and Trimmers, and two women who had taken part in the 1882 tailoresses strike. The annual report

of HM Women's Factory Inspectorate for 1896 said: "It is not possible under the present law to check to any appreciable extent the practice of giving out work to persons who have been already employed during a legal working day. It is most important not only for the sake of the workers but also for the protection of the public whose garments are taken home to be finished in insanitary conditions, that further steps should be taken in this matter". "Giving out" was made illegal for silk workers by an Act of 1845 but was commonplace half a century later. Adelaide Anderson writing in 1901 said that "the custom was common but illegal of giving work to take home". We are still faced with the problem in the 1970s. However it would appear that official displeasure was excited less by the flouting of the letter and spirit of the law than from a desire to protect the middle classes from whom the garments were being made in "insanitary conditions". Naturally clothing produced in houses where disease was endemic did cause a health hazard but one would have thought that justice demanded attention to the "sickness" rather than the "symptoms".

In 1899 a Bill was introduced in the House of Commons by Tennant and Dilke under which factory inspectors would be brought into the home. In a report in July of that year on the Dublin tailors' "crusade against the evils of homework" the WTUL said: "No government bill can fail to deal with the question even if they go no further than making the abortive sections of the (Factory & Workshops) 1895 Act workable". The Tennant-Dilke Bill fell in favour of the Factory and Workshops Bill introduced by the Government in 1900. Among its proposals were the establishment of lists of outworkers who would be given particulars of the jobs in hand so that they could calculate their wages. The Act became law in 1901 but it was 1 January the following year before the Home Secretary issued the orders that made section 107 (which established the lists), section 108 (which prescribed "unwholesome processes") and section 110 (which prohibited the use of infected premises)

effective. The orders covered "the making, cleaning, working, altering, ornamenting, finishing and repairing of wearing apparel and any other work incidental thereto; the making, ornamenting, mending and finishing of lace and of lace curtains and net; cabinet and furniture making and upholstery work; the making of electro-plate; the making of files and fur pulling."

In spite of various subsequent amendments and some radical alterations to the law of employment in other respects, the lot of the homemaker in many trades is still in effect covered by an Act which is 74 years old. In practice the extension of the inspectorate was less than was hoped for, and there was an even less beneficial effect of the 1901 law than of the dissolution of the Wages Boards. The check that they had made on the excesses of "sweating" were not compensated by the "safeguards" of the new law.

The WTUL reported in October 1902 the case of Luton straw plaiters who were getting 2½d per hat. An instance had apparently come to light when one of the women had gone to the local Guardians for relief because "she could not keep body and soul together". The Guardians were quoted as saying this was nothing new. Felt hat workers around this time were asking for details upon which they could compute their wages. Commenting on this demand the WTUL pointed out that "the need for such powers is often greater for the homemaker than for the factory worker". Both this suggestion and the extension of the inspectorate had been implicit in amendments laid down during the debate on the 1901 Act but they had been rejected by the Government of the day. Again one is forced to consider comparisons with the situation today, with a lack of adequate information about rates, surpluses and so forth, the information available being even less than the amount of data which is usually available to trade unionists in the course of normal collective bargaining.

Despite the concerns shown by women

trade unionists of the day the TUC itself was less than responsive, though the textile and clothing unions were, as ever, badly affected by homeworking. A motion appeared at the 1902 Congress but with the pre-occupation over Taff Vale, its remission in reality spelt death.

On 29 February 1904, Nanette asked the Secretary of State for War about "sweating" in Government workshops making uniforms, but the War Office replied that it was none of their concern. In April 1905 a *Home Industries Bill* was read for the first (and last) time; and in February 1906 Ramsay MacDonald quoted the case of a Mrs Thorogood who was getting one penny per hour for making trousers for volunteers. It was abundantly clear to all who bothered to investigate, that tremendous suffering was resulting from homework. Their plight had also been noted by Seeborn Rowntree in his study of York. Yet the Government continually resisted calls from the unions, from women's organisations, from individuals such as MacDonald, and from a shocked middle class, to establish a Royal Commission.

Then in July 1906, the *Daily News* backed the famous "Sweated Exhibition" in London, similar to that held in Berlin the previous year. At the time Constance Smith wrote: "It has undoubtedly awakened a very widespread sense of horror and dismay. Here indeed at our door, we found, were facts to 'stagger humanity' indeed. O Civilisation! O Commerce! and convenience, what crimes are committed daily in your names!" (WTUL, *Women's Trade Union Review*, 1897). There were 45 trades represented, including glass barrelling, cigarette making, shoe beading, glove sticking, hosiery manufacture, jewel cases, tennis balls belts and ties, furniture, brushes and saddlery as well as the usual clothing industries. Among them were representatives of the estimated 90,000 people in the East End of London alone. Matchbox makers were getting 2½d a gross "and find your own glue" An entire woman's skirt would yield but 5d. Evidence was presented of people working twelve, fourteen, even sixteen hours

a day for wages of between five and seven shillings a week. Again the WTUL pointed out the advantages of the employer having no rent to pay, no upkeep in the slack season, and no warming and lighting.

In the era of free trade versus protection and of the first Labour members of parliament, progress on this issue of homework was painfully slow. Chiozza Money tried, unsuccessfully, to persuade the Government to give him time for his "Wages Board Bill" (the WTUL considered that this plus the licensing of premises was the only answer), whilst others were calling in vain for a Royal Commission. Lobbying on the other side was however more effective and as late as July 1906 the most they would offer was a Commission of Enquiry. What finally appeared was a Select Committee on Homework (1907-8) which aroused so much comment that the "Anti-Sweating League" was able to publicise the problem widely and demand its abrogation. Eventually in 1909 Trade Boards Act was passed which concentrated on the worst areas of operation.

### the inter-war period

However this sudden burst of activity did not really solve the problems and the great industrial struggles of 1910-13 again took precedence. Then came the war and its aftermath which was quickly followed by the General Strike and the Tory attack on the organised movement. So it was the early thirties before the issue next came on the agenda. There had been an investigation in 1923 but this had been predominantly concerned with the implications of the Unemployment Insurance Law. In any event the vast number of war disabled and war widows added a new dimension to the problem with organisations such as the British Legion and the Women's Institute (both of which were set up by the state) actively promoting the idea of working at home. This presented new problems for those opposed to homework for not only was the membership of unions declining, along with their industrial



power, but the actual number of homeworkers was increasing, albeit under some supervision of a sort when it was done by recognised bodies. The British Legion was such an example with ex-servicemen making articles that could be sold in Legion shops and bazaars. The well-marked deck of cards now had a joker dealt into them—that of organisations widening the scope and depth of homeworking without any guarantees for those already in it. Thus the scales and rates were pushed downwards yet again at a time when prices were beginning to fall.

By the beginning of the 1930s the practice of homeworking had become so institutionalised that for the employers it formed an essential part of the process not only to keep down wages (though no doubt that was high on their priorities) but also to perform processes that were either unsuited to machines, not mechanisable or cheaper when done by hand. In these circumstances it makes little sense to provide factory space when there are a vast reservoir of women, many of whose husbands and fathers had been dumped on the scrap-heap of capitalism.

It would be untrue to say that the trade unions neglected the issue totally. It was just that the times brought greater clamour from other sources. In the years of very high unemployment the fatalism on economic policy did not blow a wind that yielded some good for the homeworker. At the 1931 TUC Conference, E. Machin of the Tailors and Tailoresses (those worst affected) moved "That in view of the increase in this system of working in the big industrial centres, thus saddling the workers with the cost of workshop accommodation, heat and light, and by such action depriving them of all benefits under Unemployment Acts, this Congress instructs the General Council to place before the Home Secretary the necessity of providing by legal enactment complete workshop accommodation or alternatively by the employer for the cost of the same over and above the legal minimum rates of wages in operations under the determination of the Trades Boards" (TUC Congress Report, 1931). Speaking on his resolution,

Machin said that in the West End of London, journeymen tailors were compelled to provide their own workshop accommodation.

It is something of a reflection on everyone in the Labour movement that the substance of that motion constitutes a set of demands that have still have to be realised. Homeworkers still have to bear the cost of heating and lighting, no account of which is made in the appropriate Wages Council, and because they are invariably self-employed, they lose all rights to benefit for sickness or unemployment. Most employers today insist that homeworkers are self-employed and one homeworker said at a recent Low Pay Unit seminar that the local Employment Office told her that "this would be better". What he meant was that it would be easier for him. While shrinking from a total conspiracy theory, we appear to see here an implicit collusion of an avaricious employer and a bureaucrat to deprive a homeworker of her legitimate rights.

It is interesting to note that the object of the 1931 TUC resolution is still alive, for the TUC recommendation to the Department of the Employment on the Employment Protection Bill only went part of the way to meeting this. Homeworkers are still penalised for working at home by being forced to pay for many of their own services, despite the WTUL demand for action on this point 75 years ago. Following the discussion at the 1931 Congress, representatives of all unions involved met the General Council where the force of the resolution was emasculated. The result of their solicitations to the Home Secretary was a statement that the "legislative programme was so congested that it could not be accomplished in the foreseeable future" (TUC Congress Report, 1932).

### the post-war period

The matter lay dormant after this rebuff though never far below the surface. During the second war, the establishment of the Joint Industrial Councils (JICS)

brought into the negotiating arena many more of the trades in which homeworking was prevalent. So it was at the 1947 TUC Congress that the National Union of Hosiery Workers tabled a resolution which drew attention to the growth of outworking and called upon the General Council to conduct an enquiry into the whole question.

In June 1948, A. Conley of the Garment Workers (and one of the founder members of the General Council back in 1921) presided over a Conference to consider the Hosiery Workers' resolution. Representatives from the Hosiery Workers, the Cutlery Union, Silk Workers, Boot and Shoe Operatives and Repairers, the Glovers, Leather Workers, the General and Municipal Workers and the Tailor and Garment Workers attended. This spread of unions reflected the way in which the problem had grown. The result was that a questionnaire was sent to all unions to gauge the full extent of homeworking. The Conference suggested that the results should be sent to the National Joint Advisory Committee to see whether the Ministry of Labour should be asked to introduce compulsory legislation on homeworkers.

38 unions replied to the survey and 23 said that for them the problem did not exist. From the replies it was clear that of the estimated 25,000 homeworkers in total, 20,000 were in areas covered by the Hosiery and Tailor and Garment Workers Union. Acting on this, the General Council met the Minister to press for better control. They stressed the bad conditions and said that more reliable figures were required than were available under the existing Factories Acts. These Acts required employers in certain trades to provide particulars to the local authorities. The deputation urged the setting up of a central register. For the second time, however, TUC championing of the homeworker plight received little sympathy from a Labour government. It is possible that this has to a degree coloured union response.

Two years later another speaker was at the Congress rostrum, this time C. G.

Croucock of the Hosiery Workers. He drew attention to the distinction between homeworkers and outworkers. This was important then (even today many still confuse the two). The still extant cottage and croft industries and the small engineering shops are examples of outwork. In 19th century terms, this is an "honourable" trade, being paid proper rates per piece and usually working under reasonable conditions with a cost structure which reflects overheads and ancillaries such as transportation. The woman treading away at a sewing machine in her own house, paying for the light and heat, having concern for her children or for aged people in the home and often having to pay her own portage costs is a very different matter. There is a grey area but it is fairly small and not a sufficient reason for not acting. In 1950 Mr. Croucock said: "... we know of people who have given up their work inside the factory. They would never have thought of working after recognised hours but once the work is sent to them they work all hours of the day and night. I have a feeling that if the manufacturers in my industry took concerted action and said that from a given date there should be no more outworkers many of the present homeworkers would come into the factories. How can we legislate against the employment of children when the work is delivered to the home. Visitors found that they were engaged on the Sabbath Day in homeworking. The net result is that the whole family joined forces" (TUC *Congress Report*, 1950). This impassioned appeal again highlights one aspect—that of the whole family doing the work assigned to one person. One does not have to use much imagination to think what that does to the rate or how it hides the true value of the work and degrades the effort being expended by the factory based workers.

For the General Council, A. Roberts pointed out that there were many disabled people who can do work at home but who could not work in a factory. It might, he said, cause a great deal of hardship if homework were abolished by legislation. It can thus be seen that

even as late as 1950 the TUC was far from fully aware of what was really happening. The disabled issue is, it is true, a real one, this is discussed further below; but it is impossible to use that as a reason for ignoring the real content of Croucock's plea.

Again the issue lay on the table during the period of prosperity that was built on the austerity programme guided by Stafford Cripps. The "never had it so good" society could ignore the hidden numbers that slipped through the net. By the end of the sixties, however, the great British dream began to evaporate and once again the homeworkers' cause burst through the screen of silence.

The 1959 Wages Council Act had laid down that the existence of homeworkers could not be ignored and that local authority lists should be kept up to date. The 1961 Factories Act spelt it out more plainly and stipulated that employers had to submit these lists to the appropriate local authority every six months. However the maximum fine laid down for not doing so was £20 and as the amount of surplus value accrued by a homeworker in a day would probably pay this, there was little real inducement on employers to pay very much heed to it. There have, moreover, been few prosecutions under the Act. Local authorities meanwhile are not universally adroit in maintaining the lists. Some do it very well, some as best as they can, and some view it as an inconvenience. Employers big and large give the preparation of the lists a very minor priority.

In August 1968 the TUC sent yet another circular out to the unions and to the Secretary of State for Employment and Productivity about the conditions under which homeworking was being carried on, and asked for an enquiry and stricter control. In November the unions were sent a copy of a letter from Barbara Castle stating that consideration was being given to omitting the existing sections of the Factories Acts dealing with homeworkers' health, safety and welfare and transferring them to public health legislation. The General Council's view was

that this should not be done. While this proposal might have met objections from some unions it would have opened the way for an examination of homework not as an adjunct to industry but as a device for circumventing the penal restrictions on earnings that disadvantaged families have to suffer. Its true social "merit" much lauded by its supporters, could have been studied properly. Whether being examined in isolation from its industrial context would have been profitable is another thing, but the TUC opposition reflected the views of many unions that homework as such is a bad thing and should, as far as possible, be eliminated.

That same year, the TUC's *Women's Conference* passed a resolution not to prohibit homework but to ensure that the workers were not being exploited in bad conditions and working with a lack of safety. A letter was sent to all unions concerned and the replies again indicated the lack of information in the area. Only one union had an agreement with an employer covering homeworkers and then merely that they should be union members. The main points of the replies were: (1) the likely safety hazards of industrial materials kept in the home; (2) insufficiently guarded sewing machines supplied by employers; (3) savings by the employers because he pays no national insurance, SET, redundancy pay, industrial training levy or holiday pay, and, (4) homeworkers are self employed but do not pay any National Insurance contributions on this basis.

The reply also drew attention to non-compliance with sections 133 and 134 of the 1961 Factories Act, the sending of six monthly lists to local authorities. They suggested that the then Department of Employment and Productivity undertake a sample survey into the current position.

The accent was now being placed on the safety and welfare hazards of homework and there is no doubt that these are important by-products of the cost cutting exercise which homework is *per se*. Even if it is subtly detracted from the

exploitative nature of the practice it did add a fresh complexion to the arguments against it.

### recent history

In 1969 the Prices and Incomes Board issued their report number 110 on the clothing industry which included just two pages on the subject; the 1971 TUC Conference saw the Hosiery and Knitwear Workers returning to the stand with H. L. Gibson moving that new legislation be brought in to cover outworkers (homeworkers) saying "It is impossible at present to obtain any reliable information. Companies are giving out large quantities of work to be undertaken in the homes of various people who then work on piece rates. Some local authorities keep the records, some try to, and some just laugh at it. We and the National Union of Tailor and Garment Workers have tried to get the information." Harold Gibson, one of the more sympathetic union leaders on this issue, was making yet another point that still requires satisfaction—the abysmal lack of information being supplied to those who have a statutory duty to do so.

In January 1972 these two unions met the General Council about the extent of homeworking, with particular emphasis on the health and safety aspects. They also pointed out that the 1961 Act was being ignored. Later that month the unions elicited the response from the then Employment Secretary, Robert Carr, that there was no need for an enquiry as one undertaken by the Factory Inspectorate in 1966 had revealed "no evidence of substantial hazards or grounds for serious concern about the problems of homeworking". Such a finding was naturally almost inevitable when no-one actually knows the true extent of homeworking and the hard-pressed inspectorate finds it impossible to visit every dangerous factory let alone a reasonable sample of homeworkers. One also suspects that the TUC knew that they would get little sympathy from the administration of which Robert Carr was a member. Hopes brightened however late in 1974 when the

Employment Protection Bill consultative document was published and the NUHKW and NUTGW brought the subject of homeworking through the textile committee of the TUC and submitted a series of recommendations on the Bill to Michael Foot.

When the Bill itself was published, only one or two clauses had been amended, including a re-wording of some clauses in the Wages Council Act. The effect of these will be to embrace more workers but it will not remove any of the basic inequalities, many of which have ironically been created by legislation.

This historical summary, though long, has hopefully shown both the way in which the different aspects of homework have originated and how progressives at different points in time have tried to improve their lot, albeit without very much success.

Homeworking grew up as such in the middle part of the last century by operating as a profitable supplement to various sectors of manufacturing industry, particularly in the garment sector. Changes in prices always hit most hard those doing homework and by the Great War many were obviously in a very bad plight. After the war the numbers swelled and within a decade it had become so much a part of the processes that considerable vested interest had become established. Again as prices fell, many tried to do even more in order to maintain their income, a classic under-development syndrome. As more evidence came to light, and especially after the second war, the major misuses became supplemented by a host of minor ones including one which has been present through the years—that of the considerable health and safety hazards.

### 3. the contemporary scene

Given the background described above, perhaps the first question we should ask is how many homeworkers there are? Unfortunately nobody really knows though some work being done at Warwick University may throw more light on this. Questions asked in Parliament in 1973 and 1974 failed to elicit any further information, the answer being given that central figures are not kept. As local authority lists are not open to inspection by anyone other than a public health inspector, it is difficult to find out from them, even assuming they were up to date. A survey conducted by Peter Townsend in 1968-69 suggests that there may be anything up to 250,000 people so employed. We ought first to be clear on exactly what we are examining. There are a number of workers (usually women) who particularly in clothing, take work home from the factory for finishing. Despite being illegal this often qualifies for a bonus and one can imagine the difficulties in policing this, let alone controlling or stopping it, without a change in the law. Nevertheless it does involve the same order of domestic cost and disruption that occurs elsewhere.

Homeworkers can be divided into those who do it as the sole means of income and those who do it to supplement a normal wage (excluding a pension or other transfer payment). It is difficult again to see how one could control what is in effect a form of moonlighting. The job may be similar to that done at work but not necessarily so. Then we come to the main group—those who perform work at home as a main means of income or to supplement some fixed payment such as a pension or allowance.

Again we do not really know how many there are or whether the number is increasing or decreasing. In clothing, the the 1948 TUC figure of 20,000 had become 15,000 in the PIB Report 110 in 1968, and 18,500 in the 1974 CIR Report 77, whose research was conducted in 1972. But this only covers one industry and we must also consider the typing, enveloping, addressing, packaging, boxing and so forth that occurs in trades that are neither adequately organised or under the protection

of a wages council. Work may be given to people either by a manufacturer as part of a process the majority of which is factory based or it may be handed out by a commissioner working on behalf of himself, a single employer or a number of employers. The PIB, in Report 110, defined the three groups differently: those employed directly by a firm and appearing on the payroll; those employed by agents or intermediaries of a firm; and those of self-employed status. As subsequent work has shown, there is little difference in effect between these three classifications though those who are "self-employed" are effectively outside the scope of both the wages council system and its inspectorate. Thus it is in the interests of the employer to ensure as far as possible that he does not actually "employ" homeworkers. CIR Report 49 on the Pin, Hook and Eye Wages Council added yet another category of homeworker—those doing mainly therapeutic work in hospitals and other institutions. In this context it is worth noting an establishment near Bristol where mentally handicapped people undertake work at union rates. But this is by definition more appropriate to the "outwork" classification. This confusion as to definition does make the problem of a realistic analysis of the situation more difficult.

This has been discovered by all the researchers up to and including the Low Pay Unit. For instance, having accepted the CIR definition (in turn drawn from the Wages Council) the Low Pay Unit included a large number who were in fact commissioned and some more who were self-employed. In any event very few homeworkers in any of the samples enjoyed what small benefits there are in being an accredited employee of a company.

All the official reports and those of other bodies have drawn attention to the inadequacies of the systems of protection to prevent exploitation or illness and injury. The complications brought about by the overlapping prerogatives merely add to the problem. For instance, it is the responsibility of the local authority

public health department to maintain the lists, supposedly sent in by employers in February and August each year. This is for the purpose of preventing the spread of contagious diseases and to control working conditions in certain occupations such as electroplating or tinning. It is the job of the wages council inspectorate to check on pay levels. In 1972, 3,000 visits were made to homeworkers by public health inspectors but only five homeworkers were found by the wages council inspectorate to have been underpaid (CIR, *Report 77*, HMSO, 1974). Yet from the surveys undertaken subsequently it is quite clear, given the random sampling, that the majority of homeworkers are being paid less than the statutory minimum rate in wages councils areas, and that bad working conditions are not the same as inadequate working conditions. In effect the current method of supervision and control is meaningless and possibly harmful as it constantly tends to support the lie that by and large everything is all right. It enables such devoted supporters of the trade union movement as Robert Carr to say that there is no need to look any deeper.

### rates of pay

What are the rates of pay for work in this grey and obscure area of the UK employment market? Evidently, not very good. In 1968, the PIB conducted a survey among clothing homeworkers in London, Basildon and Luton and they found that on average the weekly remuneration was £5 9s 6d just under half the average weekly earnings for women in clothing at that time. In Basildon and Central London they found few rates on or near the minima; 6s 0d to 10s 0d being the norm with 8s 0d in Central London. They found one person getting 3s 9d per hour and another 3s 2d. In Luton, where millinery is the main trade, the homeworkers were employed for the princely sum of between 2s 0d and 2s 6d an hour. Even Aubrey Jones was moved to conclude that "there is some evidence of exploitation" (PIB, *Report 110*, 1968).

The two CIR reports came across the same sort of evidence but though they con-

ducted a survey as part of their report (number 77) on clothing they did not choose to publish the details of its results. It did say that 20 of the 26 homeworkers it interviewed who were working from establishments where similar operations were carried on under factory conditions, were getting above the statutory minimum rate. The Pin, Hook and Eye Report on the other hand noted that the rate for homeworkers enabled them to earn fractionally over half the factory rate for a 40 hour week. This they attributed to the TGWUS desire to see homework abolished.

Despite the anti-union bias of the CIR, or at least the umbrella legislation which set it up, its report number 49 did come up with some startling conclusions. It noted for instance that while hourly rates can be established, homeworkers are in fact paid by the job load and therefore it was up to the worker to fix their own rate by how long or hard they were prepared to work. The report echoed the sentiments of the PIB and, in a very revealing paragraph, said of the role of the wages council inspectorate: "Even when the inspector times jobs being done, he has to exercise considerable judgement as a result of the definition imposed by the piecework basis time rates. Where timing of a job is not done, homeworkers may exaggerate their earnings capacity and say that they are satisfied with the rates since they are anxious not to lose work for which there is always considerable demand. In one case a homemaker told us that she could earn only 12.5p per hour on a particular job. She had told an inspector that she could earn more, because she was afraid of losing the work. Inspections of homeworkers over the last five years have not recorded any infringement of the wages regulation order, although no figures are available as to how many individuals were visited" (PIB, *Report 110*, HMSO).

In other words a combination of fear and misunderstanding on the part of the homemaker, blatant sweating and law-breaking by the employer, and ineptitude by the inspectorate, come together to deprive these women of a living wage.

In the Low Pay Unit report, only 16 of the 50 women interviewed were covered by wages councils and all but two of them were getting less than the relevant statutory minimum rate. Of the total sample, 80 per cent were getting 30p an hour or less and there were three women who got 3p or less. If they had worked for the whole 116 hours in a week the most they could earn would be £3.48.

While this might not be totally representative of homeworkers generally, it does give some guide to the way things do happen. Furthermore, all the work so far has only looked at the tip of the iceberg. While the Low Pay Unit did discover people working for agents/commissioners, the PIB did not. The CIR did not consider the point worth investigating. It was accepted by the groups that by and large direct employers paid better than agents.

The position of the agent (the "middleman"), is similar to that of the merchant in the 19th century. They have a "team" of homeworkers whom they employ on such contract work as they derive from employers. Often the worker does not know whom he is really working for. In some cases in London, the PIB found that the homeworkers even had to collect the stuff from the factory or shop themselves, which involved them in transportation costs over and above the other costs they are asked to bear.

It is not just small firms that are engaged in this sort of thing. One is frequently given the impression on reading at least the official data, that the practice of homeworking exists where there are minor companies operating on the fringe of an industry. This may well be true in some cases and especially applies in the case of the agents who are merely pushing up the final price for the article. However a company that markets model football teams for 50p pays one of the homeworkers £3.50 per thousand providing a profit ratio of 130 per cent. Another woman makes lampshades for 1½p each which retail at 56p. These are examples discovered by the Low Pay Unit. A more recent survey conducted by Long Eaton

Trades Council located two homeworkers employed by Steada-Raywarp, a subsidiary of the giant textile multinational Courtaulds (profits for 1975 of £125 million) who were getting 12p an hour in September 1974 and had earned about £3.60 a week on average over the previous six months. Long Eaton Trades Council made two attempts to contact Steada-Raywarp "but no company representative was available for comment". It is also interesting in this context that when the Trades Council asked the local newspaper to co-operate in the publication of their findings they were initially less than helpful and ultimately declined the opportunity.

Because the majority of homeworkers are women, the work of the Women's Liberation Group in North London is worth examining. Their findings (published by the British Sociological Society) are broadly in line with this pamphlet, the WTUL and others. They were concerned that the practice reinforces the role of women in a capitalist society and the results confirmed this. Why they asked, do women do this work?

The simple answer must be to earn money. But there are, of course, more deep rooted reasons for their perpetuation of this exploitative use of labour. Although the Women's liberation Group found no single parent families, they did discover a high proportion of immigrants amongst the homeworkers. The PIB report asserted that: "the majority of homeworkers were married women whose aim is to supplement the family income. Many are former factory workers who for domestic reasons prefer to work at home." The Low Pay Unit found 13 single parent families and another 14 who were either disabled themselves or caring for disabled, sick or aged relatives. The CIR found in that the Pin Hook and Eye industry the homeworkers were: "either mothers with young children or old age pensioners doing homework to supplement their income."

The disparities in these reasons no doubt relate as much to occupational differ-

ences as to geographic. More important is that the majority do not want to talk about what they are doing—this reluctance being evident from the reports. The Low Pay Unit circumvented the bureaucratic silence by using a well-known disc-jockey to contact the homeworkers. The Women's Liberation Group found that many people were reluctant to talk because they were afraid of repercussions from the local social security office. A similar view was found in the Liberal Party survey of lace homeworkers. The author's own investigation in an area of Watford in which some women apparently worked for well-known childrens clothing chain produced almost identical reactions. The point seems to be that people isolated in this way view outsiders in an identical light whether they are trying to increase their income or reduce it.

The employer's view of homework is much the same today as it was in the last century. The PIB report and CIR 49 and 77 were ominously similar in their findings: "homeworkers are a buffer against fluctuations in demand", "homeworkers have little control over the amount or type of work" and "they may receive little or no work in slack periods", CIR *Report 77* said that "the reason for using homeworkers most frequently given by employers was the difficulty of obtaining a sufficient number of skilled, indoor workers". They were also told that in some cases they had started using homeworkers because the establishment premises were too small. A few, however, did actually say: because it was cheaper than using indoor workers". And it is.

The actual cost of doing the homework has as yet not been adequately assessed. Aside from the heating and lighting which has to be paid for by the homeworker, some even have to pay for transport either by their own means or they have to reimburse the employer for bringing and taking away! There is not only the cost of the transport itself but also the fact that this time is not paid. There is no allowance for wear and tear of the domestic scene. The Low Pay Unit found carpets ruined by glue; fluff and dust

penetrating the furniture; and metal filings scattered about the place. Then there is the social cost in terms of disruption to family life and the deprivation caused to the rest of the family. One woman whose function it was to pack Christmas crackers (made for 12p and retailing at £1.45) not only had her whole living space filled with them but had to find extra storage space because the collection day was unco-ordinated. Of course she was not recompensed for this.

We have the as yet unsubstantiated report of a factory in Southall employing all Asian women who at the same time as laying them off enclosed in their pay packets a note saying that they could do the work at home if they cared to apply to a given address. Again, this might be exceptional, but it clearly shows the misuses that are available in abundance by the unscrupulous in a society whose economic philosophy does not have much time for scruples, only profit.

### trade union activity

The majority of homeworkers are not members of any trade union. The Tailor and Garment Workers attempts at organising have been constantly frustrated by a variety of problems. One of their London officials did come up with the idea of adopting the American practice of having a label inserted in every garment—"made by Trade Union Labour" but this didn't come to anything. The Hosiery and Knitwear union is also very conscious of the problems, as are the TGWU and GMWU who collectively account for 90 per cent of the employment areas in which homeworking is practiced. They are also the unions who fill the workers seats on the relevant wages councils but given that much of the homework is dissimilar to that done in the factories the assessment of a proper rate is difficult. The GMWU did recently persuade one wages council to establish a working party to examine homeworking and the results of this may well be useful. There is then the problem of recruiting homeworkers. Most unions have little enough time to cope with the problems involved in organising their fac-



ory members let alone tramping around streets looking for homeworkers. When it comes to servicing, the first responsibility of the union is to its members and although the low rates of pay being gained by homeworkers is very relevant in this context, the unions can do little more than press for higher overall pay and hope to carry the homeworkers in the van of progress. On top of this is the basic union philosophy that as far as possible homeworking should be eliminated.

But this only applies in "organised" areas. As mentioned above, there are a large number of people doing typing, addressing envelopes and similar work, on a very *ad hoc* basis. There is also the ubiquitous "directory" racket. This is where one is invited to send, say, 60p for "a way to earn up to £20 a week" in one's spare time. What is actually received is a list of addresses to which one again has to write, again sending money for more lists. The person concerned then writes to other people suggesting that they place adverts asking for 60p for a list . . . and so on. This is supposed to be illegal, but it continues.

### social security

Another background influence which is very strong, especially among older people, and one which leads to desperation, is the desire to "avoid going on the parish." The Samuel Smiles influence was strengthened by the Poor Law and the ever present dangers of the workhouse. The hostile parsimony of the Board of Guardians has subsequently been given respectability by legislation in the Means Test, the National Assistance Board and the Supplementary Benefits Commission. From the standpoint of the homeworker, cut off from the outside world there is at present little of substance in the way of protection. If they know of the existence of the wages council they are unlikely to know what the SMR (Statutory Minimum Rate) is. They may be on a pension or allowance which could be reduced if it is discovered that they are earning extra money. For women trying to eke out an existence on supplementary benefit, any

leakage of information is likely to result in a visit from a social security official. They are not told in advance of the earnings yield of the work they are doing nor are they advised of their rights (such as they are) under the law. They have no comparative rates by which to judge their pay.

There are specific categories of people for whom homework represents the sole or major source of income. Those such as the disabled or those looking after them, single parent families—especially where young children are involved—and of course the blind, all have considerable difficulties. Those who argue that homework is the means by which these people live may well be correct but there are two ways of looking at this.

Considerable effort could be expended by the unions. The NUHKW (National Union of Hosiery and Knitwear Workers) and the NUTGW (National Union of Tailor and Garment Workers) are not unalive to the problem even if they have been less than successful in forcing companies to pay a proper wage. A wage level commensurate to the *full* value of the work *plus* an allowance for the overheads at present borne by the homeworker would be a start. Stiffer penalties could be imposed for regulation infringements.

### the responsibility of the state

But all this totally evades an important consideration. The responsibility of the state is to act not just in a legislative capacity to compel companies to be socially accountable but also in an administrative capacity to support the people involved so that they do not have to become embroiled in the unhappy business. In addition, those who speak for the socially disadvantaged would do well to remember that time and time again the point has been made that poor homework rates of pay help to keep down already low rates of wages for the half million men and women in the industries worst affected, and to which the homeworkers rate will be linked. This interaction of low wages plus the reserve army in the home, helps

no-one in the long run and only the very few at present. What social value is achieved after all by forcing women to continue to be isolated from the remainder of the community? And for immigrant women already hampered by cultural barriers, it merely prolongs the agony.

Those on supplementary benefit, trying to bring the total income up to adequate levels are often trapped between the cohabitation rule and near starvation for their family. Employers are aware that they are scared of the social security people and so can virtually blackmail them. The implicit recommendation above about proper scales involves people working a full week. For mothers with young children or with other responsibilities this could be as disadvantageous as it is supposed to be beneficial. Were they allowed to earn a small amount without losing benefit they would still be vulnerable. They are in a "Catch 22" situation which only the state can resolve by ensuring that their income is sufficient for their needs.

Finally it is worth touching on institutional homework such as that done for therapeutic reasons by the mentally or physically handicapped in the day centres up and down the country. This broadly comes within our ambit except to note that one or two places do adopt a factory-type discipline and one in Bristol at least pays union rates. But the isolation which characterises homework is not there nor, one would hope, is the level of exploitation. Much the same applies to work done in prisons. It is neither homework pure and simple nor is it outwork and again there is doubt about the adequacy of the rates being paid but perhaps this is not the forum for proposals on penal reform.

This then is the rather dismal picture that emerges given the very superficial nature of the exploratory work that has so far been done. Quite what a full survey would reveal one shudders to think. There is, however, sufficient knowledge at present to articulate a programme which could consign most of the abuses to the dustbins of history.

## 4. the need for change

To put things right will require a compendium of remedies rather than one simple "cure." The extension of law has its limits, collective bargaining and the trade unions both suffer from institutional constraints, and simple moral appeal is likely to go unheard by the unscrupulous.

Disablements allowances, single parent support and more adequate pensions would remove the *need* for people to resort to homework in order that they can survive. Relaxation of some of the iniquities of the present rules of the supplementary benefits commission would also assist. Recognition that benefits are a *right* and not a charity by the Commission itself would be a start, although the law will have to be changed in order to confirm this right.

Bearing in mind the effort that was required to get the first Select Committee off the ground, that its terms of reference presupposed its limited findings, and that the subsequent Act of Parliament was full of holes, such a Commission in 1975 or 1976 should be considered, but very closely examined and monitored.

The sort of parcel of reforms, and they are no more than reforms, that would assist the homeworkers without any detrimental side-effects, naturally fall short of a blanket prohibition. Such a total ban has often been called for by the unions, but whilst the sympathy of all progressives may well be with them in this demand, it is perhaps as unrealistic as are the claims of those who suggest that homework has some social benefit. Such a total ban would of course be possible if it were coupled with complete alternative support for those who need the money.

### wages councils

All wages councils should have written into their constitution that all homeworkers be registered and that the functions being done by them are timed and valued on the same basis as in-work but with allowance being made for the factors

in the domestic situation that prevent the full performance rates being reached that are possible under factory conditions. This would enable homeworkers to achieve the same yield on earnings as the factory worker with the same effort input even though the final value of work output may be less.

The planned amendments to Wages Council constitution which eliminate the independent members could well be carried much further by such changes as introducing the voice of the homeworker directly. This would at the very least suffice until the unions have managed to locate the different operations that at present are not considered when standard rates are being established.

The wage councils inspectorate should be extended to police the rates with the finance for this coming from a levy on the employers such as the Clothing Manufacturers Federation and the employers' side of the hosiery and knitwear NJIC, meeting say 60 per cent of the cost with the other 40 per cent being met by the state. The levy could be on the same basis, with a similar administration, as the Industrial Training Levy. That is, those employers that can show adequate evidence of having complied with certain criteria in their treatment of homeworkers could be partly absolved from the levy.

The new Health and Safety inspectorate should also extend its regime into the home. Despite the various advances, there is continuing evidence of quite serious risks, out of all proportion to the remuneration involved, being borne by more than a few homeworkers. At a meeting held by the Low Pay Unit, homeworkers themselves spoke of solder pots on the gas stove, and of chemicals that could easily poison children having to be at hand during operations. It is however true today that most of the proscribed processes themselves are no longer being done. Even so a full investigation would undoubtedly reveal one or two instances of total abuses of this nature.

The Local Authority lists should be ex-

tended to all homeworkers and not just those prescribed under the 1961 Act and they should be kept up to date by employers and by a single responsible official at local level. More effective sanctions should be enacted to penalise those who continually flout the law (such as an increase in the fines to £200). Employers should also be bound to maintain a copy of the list where it would be open to inspection, as a right, not only to the inspectorate but also by unions and their accredited representatives.

Unions should take steps to monitor locally the outflow of work but obviously this is impossible where a shop is not effectively organised or where the "employer" is in fact an agent or commissioner. Nevertheless union officials would be able to inspect the lists of these people and could eventually judge the extent of operations on the part of the employer involved.

A typical case is that of a factory subcontracting its outwork through an agent, who in some cases is an employee of the company. In such cases, the ultimate responsibility is that of the company involved and it is there that any sanctions should be brought to bear. However in the first instance it may well be practical to force both the "real" employer and the agent to keep the lists.

One suggestion that has been made is that government finance should be made available to the unions to enable them to organise the homeworkers. Whilst this might seem attractive on the surface to some people, others may well see it as an unwelcome influence on the movement. In any event, the problem for the unions is not just one of finance, though that is important. A crucial issue is raised when the idea is mooted of extending the facilities of the union to people who are not members. Most officials will say that they have more than enough work in servicing those who are paid up, let alone those who have not even joined. On the other hand, surveys have shown that a substantial number of homeworkers would willingly join the appropriate union given the chance. One possible way out

would be for a government financed but otherwise independent body to collect the signatures of those homeworkers who wished to join the trade union and then pass these on. In this way subsequent problems would be the responsibility of the union in a proper fashion.

Even then the problem remains of unfamiliarity with some of the operations involved. Here again the bodies already in existence could help by allowing local union officials to become aware of the differences between the homework operations and those in the factory with which they are well acquainted.

### other specific proposals

"Giving out" should be banned altogether with penalties imposed on both those who give it and those who receive it. In this way there would be no temptation on either party. One has to recognise that otherwise some people will succumb to the variety of pressures brought to bear by the bosses. It is less a device to penalise recalcitrants as protection for those who may wish to decline such generous offers as "Here, take this home and finish it off—we'll add it to your bonus". To those who consider this a "perk", one must point out that it represents an important weakness in the protection of all workers and as such is intolerable. It would be nothing short of selfish to jeopardise the many for the sake of the few.

Agents, commissioners and other "middle men" should themselves be registered together with the people they employ. In this way a proper check could be kept on the rates of pay which would of course be those fixed by the Wages Council, the Joint Industrial Council or by direct negotiation with a *bona-fide* employer, for their homeworkers.

In this context unions may well find it practical to reduce the extent to which, when they do negotiate for homeworkers, they fix the rate at that of the lowest paid factory employee. As the foregoing evidence has shown, this leads not to a re-

duction in the amount of homework but an increase, as it becomes relatively more attractive to the employer. It is to be hoped that the other measures suggested would lead to the gradual decline in the practice that most unions desire. Other part time work (such as typing and envelope addressing) should be paid at the rate applicable to full time clerical workers in the locality, plus of course the homework premium. The prevailing rates should be included in advertisements for this sort of work.

All homeworkers should have "employed" status. This would mean that they would have a class-one stamp on their "insurance card," giving them full entitlement to benefits. They should be also eligible for the full range of facilities such as holiday, redundancy and sick pay, as is normal practice in their employing company.

On these points one has to consider the benefit entitlements of married women, especially as they constitute the bulk of homeworkers. Although a married woman may pay a full stamp she cannot for instance draw supplementary benefit or unemployment benefit on her own account. It would not be possible to modify the murky rules of the supplementary benefits commission just for homeworkers but most would agree that this sort of thing should disappear with the Sexual Discrimination Bill currently before Parliament.

A continuation of self-employed status not only perpetuates the iniquities of the homework system but will in fact make most of the homeworkers worse off under the new tax legislation for the self-employed.

### **the homework premium**

Bearing in mind the points that have been made about "heating and lighting" over the last century and a half, there would appear to be some justification for an additional payment to the basic rate of the homeworker to take account of the different costs involved.

These payments should cover rent, heating and lighting, running costs of any machinery involved plus an amount for the social cost to the domestic environment.

If the work were being done in the factory, then a proportion of the labour costs will be calculated for each employee for the "rates, rent and upkeep of the plant." In the same way a householder could assess the average daily cost of their home. The homework pay should have an addition made to it on the basis either of the average unit cost on the same basis as the pay (hourly or weekly) of these factors in relation to the home or on the basis of a similar unit cost as borne by the employer for his in-workers. In the case of agents, the former would apply but otherwise the matter might be negotiable or settled by Wages Council.

Heating and lighting should be assessed on the basis of for example a three kilowatt fire and two 100 watt lights running for the time needed to complete all the operations involved and which would be re-imbursed in full. Transport and other direct costs should be borne in total by the employer or agent. In calculating the various costs another criteria should be borne in mind. Much of the homework currently being done, is undertaken by less well advantaged people who, by the nature of things, tend to be living in less than perfect conditions. This would require some allowance over and above the variable costs set out above.

Finally the social cost item should include the disruption to the domestic life and any other incidental costs that arise because work is being done in the home—for example the use of a launderette rather than a washing machine.

It would be impossible at this stage to fix any percentage value to the premium, though it is unlikely to be less than 15 per cent on basic rates. In absolute terms, of course, it would be possible to evaluate particular cases. Sewing machines for instance have a certain rating so the total additional payment to someone in that

line would be around £2.50 to £3.00 per week (at January 1975 prices).

The recommendations that have been set out are many and are as applicable to the trade unions as to the Government. In this situation the areas of overlap are such that the different parties find it increasingly difficult to operate in a totally independent fashion.

For the groups outside the mainstream of the labour movement, however, there is a vital role. This is not only the one of constantly pressurising the political parties, the unions, the employers and the various institutions like the wages councils. It is also to work among the homeworkers themselves. Their confidence must be won, just as it was among German women over 70 years ago. They must be helped to realise that by bringing the problem out into the open they have more to gain than to lose.

By acting as a co-ordinating link between the homeworkers and the unions, groups such as Trades Councils and the women's collectives can both stimulate discussion and tackle the real problems as they arise.

For the movement as a whole the lesson is one not only of historic cost in terms of human misery but of a very much alive situation which cannot be allowed to continue. When the arguments are being weighed, one cannot really afford to forget the woman, who happens to be a skilled artist, desperately trying to make ends meet by painting little footballers in two colours for what is by all standards a paltry sum.

# fabian society the author

The Fabian Society exists to further socialist education and research. It is affiliated to the Labour Party, both nationally and locally, and embraces all shades of Socialist opinion within its ranks—left, right and centre.

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Brian Bolton, after secondary school, spent 15 years in the Post Office before gaining a POEU scholarship to Ruskin College. During these years he held a variety of offices in branches of the union, finishing up as assistant branch secretary of the Post Office Tower branch and secretary of the London Political Committee of the union.

It was after the course at Ruskin that the investigation of homeworking began as a by-product of a research project on the textile industry hence the heavy textile bias in the pamphlet.

Brian Bolton wishes to thank Marie Brown of the Low Pay Unit as well as those who in one way or another gave information that was vital to the preparation of the pamphlet.

Cover design by Dick Leadbetter. Printed by Civic Press Limited (TU), Civic Street, Glasgow, G4 9RH.

ISBN 7163 0436 8

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