

PROGRESSIVE MOVEMENTS

IN CHARGE OF
LUCY L. DROWN



THE CONSUMERS' LEAGUE

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THIS is an organization of persons who strive to do their shopping in such ways as to benefit those who make and distribute the things bought.

The members of the Consumers' League of the City of New York give the preference in their shopping to the forty stores on its White List, because these stores are believed to approximate most nearly to the following "Standard of a Fair House" which this League has maintained for the past ten years.

STANDARD OF A FAIR HOUSE.

Wages.—A Fair House is one in which equal pay is given for work of equal value, irrespective of sex. In the departments where women only are employed, in which the minimum wages are six dollars per week for experienced adult workers, and fall in few instances below eight dollars.

In which wages are paid by the week.

In which fines, if imposed, are paid into a fund for the benefit of the employees.

In which the minimum wages of cash girls are two dollars per week, with the same conditions regarding weekly payments and fines.

Hours.—A Fair House is one in which the hours from eight A.M. to six P.M. (with three-quarters of an hour for lunch) constitute the working day, and a general half-holiday is given on one day of each week during at least two summer months.

In which a vacation of not less than one week is given with pay during the summer season.

In which all overtime is compensated for.

In which wages are paid and the premises closed for the five principal legal holidays,—viz., Thanksgiving Day, Christmas and New Year's Day, Washington's Birthday, and the Fourth of July.

Physical Conditions.—A Fair House is one in which work-, lunch-, and retiring-rooms are apart from each other, and conform in all respects to the present sanitary laws.

In which the present law regarding the providing of seats for saleswomen is observed, and the use of seats permitted.

Other Conditions.—A Fair House is one in which humane and considerate behavior towards employees is the rule.

In which fidelity and length of service meet with the consideration which is their due.

In which no children under fourteen years of age are employed.

When first issued, the White List of the Consumers' League of the City of New York embraced but eight stores. It has grown fivefold because the standard of conditions of work is rising steadily though slowly in all occupations. In part, however, the growth of the White List from eight stores to forty is due to the growth of the Consumers' League from a small though very influential group of women, to a local membership of about one thousand, having an efficient organization and maintaining a ceaseless agitation on behalf of its principles. The mere numerical statement of the membership conveys no idea of the lively activities of the league. Thus, during visits to St. Paul, Minnesota, and Richmond, Virginia, the writer found friends in each city carrying in their pocket-books copies of the White List of the Consumers' League of the City of New York, because once or twice a year these ladies visit New York and conscientiously do their shopping at the stores embraced in the White List. They are not members of the Consumers' League of the City of New York, but their custom is desirable to the merchants and they reinforce the power of the league. This widespread coöperation of non-members explains in some degree the extraordinary influence of a relatively small organization.

There still remain merchants carrying on immense establishments patronized by thousand of customers who are indifferent to the work of the league. Some of the names made most familiar by wholesale advertising are conspicuously absent from the White List. In these vast stores conditions fall far below the requirements of the "Standard of a Fair House" and will continue to do so until the great body of shoppers come to a realizing sense of their responsibility in the premises. If customers insist upon shopping at night, merchants will accommodate them; and clerks, package wrappers, cash children, and delivery men must suffer. If customers leave their Christmas shopping until the week before Christmas, or if they visit the stores on Saturday afternoons and evenings in summer, the merchants must accommodate them, and the holidays become a period of bitter overwork for the employees.

The first work of the Consumers' League is, therefore, to appeal to the conscience of the individual and awaken a sense of responsibility and power. The next step is to afford trustworthy information as to

the conditions that exist from year to year so that the conscientious shopper may choose with knowledge and certainty. The former end is attained by holding meetings, delivering addresses and lectures, circulating literature, and sowing broadcast the "Standard White List." The latter end, that of affording trustworthy assurance concerning conditions of work, is accomplished by the work of the Investigating Committee, which visits stores, interviews managers, receives complaints, and seeks the acquaintance of employees. This committee receives much valuable assistance from the working-girls' clubs and the Settlements, both serving as points of contact with intelligent and trustworthy employees. By interviewing both employers and employees, and cultivating the acquaintance of the largest possible number of both through a series of years, it is possible to know pretty accurately whether or not a store is living up to the "Standard of a Fair House" and deserves to be kept on the White List. From time to time a new store is added to the White List. In a few cases, stores have been dropped from the list. This, however, never lasts long, for the members of the Consumers' League proceed to transfer their accounts to stores which have not been dropped, calling the attention of the dropped firm to this action and the reason for it. No store has been willing to remain off the White List after being embraced in it. Backslidings are, therefore, promptly repaired, and the erring concern is reinstated upon compliance with the requirements of the "Standard of a Fair House."

The National Consumers' League was formed in 1899 by the union of four leagues previously existing in New York, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, and Illinois. The National Consumers' League strives to go beyond the store to the sources of the store's supplies, encouraging the righteous, humane, and enlightened manufacturer as the local leagues strive to encourage such merchants.

The National Consumers' League has selected as its first field of endeavor the manufacture of women's white muslin underwear, because this industry is very largely in the hands of women. The purchasers of such goods are all women, and the employees in the factories are usually ninety-seven girls to three men, the girls being between the ages of sixteen and twenty-five years.

Thus far eighteen factories in this branch of industry are authorized to use the label of the Consumers' League. The factories are in six States, Maine, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, New York, Pennsylvania, and Michigan. They make all grades of stitched underwear except the very finest, which are usually not factory made. There are included in the list manufacturers of corsets and waists as well as the usual white underwear.

Whenever a manufacturer is authorized to use the label of the Consumers' League, he signs a contract binding himself to have his work done wholly on his own premises, to employ no children under sixteen years of age, to require not more than ten hours' work a day and sixty hours a week, and to obey all the provisions of the State factory law of the State in which his factory is located.

There are now about thirty Consumers' Leagues in eleven States. In many other States there is a corresponding member who serves as a nucleus for the organization of a league. It is hoped that in time the whole body of shoppers may be induced to adopt the principles of the Consumers' League. In proportion as its constituency grows, the league can extend its field of activity, embracing the manufacture of other garments, and ultimately of all those things which are produced for personal consumption,—clothing, food, furniture, books, etc.

The Consumers' League finds many of its most valuable members among physicians and nurses because they, more than the members of any other profession, come into contact with disease and suffering engendered by conditions of work; and they find it easy to trace the chain of cause and effect, and are correspondingly willing to take trouble for the sake of concerted action for the improvement of industrial conditions. To nurses the bare statement that there are nearly twenty thousand groups of garment-workers in New York who are licensed to make garments in tenement-houses tells the story of infection carried with the garments made under such conditions. To them no elaborate argument need be made on behalf of factory work in preference to tenement-house work. To nurses the Consumers' League appeals as to its natural allies, asking them to shop according to its White List in cities where a White List exists, to ask for the label of the Consumers' League when buying underwear (and insist upon getting it), to join the league so that it may have the strength which comes from numbers, and to bring its aims and methods to the notice of their friends within and without the profession.

We are all of us spending money (however little) all the time; and every time we spend a dollar we help to determine, by our selection of goods, whether the factories and stores which are carried on righteously shall prosper, or whether the baser competitor shall thrive at the expense of the nobler. We can make our choice wisely and helpfully only in proportion as we use the opportunities which are increasingly offered for informing ourselves concerning the conditions of manufacture and distribution of goods made to be sold to women. One effective help to a wise choice is offered by the work of the Consumers' League.