

The Main Business of Industry

By ROBERT W. BRUÈRE

FOURTEEN years after the Pittsburgh Survey was made, a committee of the Federated American Engineering Societies published an elaborate study of the Twelve-Hour Shift in Industry. The Pittsburgh Survey was the joint enterprise of representatives of practically every division of social work. It focused the experience of a generation of pioneers upon the most typical of our American industrial communities. It was a searching inductive appraisal of the human consequences of the Industrial Revolution under the intensely dynamic conditions of American life. One of its immediate concrete results was the establishment of the Cabot Fund, which was directly inspired by the republication in Collier's Weekly of the story of Painters' Row. The engineers' study of the Twelve-Hour Shift in Industry, the steel industry in particular, was financed by the Cabot Fund. On the question of the long day the engineers have come abreast of the Pittsburgh Survey; they have added an invaluable contribution by showing the practical steps by which it can be abolished. Nevertheless, the contrast between the point of view and philosophy of the Pittsburgh Survey, made in 1908, and the point of view of the engineers' study, published in 1922, offers a measure of progress and an index to the problem before us.

The author of the engineers' general inquiry into the extent of the twelve-hour shift in continuous process industries opens his report with this statement: "The people of the United States realize today more clearly than ever before that the main business and obligation of industry is to produce goods, and to produce them at as low a cost and in as great abundance as possible." He then adds that, important as the production of goods obviously is, the effect of industry upon those who labor is "hardly less vital." The prime emphasis upon the production of cheap and abundant goods is significant. At the close of the field work in 1908, Edward T. Devine summed up the findings of the Pittsburgh Survey under eight headings. The last two sentences of this summary were these: "Certainly no community before in America or Europe has ever had such a surplus, and never before has a great community applied what it had so meagerly to the rational purposes of human life. Not by gifts of libraries, galleries, technical schools, and parks, but by the cessation of toil one day in seven and sixteen hours in the twenty-four, by the increase of wages, by the sparing of lives, by the prevention of accidents, and by raising the standards of domestic life, should the surplus come back to the people of the community in which it was created." The engineers

find that in some forty or fifty continuous industries, while the seven-day week has been very generally abandoned, between one-third and one-half of all workers engaged in continuous processes—some 300,000 out of a total estimated somewhere between 500,000 and 1,000,000—are on shifts averaging twelve hours. Especially in the steel mills, the twelve-hour shift persists. These figures sharpen the contrast between Dr. Devine's statement, typical of the social worker's point of view, and the statement quoted from the engineers' report.

What is the main business and obligation of industry? Is it the production of cheap and abundant goods or the satisfaction of human wants, the liberation of men? To answer that the accumulation of an economic surplus is fundamental to the advance of civilization, and to say that alone, is to beg the question. Every one is agreed that economic security is essential. The propositions are not mutually exclusive. The problem is one of emphasis. For to produce a surplus greater than any community in the world has ever before known and to use it with such disregard of the rational purposes of human existence as to create dependency, disease, a starved physical and spiritual life, class hatreds at home and war among the nations, is not to promote civilization but rather to intensify barbarism.

In the fourteen years since the Pittsburgh Survey was made, many of the grosser evils of irrational industrialism have been ameliorated. There has been an abatement of work accidents, due in part to welfare campaigns, safety-first drives and engineering research, but principally to public intervention through compulsory compensation which has shifted the economic burden of accidents from the home to industry. Housing reform has done away with the worst of our slums. Private and public agencies have made infant and child life more secure and checked the ravages of tuberculosis. Child-labor laws and laws regulating the work hours of women have eased the pressure of industrial exploitation at some of the sorest spots.

These Things Are Not Enough

But like the gifts of libraries, galleries, technical schools and parks, these things are not enough. Industrial unrest continues, increases in volume and intensity. With an economic surplus greater than any nation ever had, America still feels the tremors of the European earthquake, amplified by industrial disturbances at home. The fact is patent that industry even in America satisfies neither the human wants of those engaged in it nor the wants of the consumers. Are they wrong who say that vast numbers, probably the majority of industrial workers,

dislike the work they are compelled to do, and that this fact lies at the bottom not only of most unhappiness in modern life but also of most retardation in the spiritual progress of humanity? And if they are right in this, are they not also right in saying that this greatest of human problems cannot be solved by the amelioration of conditions outside of industry alone, but that even its proximate solution depends upon the redirection and reconstitution of industry itself?

The central concern of the social worker from the days of the volunteer friendly visitor to this day of the specialized professional expert has been the individual human being—the release of the individual from the inherited and environmental handicaps that frustrate his fulfillment as an individual and his development as a member of the social group. Beginning with the relief of the most exigent cases of destitution, social workers have steadily widened the field of their interests to housing, health, education, the courts—all of those community institutions whose relevancy to poverty and the human incidents of poverty are manifest. With the development of psychopathology and the subtler outreachings of applied psychology, they have increasingly brought these new instrumentalities to bear upon the problem of individual rehabilitation and release. In the field of industry especially, they have driven forward these parallel and supplemental lines of attack. The Pittsburgh Survey stands as a classic not only because it epitomized the progress of social work in its time but also because it revealed with a new vividness how central the modern industrial machine is to all the problems confronting the social worker—how basic the facts of industrial ownership, organization and management are to the life of the individual. Against the background of exhausting hours, low wages, absentee ownership, slums, preventable accidents, a needlessly brutalized citizenship, it raised with challenging frankness the question as to whether the main business and obligation of industry is, indeed, the production of goods at as low a cost and in as great abundance as possible. For what is a man advantaged if he gain the whole world and lose himself?

The Social Worker's Concern with Industry

Increasingly, therefore, in the name of the preeminent worth of the individual personality, and not in the name of class conflict, the social workers have drawn their lines about the strongholds of machine industry. Successively they have attacked child labor, the destructive exploitation of women, insanitary and debasing factory conditions, industrial accidents, specific industrial diseases.

In his address before the National Conference of Charities and Correction held in Boston in June, 1911, Louis D. Brandeis lifted into sharp relief what social workers were beginning to see as the necessary next steps in their reformatory campaign. "American democracy," Mr. Brandeis said, "rests upon the basis of the free citizen. We accord (to the men) universal suffrage. We urge strenuously upon every voter the duty of exercising this right.

We insist that the voter should exercise it in the interest of others as well as of himself. We give thus to the citizen the rights of a free man. We impose upon him a duty that can be entrusted with safety only to free men. Politically the American workingman is free, so far as law can make him so. But is he really free? Can any man be really free who is constantly in danger of becoming dependent for mere subsistence upon somebody and something else than his own exertion and conduct? Men are not free while financially dependent upon the will of other individuals." . . . What then was the way to freedom? Mr. Brandeis cited President Cleveland's epigram that it is the duty of the citizen to support the government, not of the government to support the citizen; to which he answered that if the government permits conditions to exist which make large classes of citizens financially dependent, the great evil of dependence should at least be minimized by the state's assuming, or causing to be assumed by others in some form, the burden incident to its own shortcomings. He proposed a comprehensive system of social insurance for the protection of the wage-earner in case of invalidity, superannuation or unemployment, and of the widows and orphans left helpless by the premature death of husband or father. He suggested the advantages of employers' mutual compensation insurance companies after the model of the "factory mutuals" that had been so successful in rendering property secure from the risks of fire. But by implication, though not by explicit statement, he took the position that in default of other adequate remedy, the state itself, as in the cases of France, Austria, Germany and England, must take up the business of social insurance. This declaration that the time had come when social workers must use the instrumentalities of politics and government to stop the human wastes of industry, even to the extent of forcing the state to infringe the domain of private business enterprise, still had a certain revolutionary ring in 1911.

Since then, the principle for which Mr. Justice Brandeis contended has received all but universal recognition and acceptance. Not all states have workmen's accident compensation laws, but the number is rounding out to completion; unemployment insurance still lies mainly in the future, but it is debated from the point of view of expediency and practical statesmanship rather than as a question of principle. The battle still needs to be waged along these lines. As in the case of the attack upon primary poverty, the exploitation of women and children, and the insufficiencies of public education, the stakes yet to be won are of incalculable importance. But with social insurance as with all forms of charitable relief, our experience, the experience of Europe certainly, is ample to show that these things alone will not set the individual free. Not social workers only, but employers and industrial managers also, have come to recognize that it is because of the invidious class implications of social insurance that the workers, the organized wage-workers especially, have remained hostile to all forms of social insurance except workmen's compensation. They

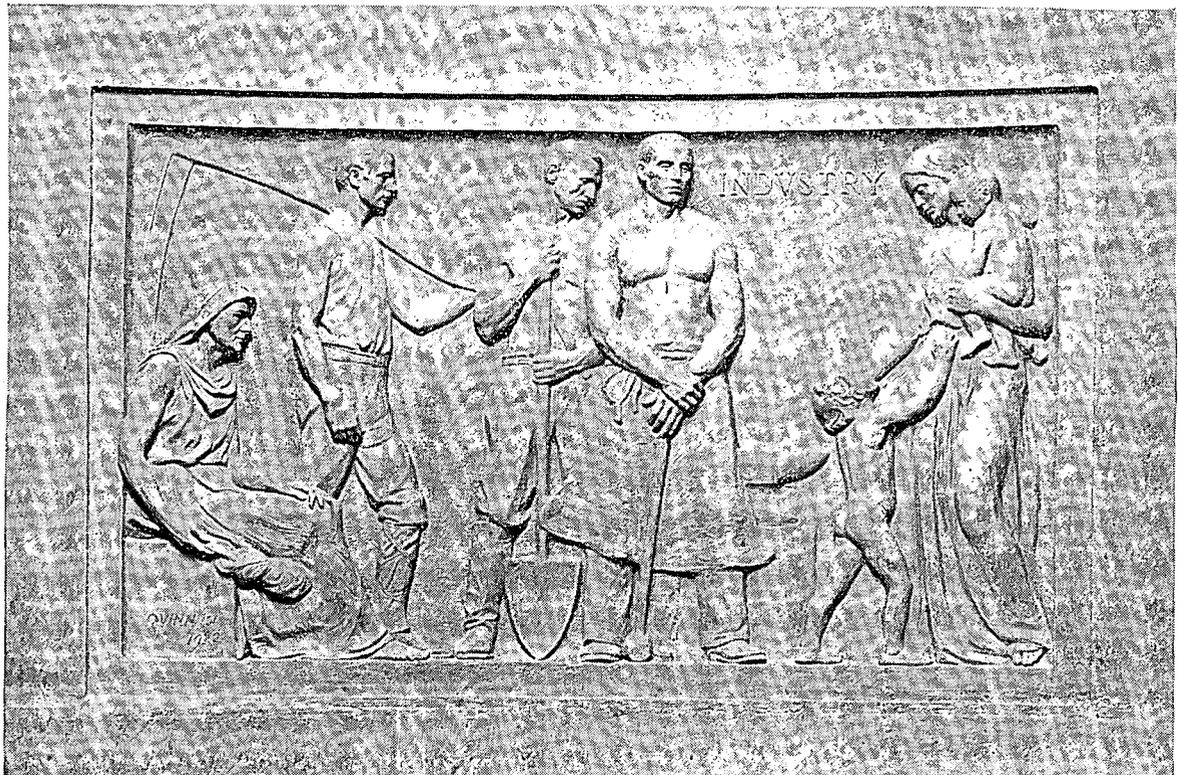
prefer to help themselves, however inadequately, to having their condition improved by others, even by the state. It is only in countries where the manual workers have organized for the political control of the state that they have fully accepted the principle of social insurance along comprehensive lines. For them the main obligation of business is not to produce cheap and abundant goods, even when by a system of pensions in the event of sickness, unemployment or death, they are protected as servants of industry against financial dependence.

There is a subtler and more fundamental element in the problem of individual freedom than any that can be expressed in terms of finance. Women, particularly, who ponder the passage quoted from Justice Brandeis' 1911 address will sense what that element is. "We accord (to the men) universal suffrage." Those three words in parenthesis are highly significant for the light they throw on the problem. Writing in December 1922, Harold J. Laski, formerly of Harvard University, says: "It has become finally clear that the release of the individual is utterly impossible so long as the control of industry is confided to a small number of men whose decisions need not take account of the wills of those who work under them. . . . The worker cannot respect the obligations of citizenship if he is simply an unreflecting unit in the production system." The status of the wage-workers in industry today is substantially identical with the political status of women before they were enfranchised. The more the workers are freed, or win freedom from financial handicaps, the more acutely do they feel the spiritual handicap of their inferior industrial status. No amount of swagger about one man being as good as another, no amount of hokum about the nobility of labor will satisfy

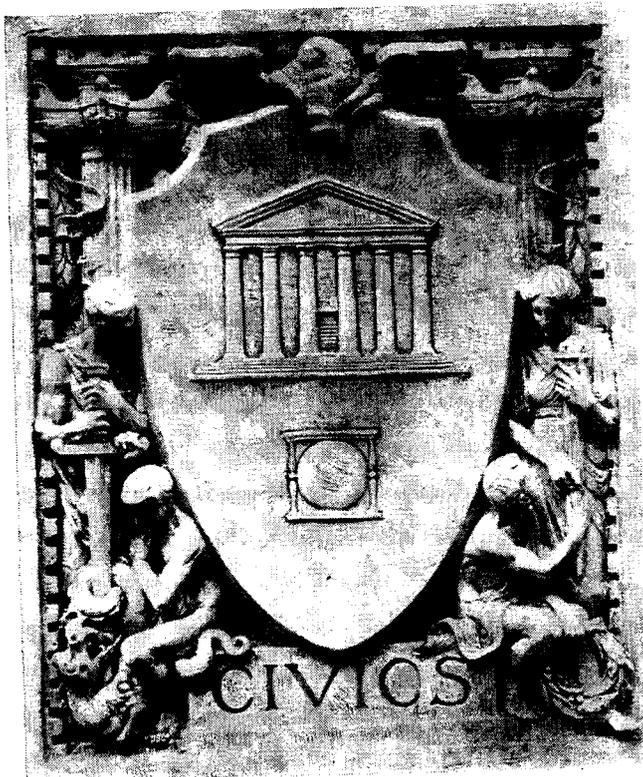
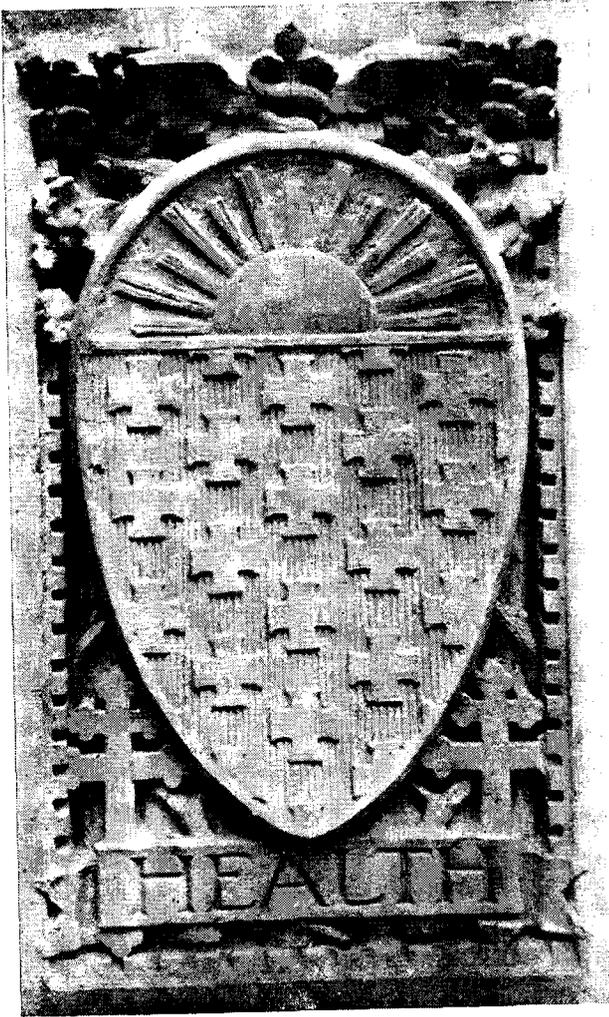
the soul of men as a substitute for industrial enfranchisement, any more than the persiflage of anachronistic chivalry satisfied the soul of unenfranchised women. This is a major cause of what is commonly called industrial unrest whose incidents are as demoralizing and socially destructive as those of poverty itself. Recognition of its importance as an element in the problem of human liberation has led not only to the establishment of training courses in industrial psychology and employment administration by schools of social work, but also to the introduction of all manner of experimental forms of so-called industrial democracy in an increasing number of industrial establishments. The trade-union movement is essentially and fundamentally an expression of revolt against this spiritual handicap of inferior status.

Social work has its roots in the Christian doctrine—the democratic doctrine—that all men are brothers and equal in the sight of their Creator. Step by step, the pursuit of human liberation has led social workers from casework among the indigent through welfare legislation into the heart of industrial government. The problem there is one of research, interpretation, education. In their study of the twelve-hour shift, the engineers found an "unbelievable lack of knowledge; there are no statistics covering the matter of shift-work, nor has the government or any other agency collected figures which show the number of twelve-hour workers." Even managers in continuous process plants lacked information about shift operations in other plants in the same industry. Labor leaders were equally ignorant. Industry which conceives its main business and obligation to be the production of cheap and abundant goods, has sought "not the

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Industry—one of two panels by Edmond Quinn for the rotunda of the Hartford Fire Insurance Building in Hartford, Connecticut



A Sermon

The stone panels here reproduced have lately been added to the facade of the Russell Sage Foundation Building in New York. They were modelled by René P. Chambellan from designs by Grosvenor Atterbury, the architect, and are the first symbolical representations of modern social work in sculpture. Incidentally, these stones, successful as they are as decorations, exemplify the difficulty of