

HOW MELBOURNE LIVES

A Descriptive Report of Impressions Obtained by a Labor Club Sub-committee.

Of the 1,000,000 or more people living in this city of ours, over 700,000 are estimated to belong to the working-class. In our attempt to make people realise the conditions of life in the capitalist community of Melbourne, we shall concentrate on these; for they are the great majority, and it is on them that society depends. If we adapt the figures of the 1921 census to the present population of Melbourne, we can say that, of these 700,000 working-class men, women and children, about 300,000 are actually in employment or seeking it. Of the others, about 30,000 receive old-age pensions, and the rest are dependents of wage-earners. At the present time, about 30 per cent. of those 300,000 workers are unemployed, and more are working only part time.

Of those workers who are still in employment a good majority, probably about 70 per cent. are unskilled, and therefore earning, if men, the basic wage or a little more, and if women or under 21 years of age, considerably less. Women and young workers make up quite a good proportion of the total number of wage-earners. In factory employment in Melbourne, for example, one-third of the employees are women; while, if we can adopt all-Australian figures for Melbourne conditions, the proportion of workers under 20 amounts to 19 per cent. of the total. The wages of these women and young workers, however, though below the basic wage, are generally used only to supplement a family income. The basic wage itself at the beginning of the year was about £3/10/6 a week—that is, assuming regular employment, £183 a year. This is a considerable drop from two years ago. In the Railways, for example, the fall in the money-wage from November, 1929, has been from £4/9/- to less than £3/10/6—a fall of 29.2 per cent. Ten per cent. of this is due, of course, to the real wage reduction decreed by the Arbitration Court, the rest being due to a reduction in the cost of living figures, a reduction which many housewives declare to be unjustified. However this may be, let us see what can be done by the average family on £3/10/6 a week at the present time.

First of all, the man must work for eight hours or more a day, leaving evenings, Saturday afternoons, and Sundays free. As a reward, he can keep himself, his wife and his children fed, clothed and housed after a humble fashion, go to the pictures on Saturday night, and possibly have a holiday now and again. He has had little education—leaving school at the age of fourteen; he has in many cases become so accustomed to the economic grind that he has no interest left for things more worth while. His children, if under 14 years, will be obtaining a smattering of education in an overcrowded school where, school-teachers tell us, there are often up to 70 in a single class. At 14 they will leave school and if possible find work, so that the family

income may be extended. Such an existence seems to us to leave the worker not only short of material things, but also of all means of pursuing the higher ends for which man lives.

As for skilled workers, though the margins they obtain in excess of the basic wage have frequently been decreased within the last year or two, they still obtain considerably more than the basic wage. A man who earns £4 or £5 a week can live more comfortably, and has greater opportunity for the development both of himself and his children. But for skilled workers as well as unskilled, the inevitable emphasis on material things is immensely increased at the present time by the constant danger of losing them. The spectre of unemployment is ever at hand.

In fact, as we mentioned before, the great extent of unemployment at present prevents the majority of workers from keeping the standard of living we have been describing. This is due firstly to the fact that the wages of those still in work are usually shared by unemployed members of the family, and at times by relatives and friends. Secondly, there is the unemployment relief-tax on wages, amounting, in the case of a basic wage-earner to 1/3 a week. Thirdly, statistics show that unemployment itself is distributed. At any one time there are about 30 per cent., but actually a much larger number than this pass through periods of temporary unemployment. And to be unemployed even temporarily means lowering one's standard of living very considerably. Fourthly, the large amount of unemployment makes it easy for employers to obtain their labour at below award rates; in other words, it encourages sweating. Though sweating is worst in the clothing-trade, we have been told by a prominent member of the Anti-Sweating League that it is extending into all branches of industry, especially in all contract work where it is carried out by sub-letting. Young women in sweated shops in the clothing-trade now receive, according to him, 42/6 a week, where some months ago they received £4/10/-, and he quoted many other cases where such drastic reductions have been made. The Vigilance Committee of the League mentioned above vouches, after personal inspection, for the existence of much Sunday and night work. We see, then, from all these causes that unemployment means not only a mere sustenance allowance for many, but a lowered standard of living for the majority.

Let us trace this standard downwards as it falls. Starting from £3/10/6 a week of which up to £1 goes straight away as rent, we do not have to progress far before the means of satisfying even material wants begin to fail. The holiday relaxation may go first, then perhaps the pictures. Then might come removal to a dingier house, or the buying of cheaper food and clothes, or the going of the housewife in search of work, or doing without medical attention. There are many routes

we can follow in this journey to the bread-line, but they all lead in the same direction. Soon we come to the level at which the whole family income is £2 a week, or what is considered equivalent, an individual's 10/- a week.

We have not passed by so many in descending to this level. There are still 48,000 families to consider, and on an average this means about 200,000 individuals. We know this because of the State sustenance allowance granted below this level. This consists of orders for different kinds of food at certain stipulated shops, which amount in the case of an individual to 5/- a week, in that of a man and his wife to 8/6, and 1/6 extra for each child up to the eighth. Other forms of relief also are granted below this level. The Unemployed Girls' Relief Organisation, which covers about 2,000 of the unemployed women of Melbourne, grants, in return for a day's work or so, 7/6 plus 5/- grocery order to those girls who have no family to live with, and 7/6 to those who have. The Women's Benevolent Society also gives a certain amount of relief to women in the form of cash allowances, while Church charities do some work among the destitute.

Now let us see what havoc is wrought at this sustenance level in respect of the three primary essentials of life—shelter, food and clothing. Working-class house rent now ranges from 15/- or so for a house with any slightest degree of comfort (or a good deal more in some suburbs), down to 10/- for anything inhabitable—houses below this level being generally uninhabitable, as has been actually admitted in one instance by a house-agent. Clearly, even 10/- a week would be an impossible sum for most of these families, even when they have sold most of the furniture. The result is often that more than one family will crowd into a house. More often, however, families live on in houses without paying rent—whence evictions and attempted evictions. The housing difficulty also confronts single men and women, and those youths and girls who have deliberately left home to obtain the larger allowance. It is hard to obtain the barest room below 7/- a week. Unemployed girls can eke out their 12/6 allowance by sharing such a room between two or three of them; but men with their 5/- worth in ration tickets are usually forced either to live in unemployed camps, or put up rudimentary hovels of their own or crowd together in large numbers in single houses, often practically stripped of fittings and furniture.

Though below the £2 level most of the money is spent on food; this also becomes poorer and poorer as we descend to sustenance bedrock. A doctor states that the sustenance allowance not only contains insufficient fresh food to provide the required vitamins, but actually that the 8/6 allowance for married people means one day of starvation in the week. As an example of sustenance diet, let us look at the weekly menu of half a dozen single men who combined to share rations. It consists

of meat for two days, bread and dripping, rice, oatmeal, eggs, tea and sugar—no fresh fruit or vegetables, milk or butter. This might be supplemented occasionally by a free cabbage or so from a Church charity, or a free tea at a mission, where religion and stale sandwiches are served up in the order mentioned. As for the third necessity—clothes, the general position is that your old ones have to last, though they are supplemented to a certain extent by the second-hand clothing distributed by charitable organisations, sometimes at a nominal price, such as a penny for a pair of socks, twopence for a coat, etc.

To such depths is it possible for material conditions to fall in Melbourne. And it is to such low conditions that the large increase in disease at present has been chiefly due. The most obvious evidence that insufficient food, overcrowding, and the lack both of recreation and of work have led to such an increase, is to be found in the overcrowding of hospitals. In special hospitals, the number of in-patients is now about 19,000—an increase of 79 per cent. in 10 years; while in metropolitan general hospitals the increase in that period has been 69 per cent. The result is that patients are being discharged before properly cured. At the hospital for infectious diseases at Fairfield, for example, the increase in the number of patients since 1922 has been from 294 to 562; and the medical superintendent has stated that nearly every ward in the hospital has cross-infection, and that patients, instead of being detained until free from infection, are discharged as soon as they recover. In the asylums also there are now 500 patients in excess of accommodation. The insufficiency of relief, due to this overcrowding and also to the fact that invalid pensions of 17/6 a week have now often to be distributed over whole families, only helps to make the health conditions worse. It is significant of the fears of the authorities concerning these conditions that the chairman of the board of management of Fairfield hospital mentioned as early as last October that another epidemic of disease would probably occur this year.

It might be argued, however, that, despite this state of affairs we have been describing, there is for the old man, at any rate, the secure harbour of the old-age pension. He will get his 17/6 a week, at any rate. But what a miserable reward for a lifetime of toil! Even for husband and wife together it comes to only 35/- a week, about half of which must be swallowed up in rent if they are to end their days in a reasonably decent house of their own. Where an old-age pensioner has to support a wife who is not yet eligible for a pension, the struggle to live becomes more bitter than ever. Sometimes the pensioner is forced to become a drag on the earnings of the younger generation; sometimes—still worse—he is forced to contribute to these earnings from his own meagre grant. The best one can say of such a pension is that it is a fitting terminus to a life's journey through the sordid conditions described throughout the report.