

## Women workers in Japan

It is quite a common thing to ask Socialists: "Are you for Russia or Japan?" To this question, as to many others which usually crop up when two cut-throat thieves attack each other under our modern social system, we have only one reply: "Above all, we are for the proletariat of every country". This does not, however, prevent us from stating objectively in the case of the Russo-Japanese war, that the victory of the Japanese forces would mean as an inevitable consequence the political emancipation of Russia: its almost certain deliverance from the home enemy—we speak of Czarism, hangman, and knout-bearer.

In the meantime, let us study the situation of those who interest us most in both countries—the proletariat. We begin with that of Japan, the least known and the most exploited. Take, for instance, the Japanese working woman.

The development of the great industries has gone on increasing and aggravating the economic slavery of woman.

In modern Japan we find as many work-women as workmen. The cotton spinning mills employ more women than men: in the mills of Kanegafendji they number 2,700 as against 300 men; in those of Boseki, 3,000 against 500—that is six, and even, nine women for every man. In the extensive Mourai tobacco factories of Kyoto, they are 2,500, forming five-sixths of the entire staff. The match industry employs almost exclusively women and children. Even in the Imperial Printing Works the women are much more numerous than the men.

Under the preceding social system they were put to work at the roughest employments. To-day under the capitalist regime they are employed in the most trying industries.

In the linen spinning mills of Hokkaido they live during entire weeks at a time in a stuffy atmosphere. In the paper mills of Odji they carry heavy baskets, filled with stinking rags, into smoky rooms. At the mines of Muke they not only work at the surface, removing earth or dragging coal, but even in the very bottom: mothers often descending into the pits with children on their backs.

Capitalism in Japan gives a better example than in other countries of the tendency to replace male labour by female and child labour; a tendency so well analysed in the first volume of *Capital* by Marx. The proportion of women employed in the great industries, according to the statements of Wenlersse, continues on the increase, and we find it stated in the official report presented at the Chicago Exhibition that in the little town of Souva there are more than 40 silk manufactories employing hundreds of women. The women earn more working in this manner than if they were employed as domestic servants. It is, moreover, very difficult to obtain them for domestic purposes anywhere in the neighbourhood of a factory.

In the cotton spinning mills the average proportion of women to men was in 1886 only two to one; in 1897 it had increased to more than three while to-day it has attained a figure of five, six, and even more.

The Japanese woman is considered much more able at certain work than the man. Wenlertse says that in the Imperial Printing Works women are employed in counting bank notes, in stippling sheets of stamps, and gumming the backs; and with what rapidity do they not make their fingers travel; how they run from one machine to another, making their wooden sandals clatter on the stone flags—quite little people, like white mice, in their great large linen robes!

The nimbleness of the tobacco factory girls is surprising. They wrap up as many as 100 packets of cigarettes in tin paper per hour—1,000 in a day. Those who fold up the large boxes are still more dexterous; the girls employed in the match factories paste 60 labels per minute on the little boxes, and continue thus for nine consecutive hours; while, in the spinning mills, they re-knot the broken threads with a rapidity and daintiness not to be equalled by a man.

The reasons for which the capitalist in Japan prefers female to male labour are the same as in Europe. In the first place, the woman is docile, and in order to get her better under his thumb, he has her brought from the most distant provinces.

The poor country-people make scarcely any opposition to delivering up their daughters to the recruiting agents of the great manufacturers. In order to get the children and parents to make up their minds these agents have recourse to falsehood. Here is what Saito Kashiro, an official employed by the Ministry of Agriculture and Commerce, says:

“I have been speaking with an old work-woman in the cotton spinning mills of Kanegafendji in Tokio. She has told me that the company’s agent said to her, before the engagement, that the work was very easy, the pay considerable, and that before settling down to her duties, she could visit all parts of Tokio, see the theatres, listen to the concerts, all that she wished; eating and drinking the best to be had in the finest restaurants”.

As the greater part of these women are peasants, completely ignorant of the world and its ways, they easily consent to any proposals which will give them the pleasure of seeing the many novelties abounding in the great city. So off goes our little peasant girl without much more ado. However, the day following her departure with the agent, she is limited to a plate of vegetables and rice both for breakfast and dinner; and all such expenses are put down to her, as also the cost of travelling. On arriving at Tokio she was certainly conducted to the principal places of interest in the town, not forgetting the restaurants, as had been promised, but everything was duly chalked down to her account. Not having sufficient money to defray those outlays, a certain proportion was each month deducted from her wages. Now, the work was hard and the wage small: 6d per day. Consequently, she could not support this intolerable condition and left the factory one fine day on the pretext of taking a walk—such a trick being possible only in the most exceptional cases, while the swindle just recounted is quite the rule.

Women allow themselves to be very easily exploited by the employers; they are the complete dupes and victims of the capitalist system. Their most elementary interests demand that they should wake up to this fact and organise—in Japan as well as in Europe.

Moreover, female labour is preferred above all, for the reason that it is more profitable. Eleven hours of solid work per day is exacted and obtained from Japanese workwomen—sometimes even eleven and a half. If an hour is granted to them during the day for eating, it is on condition that the machines are kept going; they must make an arrangement among themselves whereby they go to meals in such order that the factory always has its complement of workers. Sunday is unheard of; two days' rest only are allowed each month, and even such "days" consist of but a few hours. During the entire years they have scarcely five holidays, and those for the purpose of repairing—the machines, more precious to the capitalist than that other human machine which can always be readily replaced in the event of a breakdown!

No law has so far been passed on the limitation of the women's working hours; just as the men, they work night and day indifferently. Their wage is beneath contempt. In Japan we are still in the stage of "primitive accumulation" thus styled by Karl Marx, the Dante of the regime under which we live.

The more dexterous weavers of Osaka earn only about 10d daily, which is the maximum, the minimum amounting to but 4 1/2d. The women who gum the labels on matchboxes receive 3 1/2d in a working day. In the cotton spinning mills the adult women get from 6 1/2d to 1s, while where men and women are employed at the same work, the latter are paid from a third to half less than the men.

How do those "galley slaves" of the Japanese factory bear such conditions of labour? It opens sometimes with an idyll such as would make the aesthetic Pierre Loti (author of *Madame Chrysanthemum*) and his fair readers rub their hands with joy, but it closes in quite another fashion—here is the picture:

"The spectacle given in the port of Nagasaki is still more singular and interesting. There you see the women coalporters with their sugar loaf hats of brown straw adorned with white and blue cambric, below which peeps out bunches of jet black hair. To see their sparkling eyes, their cheeks all rosy and tanned from the sun's rays, that air of sweetness spread over their features, is quite a pleasure. With what an unembarrassed step, without the impediment of skirts and not fearing to allow their legs to be seen, do they carry the large bamboo cane to which are attached heavy black baskets . . . They laugh, push, and tickle one another as they pass, and offer no objection whatever to being encircled round the waist by some young men in the same gang . . . But these pretty legs soon waver, and on the planks which stretch trembling from the quay to the ship, a little fright and very much fatigue close those lips in pain, which, but a short time since, expanded in a dazzling smile . . ."

And all this for a few pence a day!

Among every eight Japanese workwomen we find one prostitute. Under the conditions which she lives her "erring sister" is not the least intelligent nor the most to complain. She is but a rebel anyhow, an escaped slave of the capitalist compound.

And this they call "Civilisation"!

(translated from *Le Socialiste*)

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