

“Bricks Without Straw: The Story of an Italian Girl Among the Striking Garment Workers in Chicago, Taken Down Verbatim by Prof. Katharine Coman of Wellesley College,” *Survey* v. XXV (December 1910); 424-428.

I went over to Blue Island and Polk Street to Mr. G. one Saturday and asked for work. He asked me what could I do? I said: “Well, I can do shoulders, I can do body finishing and all sorts of work.” He said: “Just wait here a minute and I will put you to work.” So he came back in a minute and I started top work. In the evening I went to him and said: “Well, Mr. G., do you like my work?” “Yes,” he said, “very well.”

There were about ten greenhorns who could not talk English at all. I can’t speak English very good but I speak [end page 424] more than what they could, so in the evening I went to him and I said: “Do you like my work?” He said: “Yes, I like your work very well.” I said: “How much are you going to pay me?” He said: “What can you do?” “Well,” I said, “I told you, basting, finisher, buttons, all kinds of work.” So he said: “Well, I would like to have you for forelady to teach these greenhorns how to work, because these are greenhorns and they can’t work very well.” So he told me: “You just be forelady and tell them to work more and make me good work.” So I said: “Well, all right, but don’t you like the work that they do?” He said: “No, they can’t work for me now, but you must try and learn them.” So I said to him: “If you think they can’t do the work, I have some good experienced girls that could do the work right, and I will bring them over in the morning.” So he laughed-he stopped and he laughed. He said: “Experienced girls? Not in my shop.” “Why, not?”

He said: "I want no experienced girls. They know the pay to get. I got to pay them good wages and they make me less work, but these greenhorns, Italian people, Jewish people, all nationalities, they cannot speak English and they don’t know where to go and they just come from the old country and

I let them work hard, like the devil, and those I get for less wages.” I said: “All right, then you are the boss and I will do as you say.”

So in the morning, Tuesday morning, I started to attend to the girls. So when the girls seen me, they asked me: “You are the forelady?” “Yes.” “How much are you going to pay us a week?” So I said: “I am a new girl here, I don’t know anything, but I will ask the boss, and I will let you know.”

So when it was Tuesday night I went to the boss and I said: “These people want to know how much are you going to pay them?” He said: “Well, don’t you know how much?” I said: “I don’t know, I am new in the shop, I don’t know how much you pay.” So he said: “For a finisher, I will give her six dollars a week, and she must finish me up ten coats a day.” Now each coat you could sew it in an hour and a half, and that made fifteen hours’ work a day. So I answered and said: “Oh, my, they could not do that. Why, I cannot finish myself ten coats in a day, and I am an experienced girl, and how could you expect these people to finish ten coats in a day? So he said: “Well, never mind, that is my price, six dollars a week, ten coats a day, if they want to work. If they don't want to work, I got a lot of greenhorns to come in the shop, why, let them go.” I said: “Well, all right, I will speak to the people.”

Well, Wednesday morning I told the people, “You must finish up ten coats a day, six dollars a week.” Well, these people were all married women, they all had families of small children, some had husbands that were sick, and there was a woman there that had a husband that was blind for two years and besides he was sick in bed, and she was in that condition she could not work, but she had to work in the shop to get fifty cents a day to support her and her husband. So I said, “Well,

you must finish up ten coats a day.” Those people started to cry. They said: “How can we support our families if we have to do ten coats a day, because we could not do a coat in an hour and a half. How can we do it? It is impossible.” Well, I got up and I said, “Talk to the boss.” They said “We cannot make ten coats a day.” I said, “All right, I speak to the boss again.”

So I went to the boss and I told him, I said: “The people are not satisfied. Ten coats a day, an hour and a half on each coat, you ask them to work fifteen hours a day.” He said: “If they cannot finish ten coats a day, let them finish up just as much as they can in the day time, and the rest of the coats they bring home so as to make one day's work. If they cannot finish ten coats a day, bring the rest home and make them in the night time, so they can do one day's work.” I said, “They want to be paid piece work.” He said, “That is all right. I will pay them piece work.” I said, “All right. How much are you going to pay them?” He said, “I will pay them thirteen cents a coat,” and that was a little worse than the week work. You had to work an hour and a half on each [end page 425] coat for thirteen cents a coat, and if they worked ten hours a day they could not make more than fifty cents a day, and I said, “It is too cheap.” He said: “I can get all the greenhorns I want to do the work, and I can get them cheap.” “All right.”

I went to the people and I said, “The boss will pay you thirteen cents for each coat.” “Thirteen cents a coat. Are you crazy,” they said to me. “Well,” I said, “I ain't crazy, but maybe the boss is.” They said, “How do you expect us to make fifty or sixty cents a day, how can we do it?” I said: “I cannot help it. That is my duty, I have to tell you.”

So these people, they did not know where to go, and they had to suffer and be satisfied with that thirteen cents a coat because they did not know where to go. They did not know how to speak English, they did not know any place to go, any other shop, so they had to keep on there and suffer, and they could not make any more than five coats a day when they worked hard. He wanted fine work and small stitches. He said, "I want work just like a patty cake." He wanted all that work for thirteen cents a coat, and those people make five coats a day.

Well, about a month later this boss came to me and said, "Oh, Clara, I am so sore I don't know what to do." "Well," I said. "The bosses are always sore for one thing or another." He said "Well, do you know what is the matter with me? The contractor that gives me the work, he cuts me twenty-five cents a coat. What can I do?" I said: "Well, you must ask him again to raise you back again." He said: "Oh, no, he don't want to do it." "Well," I said: "I am sorry for you, but what can I do?" He said: "Well, the only thing to do, I pay thirteen cents a coat for finishing, and that is too much, we must lower it down to twelve cents." I said: "Thirteen cents a coat is too much? You must be crazy. If you would lower the price down to twelve cents, they cannot make it." He said: "If they cannot make it, here is the window and here is the door. If they don't want to go from the window, they can go from the door, and if they don't want to go from the door, they can go from the window. I have lots of greenhorns. I got to make my own living." I said: "Ain't you ashamed? Ain't you sorry to make those people work an hour and a half for twelve cents?" He said: "Don't you care. In the old country they work for ten cents a day, and in America, if they make thirty-five cents a day, they can eat beans and they will have plenty to live on." He said, "You don't understand America. Why you worry about those peoples? Here the foolish people pay the smart." That made me angry and I said, "Well, now the smart people will teach the foolish!"

I said: "I am not going to tell those people twelve cents a coat, they will jump over me if I tell them." He said: "You got to tell them." I said: "No, sir, you tell them yourself. I am just ashamed to tell them." I said: "You are a rich man." He said: "Yes, I am rich, and the poor must stand by the poor, and the rich must stand by the rich." I said: "Well, if you want to do that, you tell them that yourself." He said: "You are forelady, you are supposed to do the speaking." I said: "Well, if I am supposed to do the speaking, then I will not be the forelady, I want to be a working girl, the same as the others, and then I don't speak." So he said: "What do you care for them greenhorns?" "Well," I said: "I am an Italian girl myself. I can speak myself good English, but if I could not, you would do the same thing to me." "Well," he said: "If they don't want to make the coats for twelve cents, let them jump out." I said: "All right, you tell them." He said: "Don't you want to attend to the girls?" I said: "No, I want to be a working girl." He said to me: "Well, what work do you want to do?" I said: "Well, give me work, anything you wish to." "Well," he said: "All right, I will give you week work." I said: "How much?" He said: "I will give you fourteen dollars a week."

I was the best one in the shop, one of the best girls, an experienced girl in all kinds of work. Those people could not do no more work than two and a half to three dollars a week, but I was better, I was a good, experienced girl [end page 426] and do all kinds of work that no other girl could do. He said: "All right, I will give you week work." So he told them twelve cents a coat and they said: "What can we do for twelve cents a coat? We cannot make no more than five coats a day. How can we make our living?" He said: "Don't you want to stay? Go on, go out of the shop. I will kick you out, one by one, out of the shop."

I was the only single woman there. They were all married women. He said: "I can kick you out." The women got up and said: "Well, you got such a heart, you make us work for twelve cents, you are a rich man. Why don't you give us a cent more, five cents a day more. That is enough for us."

He said to one woman: "A good looking woman like you, maybe you don't need no position. You don't need to work." You understand-I am a young girl, and I cannot explain. "A nice woman like you, if you don't like to work in a shop, you don't have to work, you do something else." So that woman, of course, she had to keep quiet. She understood and she said: "Well, no, I will starve first." "Well," he said: "Get out of the shop." He talked that way to that woman.

Well, then, when he put me to week work-anybody who works for him must make small stitches. He said: "They must be so that the stitches does not show at all." He put me to week work and he said: "I will give you fourteen dollars a week." Of course I basted on shoulders, and if I was to work real fast and real hard that I would not have two minutes to get a glass of water to drink, it took me twenty-five minutes, so in ten hours I could not make any more than twenty-three or twenty-four coats, and I had to work hard to do that.

So the first day I make twenty-four and the second day the same. I could not possibly do no more. I used to go up there a quarter after six and half past six to finish the shoulders, because if I did not have them ready they had to wait for me, and my overtime, I did not get paid for it. So one day there were about fifteen coats laying on the floor and I was the only one basting shoulders and the boss came in and he said: "Clara, are those coats all basted?" I said: "All basted? An hour and a half, fifteen coats all basted; no, they ain't basted." He said: "Do you let them lay on the floor?" I

said: "No, but if you don't want them on the floor, put them on a chair." He said: "I thought they were all basted." It was nine o'clock in the morning, and fifteen coats laying on the floor. I said: "I cannot baste a coat in less than twenty-five minutes, no matter how hard I work." He said: "You know that these coats must fly like the leaves on a tree, that is the way you must make the work fly." I said: "My, I cannot do that." He said: "Well, you know the people cannot wait for you, the finisher cannot wait for you, the work must go out." So I said: "Well, get another one to help me if you want the work to fly." He said: "No, I won't have another girl, you got to do it. If I get another girl, you have to baste one hundred coats a day," and I could not do that in a week, so I said: "No, I cannot do it." He said: "Well, you should baste thirty-five coats a day," and I could not baste no more than twenty-four coats if I worked real hard.

Of course, I am a poor girl against a rich man. If I would quit, maybe it takes me two or three days to get another job, and there was a family of five or six persons in the house and I was the only one working, and then I lose two or three days, five or six dollars, and I could not; I had to suffer and take all he said. Every day he comes to me and he said the work must go, and he holler and he use profane words, too, so what could I do? I cannot go to another place to find work because the other places were on a strike. Of course, he was insulting me every day and the other people, too.

So I knew they were striking in all the shops, so I told all our girls, I said: "The first whistle we hear in the window that means for us to strike. You cannot work for twelve cents a coat, and I cannot baste thirty-five coats in a day, and we will all go on a strike." So one day, it was dinner time, a quarter after twelve, and we hear a big noise under the win- [end page 427] dow and there

was about 200 persons were all whistling for us to come down and strike, so I was the first one to go out and get the other girls to come after me.

So when we went on a strike, he owed me eighteen dollars and a half, and he owes all the people and he would not pay us. I went to him and I said: "Why don't you pay us? I need the money." He said: "I am not going to pay none of you," and he did not do it. [page 428]