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**BRITISH WAGES BOARDS**  
**A Study in Industrial Democracy**

**BRITISH WAGES BOARDS**  
A Study in Industrial Democracy

BY  
DOROTHY SELLS

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## DIRECTOR'S PREFACE

Nearly half a century has elapsed since New Zealand—a young agricultural country—inaugurated minimum wage legislation, and thirty years since Great Britain, then the stronghold of *laissez faire* doctrine and the foremost industrial nation of the world, took its first legislative step in the same direction. With the bringing into operation of the Fair Labor Standards Act on October 24, 1938, the United States takes its place among the large and growing number of nations whose governments have adopted legislation of this general type. In view of the complexity of the administrative task involved in this new phase of government activity, it is fortunate that we are privileged to draw upon so vast a body of experience as has been accumulated by other governments that have gone before us in this field.

It seldom proves feasible to import full-fledged the machinery or methods of operation which have been devised in another country to meet its peculiar needs. At the same time, it seems reasonable to suppose that out of the broad experience of other countries in dealing with minimum wage legislation as both to industry and to agriculture, certain principles, methods, and expedients have been developed, and even some illuminating mistakes made, which should afford guidance to those concerned with the administration of a similar undertaking at any time or in any place. We deem it opportune, therefore, to present at this time a detailed study of the British experience.

Miss Sells had an unusual opportunity to study at first hand the operation of the British Trade Boards system

during its early formative years. The outcome of that investigation was published in 1923 as one of the London School of Economics Studies in Economics and Political Science under the title, *The British Trade Boards System*. The present study may be regarded as essentially a sequel to that volume, incorporating the results of further study covering the more extended period of operation now available. For this further study, and at the suggestion of Mr. Leifur Magnússon, director of the Washington branch of the International Labour Organization, Miss Sells was sent to England in the winter of 1937-38 by the International Labour Organization and the Bureau of Labor Statistics of the United States Department of Labor. Since her return to the United States, she has been attached to the staff of the Institute of Economics in order to provide her opportunity for digesting the mass of materials collected and for developing her interpretation of their meaning.

It is our hope that this study of Great Britain's experience with minimum wage legislation will prove useful to legislators, administrators, members of wages committees, and others dealing with problems of this type, as well as to those members of the public to whom minimum wage laws apply and others who have a general interest in the relation between the state and industry.

The committee of the Institute cooperating with the author in the preparation of this volume consisted of E. G. Nourse, Horace B. Drury, and Maurice Leven.

EDWIN G. NOURSE

*Director*

Institute of Economics,  
April 1939

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For efficient work connected with the charts, tables, and certain details of research, I am grateful to Miss Louise Bebb of the Brookings Institution staff. To P. S. King and Son, Ltd., of London I am indebted for permission to use parts of *The British Trade Boards System* published by them in 1923. But for the opinions and interpretations expressed herein I assume sole responsibility.

DOROTHY SELLS



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**BRITISH WAGES BOARDS**  
**A Study in Industrial Democracy**

## FOREWORD

"A living organism must take the place of a mechanical instrument if the public good is to be served."

—SIR RUPERT KETTLE

Prior to 1933, minimum wage laws had been adopted by 15 states of the Union, (Puerto Rico, and the District of Columbia,) but only 8 of these were operative in 1932. Moreover, the scope of these acts was confined to women and/or minors, whose wages were exceptionally low owing to lack of both individual and collective bargaining power. Fostered by expanding markets and technical improvements, both the nominal and real wages of the majority of employed persons had been rising almost steadily for a century or more and were high relative to the wages generally paid for similar work in other countries. There was consequently little pressure for extending wage legislation to include male workers before the decade of the thirties.

Following 1929, however, the scenes in the economic drama of the United States changed. Decreasing business activity, decreasing wages, and decreasing employment brought the minimum wage issue to the national stage in 1933. With passage of the National Industrial Recovery Act in that year the field of wage legislation was also extended to include male workers as well as women and minors. A decision of the Supreme Court rendered this first law embodying federal minimum wage provisions unconstitutional in 1935.<sup>1</sup> But in June 1938 another type

<sup>1</sup> Between 1933 and 1938, minimum wage legislation was adopted by 12 new states, one law applying to men as well as women and minors. Seven of the 9 laws inoperative in 1932 were revived and these, together with the 8 laws then operating, make a total of 27 state minimum wage laws including those of Puerto Rico and the District of Columbia.

of federal minimum wage legislation was adopted in the form of the Fair Labor Standards Act. The country consequently faced with a new set of administrative problems involving application of federal wage and hour provisions to perhaps 11 million men, women, and children working in various industries throughout its continental area.

The new importance which the minimum wage has thus assumed in the United States raises two fundamental questions with regard to legislation of that kind, one a question of principle, the other of method: (1) Is minimum wage legislation advisable? and (2) What is the best method of applying the minimum wage principle under a democratic régime? The answer to the first of these questions obviously depends upon two factors: the social philosophy of the person attempting to answer it, and how application of a minimum wage works out in terms of its objectives. In the nature of the case the author must leave each individual reader to determine for himself whether a minimum wage is a good thing by the light of his private conception of the good society and of the economic requirements of our industrial system. It is rather to the method of applying the principle that the author addresses herself in this book, although the study of actual administrative experience under circumstances most nearly comparable with those in the United States will doubtless be found significant by any one trying to make up his mind as to the soundness of the principle itself.

For the purpose of studying minimum wage adjustment in practice the wages board system of Great Britain has been chosen for intensive examination. This body of experience has been selected for the following reasons (1) Great Britain is a country whose language, law, tra



dition, aspirations, and political and economic organizations have most in common with those of the United States; (2) the British wages boards have been in operation for a sufficiently long period to be thoroughly tested; (3) the system is not only approved by employers, workers, and the public generally, but is conceded to be one of the most successful pieces of social legislation yet placed upon the British statute books; (4) the British wages boards offer the clearest example of democratic wage determination operating under a democratic form of government.

Emerging from the British experience with minimum wage legislation are constructive approaches to most of the problems with which those drafting or administering legislation of this kind are likely to be faced. Instead of pulling out these problems and their solutions by means of analysis, however, an attempt has been made, in so far as it is possible with words and figures, to create for the reader a dynamic picture of the living organism into which the wages boards of Great Britain have developed in the thirty years since their inception. Emphasis is therefore placed upon the legislative and administrative aspects rather than upon the economic. The process is described instead of the result's being weighed. The qualitative factors as opposed to the quantitative for the most part comprise the contents of the study.

But before embarking upon this joint exploration of the British Trade Boards, Agricultural Wages Committees, and other statutory wage-fixing bodies—how they came into existence, what they are, how they work, what they have accomplished, and what their significance is—the reader should be apprised of certain points of difference between Great Britain and the United States in order to render the following pages intelligible.

First, a difference in the use of the phrase "minimum wage" requires clarification. Though a *minimum wage*, as the term is used in Great Britain, originally implied a bare *subsistence wage* fixed by law for sweated workers, the conception of the term has grown with the development of industrial democracy. In current British usage a *minimum wage* does not necessarily mean a *subsistence wage* or even a *living wage* as it usually has in the United States. A minimum wage is exactly what the words say, simply the lowest wage legally payable in a trade. The level of living which it provides may vary somewhat from trade to trade. Actually, however, the minima fixed by the different wages boards represent the prevailing rate of wages in the industry for which they are fixed and they are determined with that objective in mind. The minimum is not the *standard* rate in the sense that rates agreed to by trade unions and employers' associations are standard, nor is it necessarily the *maximum* rate since trade union agreements may and often do stipulate that a higher rate shall be paid for the same occupation to which a minimum may apply; but it is the *prevailing* rate, that is to say, the *rate generally paid* and it is also intended to be a *fair wage* for that industry or occupation, taking into consideration the existing purchasing power of the pound, the work done, the rate actually paid for similar work in other trades, and what the particular trade involved can bear.

Though a comparison of money wages in Great Britain and the United States is quite beside the point of this study, it is important that the reader should have some idea of the relative cost of living in the two countries at the back of his mind. No definitive statement regarding this relationship can be made. A very rough estimate based upon the best available data indicates,

however, that during the years 1931-37, the cost of living in Great Britain approximated 75 per cent of that in the United States.<sup>2</sup> Expressed in monetary terms, this means that 9 pence in England bought something like what 25 cents would buy in the United States during those years. In attempting to obtain a relative value for wages in the two countries, a mental allowance should also be made for certain imponderables. For one thing, the material standard of living among all income groups is considerably lower in Great Britain than in the United States. Consequently wages are not expected to provide so much. What virtually amount to a further addition to wages are the various state insurance and pension schemes, to which the worker may or may not contribute a small sum, and most of which have existed in Great Britain for more than 25 years. The security thus gained, to say nothing of the greater stability of wage rates, in part incidental to existing social legislation itself, reduces the necessity for saving, so important to workers in the

<sup>2</sup>This figure is derived from cost of living index figures given in Table II, p. 31 of a publication entitled *A Contribution to the Study of International Comparisons of Costs of Living* (Ford Study), an inquiry into the cost of living of certain groups of workers in Detroit, U.S.A. and fourteen European towns, issued by the International Labour Office in 1932 (Studies and Reports, Series N (Statistics), No. 17, second revised ed.). It was obtained by using 71 per cent (the range being 69 to 73 per cent) of the Detroit cost as the cost in Manchester, England, in January 1931, of a standard of living approximately equivalent to that of an average working-class family in Detroit. Taking the relationship between these two cities as representative of that between Great Britain and the United States at that time, a common base was established by means of which the official British cost of living indexes could be converted for comparison with those of the United States. Using the weights of the I.L.O. study, the British cost of living index at the end of 1937 was found to be 81 per cent of that of the United States. The relative cost of living in Great Britain and the United States thus ranged between 71 per cent in 1931 and 81 per cent in 1937. The figure 75 per cent has been arbitrarily chosen to suggest the relationship obtaining over the whole of this seven-year period.

United States who are not as completely covered. In these ways the buying power of 9 pence is stretched to something more than the actual purchasing power of 25 cents in the United States.

The relative homogeneity of the British population and the smaller size of the country in comparison with the United States are also important points of difference because they facilitate administration of industrial legislation. A common ideology created by such conditions has proved advantageous in organization of responsible worker and employer associations and in the growth of a strong social consciousness which has developed in Great Britain especially since the War. Though British society is more definitely stratified than is that of the United States, a more unified population has nevertheless produced a highly developed and profound conception of democracy, which finds its source beneath superficial social customs, political forms, or economic standards in deep recognition of the inherent dignity of man. This profound belief in the right of every Englishman as an individual to govern himself, qualified by the more recent realization that every Englishman, being also a part of society, has a duty to govern himself accordingly, naturally expresses itself in parliamentary form with regard to both political and economic matters. If the United States has taken pride in her technical achievements, it is also well to remember that Great Britain is far advanced in the art of human relations.

The British wages boards represent an application of the parliamentary form of government to a particular economic field. The details of the legislation and the respects in which it has developed or been limited over a period of years are consequently significant for the United States, which has recently launched forth upon

a similar undertaking. (But, however well conceived and drawn is any piece of legislation, its ultimate success or failure depends primarily upon how its provisions are interpreted, how they are carried out, and upon the relationship established between those who apply the law and those to whom it is applied, that is to say, upon its administration.) Good administration being primarily a matter of human character, judgment, and understanding rather than one of forms, filing systems, reports, or similar techniques, we in the United States can learn much from Great Britain, especially on the administrative side.

Since the effectiveness of democracy is measured by the capacity of government to adjust to the growing needs of a living people, the author invites the reader to commence this study of British wages boards by observing how the concept of wage regulation has expanded with industrial and economic change and with the development of British democracy. It is the author's hope that those actively concerned with administrative problems will find the subsequent statement of how the British system works not too detailed to be followed through in all its intricacies. More general readers, however, may perhaps gain sufficient light on the broad problem through reading Chapters I, II, III, V, IX, and XII. ✓

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