

Report(s) from the Select Committee of the House of Lords on the Sweating System,
1888-1890

Evidence of Mr DAVID LUBELSKI, including his swearing in

Die Jovis, 11e Julii, 1889

LORDS PRESENT:

Earl of Derby

Viscount Gordon (*Earl of Aberdeen*)

Earl)

Lord Clifford of Chudleigh

Lord Foxford (*Earl of Limerick*)

Lord Kenry (*Earl of Dunraven & Mount-*

Lord Monkswell

LORD KENRY (*Earl of Dunraven & Mount-Earl*) in the Chair

MR DAVID LUBELSKI is called in: and, having been sworn, is
Examined, as follows:

31643 Chairman: What is your business?
Wholesale clothing manufacturer.

31644 At Leeds?
Yes; at 20, Park Cross-street.

31645 How long have you been in the trade?
I have been in the trade for 26 years.

31646 Twenty years a wholesale manufacturer?
No; I have been in business for myself since 1873.

31647 Before that, what were you doing?
I was working as a journeyman in the tailoring.

31648 Working in a shop?
In a shop.

31649 You have been in Leeds altogether how long?
Above twenty years.

31650 Were you born in this country?
No; I am a Pole. I come from Warsaw.

31651 Have you ever acted as a middleman?
I did up to about two years ago.

31652 That is to say, taking out work from other houses and getting it made at your own place?

Yes.

31653 How many hands did you employ there?

Between 60 and 70 sometimes, and sometimes less.

31654 It has been suggested in evidence that the foremen in these large establishments practically act as middlemen, absorbing profit, for which they do nothing, owing to the fact that it is a customary thing for the middlemen or sweaters, as they have sometimes been called, to bribe them: is that the case, do you know?

Yes.

31655 You think that is the case?

It is.

31656 Is that very generally done?

Yes; up to the time I left off being a middleman it was done so.

31657 Has it ever occurred to you to have to do that yourself?

Yes, I had to do it, I am very sorry to say, and if I did not give sufficient bribery I did not get sufficient trade. But I have a large family; I have 10 children, and I could not afford to give bribery as much the others gave. They gave more bribery than me, and they have worked themselves into a good position, so that they get all the trade.

31658 Then, in fact, you mean that the better the bribe, the more work the man gets?

Yes, in the best work. If I happened to miss giving bribery I suddenly was stopped of a bit of work.

31659 And you say that the system is common, in your opinion?

It has always been done so, all the time that I have been a middleman.

31660 The Committee have been told that is one of the reasons why the workmens' wages are so low, that the middleman has to cut down the wages as much as possible, because he has to take out of his profits the money he uses to bribe the foremen. Is that so, do you think?

It is not so much lowering the wages, but driving the workmen

31661 What do you mean by 'driving'?

I will explain it. If a man gets a wage and gets constant work, I certainly say that he gets a good wage; but with regard to the wages that the working-men or hands get in the middlemen's shops, they simply work so many days in the week: they do not start on a Sunday morning as Jews, or on a Monday morning as Christian girls, and they work up till Friday sunset; they work only certain days in the week. When a middleman gets out a quantity of the work on a Saturday, and if he thinks he will not have sufficient to go on

till Monday night, he already gets the tip from the foreman about the place to say 'Well, I do not think you will get much work brought on Monday', and therefore he only starts, say Monday dinner time. Then he starts with a certain class of hands, that is, one portion of the shop, as we call them machinists; another, he starts next morning with the tailors, and at dinner time he starts again with feller hands, and buttonhold hands; and the day following he starts with the pressers, and then he drives the workers late hours at night and early in the morning to get his work by Friday. And the first portion of the hands which I have mentioned get stopped on a Thursday, for instance; they do not get Friday work, on account of its being a short day; simply the middleman gets the advantage of the day's wages for himself; and of course this is the way that they are doing regularly in the shops in Leeds.

31662 What I want to get from you is whether in your opinion it is true that because the middlemen are obliged to bribe the foremen, they are therefore compelled to deal more hardly with their workmen than they otherwise would do?

Decidedly; because the workman has to work for a living for the middleman, and for all his expenses, because some of them are not tailors by trade; it is very seldom they are; and then he has to work for the foreman to be bribed, and for the middleman to have all the luxuries, that they can by spending money.

31663 From your experience are the numbers of your countrymen increasing largely in Leeds or not; I mean are there more Jews?

I could not exactly say that, because I very seldom come in that neighbourhood, as I have passed out of the business as a middleman; therefore I could not so fully explain that matter.

31664 Have you anything you wish to say as to the general condition in which the workpeople live?

They live very wretchedly; they are very poor. I know they often enough come to me, or some of my friends, to make collections for the Jewish tailors. I must say that they have not sufficient work always to keep themselves right. You know there was a strike in Leeds. I helped as much as I could the workmen, and I was sorry to say they could not gain the day on account of being so poor, because they were obliged to give in to the middlemen and they could not stand the time they would have got taken off. They simply wanted this when the strike was. The machinists and pressers combined together with the tailors and they said, 'Why should you be worse than we; the Jew tailor on the board has to work from seven to eight; why cannot you work the same hours as we do?' and they struck work on account of this, that the tailors should work from eight to eight the same as the other men; and the masters would not give in; and the people were obliged to give in at the time; and I think it was not right then of the middlemen.

31665 Have you any suggestions to make as to how the evils you complain of could be remedied?

Yes, there are lots of things to that effect to do. It would be a good idea if the governors of certain firms would look into the case themselves; they should not leave it to their foremen. There are some of the large firms in Leeds which leave it to their foremen and

never take any notice. The governor cannot help it; so long as he gets his work done, he leaves it entirely to the foreman; if the foreman does as he likes he gives it to his favourite. For instance, there is a large firm now existing in Leeds; I will say they are perfect gentlemen; I know the foreman does simply give the work to three or four men; 18 years ago to my knowledge they employed 18 to 20 master tailors, middlemen. Now, though the trade has increased in Leeds to a great extent, there are only three or four that get the trade; and this firm has increased by about 2,000 hands in the time that I remember. And then they used to have about 18 or 20 middlemen employed about 18 years ago; now they only give to such middlemen as I mentioned, to the favourites, to three or four; and it is done by the foreman only, unknown to the governors. I went to a gentleman before I left Leeds yesterday morning, a certain practical tailor who worked for the firm occasionally, and you can refer to him if you like; I can give you the name if you wish to do so; but I said to him, 'Now I am going before the House of Lords; now you remember you used to work for such and such a firm.' He said, 'Yes, I wish you would only mention my name; they should have my evidence. As you know I am a practical tailor and I used to do a good trade for a certain firm, but now such and such men who are shoemakers or carriers, or blacksmiths, have the trade, and I, a good tailor and others like me, have to do simply what we can get.' I said, 'I will do my best to mention those words.'

31666 I take it from you that owing to the system of bribing men who are not practical tailors get the work, and that the practical tailors can get none?
That is it.

31667 And that you think that a great deal of good could be done if the heads and responsible persons in large houses would not leave matters so much to their foremen?
That is so. And not only that, I know for a fact (I have been myself in this trade) that they have done this. Certain firms have got good men at Leeds to do the best work. And what have those favourites done, that work for such a firm. They have actually told the foreman to take the buttons off the coat and shave the linen and canvas away, and then sew the buttons on the bare cloth. And then the foreman showed the coat to the governors and said, 'Now look here; this is a fresh tailor, and he reckons to do the best trade, and he sews on a button on the bare cloth.' And the governor said, 'Well, if he does work like this you must not give him work any more.' That was done by bribery; because I have been with the parties when it has been done so.

31668 We understand from you I think sufficiently what your opinion is about the action of the foremen in the matter; to pass on from that, are there any other suggestions that you have to make?
The suggestion is that the work ought to be divided between more middlemen; that one should not have a full earning and the others starve; the work ought to be divided, and then there will not be such poverty amongst the Jews in Leeds, amongst the tailors. I know I have to suffer myself; I have a family of ten, and I have to suffer much in the same way, and I feel for others the same as for myself.

31669 Do you mean that the condition of the people is worse than it used to be?
Yes, because these favourites have their own, and they keep it between them; there are three or four favourites in the place, and they give the foreman so much bribery that no one can get over it.

31670 Have you anything else you wish to say?
There are also some foremen that are not practical tailors; they do not understand a garment.

31671 I think we have heard enough about the foremen; is there any other point you wish to mention? If you wish to ask me anything I should be very pleased to answer you.

31672 [*Earl of Derby*] You say that the masters ought to attend more to the distribution of the work, and not leave it so much in the hands of foremen?
Yes.

31673 That may be very good advice to the masters, but I presume you do not suppose that any rule of that kind could be enforced by Act of Parliament?
It could be done so far to my knowledge as to see that one should not be starving altogether and the other have luxuries; that is my idea.

31674 It is not a question of what masters or foremen ought to do, but of what we can cause to be done by legislative action; there is nothing in what you have said that can be enforced by any Act of Parliament, is there?
Well, I am not so deep in the laws; but what I mean is that the governor might look in and ask a question of the foreman and say: 'I think this man has drawn too much wages this week, and why, if this other man can do it, cannot he get a bit more?' For instance, if I get work to do to the extent of 5 *l.* a week, and another man 100 *l.* a week, am I not entitled to have 50 *l.* or 20 *l.* a week, and the other man not to have the whole lump.

31675 You mean, when there are a certain number of men asking for employment, it ought to be more or less equally divided among them?
Yes, that is my idea.

31676 Then you consider that every competent workman who comes to an employer and asks to be employed has a right to be employed?
He ought to get a job to have a trial. I know for a fact a case in which a practical tailor came in and got some work to do; the foreman had got to give it to him because the governor ordered him to give it, and he got a certain article to do. And what did the foreman do; he went and told certain other men: 'Now,' he said, 'be aware that such-and-such a man has got such-and-such an article to do which will be laid before the governor to be proved.' This man did not know anything about it that it would go before the governor, but the foreman's favourites did know; and both articles were laid before the governor. I think it is hard to deprive a practical tailor of his living.

31677 If I understand you then, what you object to is the right of the employer to choose his own workmen?
I say that the master should employ a practical tailor, and not let him have any work if he is not a good tailor. If the middleman is no tailor he has no right to have work.

31678 Then would you have everybody examined as to their knowledge of tailoring before they are employed?
Well, he must make a job. If a man comes here and calls himself a practical tailor and really is a shoemaker or a glazier, you cannot believe him to be a tailor; at least I should not.

31679 I presume if he does not understand his business that is very soon found out, and he is not employed any more?
But he employs hands who do not understand the business; but he is himself simply a nigger driver in the shop.

31680 Do you object to there being a middleman altogether, or do you say that he ought to be a practical tailor himself?
He ought to be a practical tailor, a workman himself; if the working men leave him he ought to be able to sit down and do his own job.

31681 But do you think that Parliament or Government could interfere to require that every middleman should be a practical tailor?

I think they ought to be. If I serve my time, and a bricklayer comes in and asks for a job, I think I am more entitled than the bricklayer to get the job, if it is my trade that I have learnt. That is my idea; but it is not for me to do the thing; it is only my opinion of it, that if I have learned the trade, I think I am more entitled than any shoemaker or glazier to get the job.

31682 You would have employment confined to those who can show that they have worked up their way in the business?

Yes.

31683 And no outsider to be allowed to come in?

No; that is my opinion.

31684 [*Lord Clifford of Chudleigh*] Do these middlemen of whom you speak generally employ a large number of workmen or only a few?

A large number.

31685 Twenty, 30 or 40?

Sixty or 70, or 80, or more; and I think they ought to be divided.

31686 A man employing 70 or 80 workmen would have enough to do himself, would he not, in looking after them, without doing any work?

He does not look after them; he keeps men to look after them; he simply walks up and down; and if he grabs all the work away in occupying such a large manufactory, a practical man has no chance to get a bit of work because the other man is in a large way, and he bribes in the largest way.

31687 But it might be an advantage to the large manufacturers; to the people that you allude to, the governors, the masters of the establishment: to have their work done by these men who employ a large number of men?

It never used to be done so.

31688 [*Lord Monkswell*] Do you say that it is a new system, this bribery of foremen?

No, it is not a new system.

31689 Has it been increasing?

It has always been done up to the time when I retired from being a middleman.

31690 But I thought you said that employers used to employ more middlemen than they do now; the great firms that you have mentioned?

Yes, they had more middlemen then; they have worked themselves in with certain people.

31691 But your answers would lead one to suppose that the evil was getting greater?

Bribery goes on heavier still; every time more.

31692 Do you say that every employer allows his foreman to bribe?

I do not know whether the employer knows about it.

31693 Did you never tell an employer that the foreman asked for a bribe from you?

I went on one occasion myself to the governor.

31694 And what happened?

I am sorry to say the governor died. He looked into the matter, and if you allow me I can mention the name.

31695 Did you never make any inquiry of any other governor who is not dead?

No, I have done all I could, and every time I tried to kick up a row I used to get a bit of work.

31696 Why did you not go on 'kicking up a row'?

Because I got tired of it, and I thought it would not pay me going on like that, and I could not give such high bribery as others did; I had too much to do, with my family to look after.

31697 But I should have thought that if the bribery was a good investment, if you employed 60 or 70 men you would have been able by degrees to have accumulated a little money to have bribed more?

I did, till they kept me for many weeks, coming every day asking for work morning and night, or next day, and so on, till I got tired of it.

31698 You found that the demands were so heavy that you could not comply with them?

No, I could not.

31699 [*Earl of Aberdeen*] Do you know whether this system of bribes, as you describe it, of foremen is in practice in other kinds of business besides your own?

I can only tell of my business; I cannot say about any other business.

31700 Have you had many complaints from other people about it?

In the same trade do you mean? Yes, plenty of them. 'If I could do so-and-so,' they say, 'I would get more work.'

31701 [*Chairman*] Do you consider the middlemen necessary in the trade; do you think it necessary that there should be any middlemen?

They could not do very well without the middlemen, I think, unless the governors took the trade inside and gave the work to the men inside, which I think would be very good for the Jews, because they would have regular work and they could work during certain hours, from eight to half-past six; and I think it ought to be done so.

31702 You think it would be better that the work should be done without the middlemen at all?

Yes.

31703 But I understand you that what you principally object to is the middlemen who are not tailors at all?

Several of them are not.

31704 And I understand you also that these men who have no practical knowledge of the trade whatever, are enabled to get work because they bribe the foremen to give it to them?

That is so.

31705 And practically, therefore, I gather from you that if this bribing of foremen, and favouritism shown by foremen, and so on, was stopped there would not be very much to complain of?

No.

31706 And when you said, in answer to Lord Derby, that you thought that these men who had no practical knowledge of the trade ought not to have work given to them, are we to understand you to mean that you think that the law ought to step in to prevent it, or simply that in your opinion it is not right that they should have work?

Decidedly it ought to be stopped, so as to give it only to practical men who are tailors, no other men.

31707 But I suppose you have no idea, have you, how the law could stop it?

I could not say. The only thing I think is, that if a man is not a tradesmen of that sort he ought not to have a job, but it should be given to the man who has served his apprenticeship. And the long hours are abominable that they work in Leeds; from seven to eight, I think, is too long hours for any man to work.

The Witness is directed to withdraw.

Mr. DAVID ISAAC, is called in; and, having been sworn, is Examined as follows :

31708 [*Chairman*] What is your business?
I am a jeweller.

31709 In Leeds?
In Leeds.

31710 How long have you been in Leeds?
I have been there 36 years.

31711 Are you well acquainted with the condition of the Jewish working population in Leeds?
I am very much acquainted with the Jewish population all round. First, when I came to Leeds, there were not above half-a-dozen Jewish inhabitants in the town of Leeds; now they nearly number 5,000 Jewish inhabitants.

31712 And what are they principally engaged in, tailoring?
Tailoring, the majority.

31713 In your opinion does this sweating that is complained of obtain in Leeds to a large extent?
Yes, and it does a deal of harm both to the Jewish poor, and also to the English working man in the same trade; I am acquainted with both sides, I frequently meet them, and I hear from the two sides the complaint.

31714 Well, what is the complaint?
If your Lordships will permit me, I will say a few words in explanation. About 20 years ago there were a number of foreign tailors employed, and such a thing as sweaters was not known then, and any practical tradesmen in that branch of trade might have come to Leeds and been employed by the proper employer if he was competent to do his work, and the man could obtain a very respectable living as a working man, and would not injure his fellow English working man in the prices. But of late years a kind of sweating system, a kind of middleman has sprung up, starting with small bribery and raising it year by year, with the result that the strongest man, the man able to give the heaviest bribe, is the man that holds possession of the warehouse; he holds the position which enables him to get the work from the warehouse, whilst the smallest men are knocked out gradually by not being able to support those men that take the bribe. The first bribe that was given, to my idea or to my knowledge, was by a man who gave a horse and trap to a manager. I can mention above a dozen or two cases where goods were purchased from me by the middlemen and sent to the managers of this trade.

31715 Do you mean that the middlemen bribe the foremen or managers by giving them presents of articles bought from you?
Yes, presents. Of late years all those bribes have ceased in the shape of jewellery, but they have turned into cash presents, such a thing as 40 *l.* or 50 *l.* ready cash; and the one that cannot do that, cannot get employment at all from the managers. For instance, a competent working man shall go to a warehouse; he shall possess recommendations and he shall possess capital to apply

HERE, BETWEEN THIS PAGE AND THE NEXT, THE PARAGRAPH NUMBERS, WHICH HAVE BEEN IN SEQUENCE, JUMP FROM 31715 TO 31781, ALTHOUGH THE PAGE HEADING STILL SHOWS ISAAC TO BE THE WITNESS. CLEARLY SOME OF THE TRANSCRIPT IS MISSING.

31781 And if the bribing were done away with the working man would be better off?
He would have a chance of going to the employer and getting employment, and according to his merits he would receive his reward.

The Witness is directed to withdraw.

Mr. DAVID LUBELSKI, having been re-called, is further Examined, as follows :

31782 [*Chairman*] You want to add something to your evidence?

Yes, I have one question to answer which my friend Mr. Isaac could not explain: I can answer about the women's trade. The women at the middlemen's shop work from eight to eight, but after eight the middlemen give them work home to do; they work in their own houses. I think that is done at night; when they leave the work at eight o'clock they give them some home work to do in their own houses.

31783 So that you mean that the law is practically broken; it is evaded in that way; that although the women do not work overtime in the shop they are compelled to work at home?

Yes, they work at home. I see them frequently carrying the work home, as many as six or eight coats to each girl or one woman; and it is rather too heavy, according to my idea, for any woman to carry so many coats home at night after a day's work.

31784 Do you mean that they are obliged to do it, or that they do it of their own choice to earn money?

The master compels them to do it. He says, 'Well, I must have this work sent in tomorrow; if I do not send it in tomorrow I shall not have more work,' and then of course the girls take the work home and they get paid by piece at home, and that means certainly more work for the presser to do, and it drives the men to do more work.

31785 I understand you that the men are enabled to work long hours in the shop because the girls are compelled to do part of their work at home, and that enables the presser to be kept working late in the shop?

Yes, the girls work at home, and bring it in the morning, and then the presser has to work harder during the day, because the middleman goes to the man presser and says 'Look here; look at the pile of work here; you must work away and send this work in;' and he does not give him time to breathe; and there is one more thing I wish to tell you which Mr. Isaac forgot. At the time of the strike of the men, the middlemen went actually round to the provision shops where the men deal and get their bit of provision during the week, and stopped them of their provisions by saying, 'Now, you must not give any of these people credit because we shall not employ them; we shall let them all starve.' This has been done by the middlemen of Leeds.

The Witness is directed to withdraw.