

Discussions with Women on Strike

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1.

Twelve days after the start of the strike and eight days after the first meeting with the capitalists, I looked up the women who work at the Sanshûsha company in Matsumoto Hall in Kanda.

“Many of you must be face with different and particular issues than men are, but the fact that you have proven your solidarity for so long...”, I said, straight after the salutations

“But no, although we are all appointed to different positions to the best of our ability, a few of us have gone back to work yesterday. There is no excuse for this.” “Oh yes, I have also already heard of this. Since the strike has lasted for over two weeks now, we can well understand this. A shame they didn’t have more perseverance, isn’t it? How many women went to work?” “It must be three. If they had waited until today, the terms for today’s meeting might have been more favourable. Our whole effort has not paid at all yet! They have way too little steadfastness.”

The resolution of the printers of the morning paper had confirmed me that, because of the treason of these people, the capitalists had suddenly become inflexible. I could already imagine the result of today’s meeting. Now I found no words supporting this in the discussions with these women which seemed not to know anything about this.

Although the willingness existed at first for this strike to endure the hardships a month or more, it happened that a few didn’t last more than two weeks and went back to work without condition. An honest conversation between two colleagues developed about why these few didn’t say it openly, if they were in a day or two in unbearable distress, although people could have helped them somehow – even if all also suffered – if these things were only expressed. They also talked about the fact that the influence from one or two traitors could be altogether immensely great on this great strike.

I picked up, along with all the others, two big rice dumplings covered in bamboo leaves and ate. While I felt a familiarity which moved me to tears, I took part in the circle of discussion until the evening.

2.

Naturally, the stories were not completely surprising for me. Some of it I had already read and already heard. Part of it I could also imagine from my own experiences.

But although I had long known this, it moved me very deeply to have these discussions with people who had experienced it in reality and felt it so bitterly. While I listen to the tales of these women about their normal work conditions and other things, the feeling overwhelmed me that the demands of the strike for shorter work hours and a pay increase did not simply constitute a way to make production more effective¹, which part of the capitalists find to their taste, or that they come from the men’s side who join for education and leisure time, but rather that the requirements attack especially strongly the truly insoluble needs of these women. It emerges from the comments of these women that, although the factory law² thankfully give women and children special attention as protected workers, it guaranteed them no protection, that the capitalists mainly used it at the time of wage increases not to raise the wages of single female workers.

They let the women work the long time of twelve hours between dirty, cracked planks. They cannot sit down but must stand up the whole time. They don’t pay any mind to the particular

body characteristics of women. They let them carry heavy loads and climb up stairs, exactly in the same way if they are pregnant or if they have another condition; no consideration will be taken if she suffers injuries because of it.

Although the work alone seems horrible because of the dust-filled air in the factory, it sent shivers down my spine, as I discovered in these discussions that they let them work so hard and destroys their health so in cold blood as well.

3.

The women also told the following:

“Early it would be seen as usual to be working from seven in the morning till over eleven at night. We hardly came back home before midnight. If we imagine how things were then we are happy about the twelve hour day today. At that time, we had never thought in dreams about a day of rest every Sunday. It seemed inevitable that the wages would not be raised for two or three years by one sen (1/100 of a yen). We were truly urged to work, and treated as badly as they wished. But we accepted this in silence. When we think about it, it seems incredible that our bodies could withstand this. We can't imagine something as beautiful as an eight-hour day or a six-hour day, but if it became reality, the twelve-hour days for which we are now so thankful would seem most awful.”

This is the truth. Most of these women must work double: at home and in the factory.

Young unmarried women too, who must carry out next to no housework, work twelve hours at the factory and need around two hours for commute. From the ten hours at home, they are left with, after you take out two hours for the meal or for getting dressed, only eight hours; if they come back at night and after the meal talk to their family members and have a bath, that's another two or three hours gone. Because they are so tired, they can do nothing very tiring outside, for example, learn something. If a competent young woman does only one hour of needlework, she reduces her sleeping time to something like four or five hours. Can she recuperate thus completely from her tiredness after a day of work? But now the women who are charged with responsibilities as wives or mothers, in this so tightly allocated time, look after their husbands or children. The preparation of meals, the care for all the utensils, the reflection on the household's money, the washing of clothes in cold or hot water and other plans – all of this she must deal with, on top of the daily wash of the dirty children's stuff. All of these worries they can't in any way give to someone else, even if someone helps them. In order to perform adequately, their limited sleep is reduced and they must give up their rare days off.

Understandably, civilisation offers us different methods and facilities to shorten usual housework. The working class is however too poor to make use of them. Thanks to this civilisation, the strange phenomenon is produced that the most idle women have more time at their disposal, while the women who have the most things to do are driven to terrible overtime.

4.

“Work in the factory is a real poison for our health. I am still quite strong, but when I get a bit sick and the doctor examines me, he recognises straight away, without me saying anything, that I am working in the factory. If we are just a bit unreasonable, something happens immediately. This is horrible! Sometimes I notice that I no longer have news from a woman with whom I have been working; then when I hear about them, they are either sick or dead. We don’t know how many people have lost their health in the factory. It was also the case for our older sisters,” says a woman, who was sitting next to me, in a serious tone, while she pointed at a friend next to her.

5.

I stayed that day and the following days a while with the workers. Although these women found themselves in the sad situation where their urgent demands were dismissed by the capitalists with a hard hand, they didn’t see the future as gloomy. How brave is their common resolve to reach for themselves, with their own hands, without a doubt, a reform of their work conditions all around! I would like here to express the cheerful anticipation that surely in the near future the day will come when the tremendous self-confidence of these women, who rely on almost nothing and educate themselves, will cast a new bright light on working women.

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