

NEW JERSEY

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The Consumers' League of New Jersey was founded in 1899 by a group of people who felt that the consumers should be as responsible as anyone concerning the labor conditions under which the products he consumed were produced, and also the honesty with which these products were presented to the public.

At that time many cough remedies and patent medicines contained opium, and thousands of otherwise up-right Americans were dope addicts without knowing it.

Attempts at labor organization were met with federal troops and 40-hour week was a laughable matter. Children worked long hours and there were no seats for women in factories or retail stores. Some of the reforms for which the New Jersey Consumers' League is responsible for initiating are:

Factory Act establishing State Department of Labor--1904

Law regulating hours for minors engaged in messenger service--1911

Hours Law for women--1912

Child Labor Laws--1914 and 1920

Compulsory Education Laws for children under sixteen--1914 and 1940

The Migrant Labor Law passed in New Jersey in 1945

A Study in cooperation with the New Jersey Department of Labor in relationship of Juvenile Delinquency to the increase in work permits, 1955.

Hot water regulation for Migrant Camps, 1960

Work in Process -- Minimum Wage Bill accepted as administration bill

The New Jersey Consumers' League at present is working on Minimum Wage laws which will establish a floor for those workers that are exempted from all other minimum wage laws, and those unprotected by unions or represented by poor unions, such as hotel workers, laundry workers and agricultural workers, who have no unions at all and are the lowest paid, most poorly housed, uneducated citizens of the wealthiest, most highly developed society the world has ever seen.

The Migrants or Agricultural Workers, for instance, start up the coast early in the spring. In most states they are checked only for venereal disease if their health is checked at all. They work from sun-up to sun-down--there are no latrines in the fields. They live in, at best cinder block houses--a family to a room, with proper wash houses and flush toilets; at worst, filthy shacks, hidden back from the road--some of them ex-chicken coops. Sometimes eight to nine people to a small room. Children of eleven and up do this gruelling stoop labor--their chances at education snatched in those states that have summer schools for them--a couple of weeks here and couple there.

I'm sure that when Premier Khrushchev was visiting here and was over-whelmed with admiration at the height of our corn, he was probably quite aware that those that picked it were poorly housed and that their skins were almost always brown or black.

To all this the farmers say they can't pay a living wage because he would go out of business because the consumer will not pay more for produce. I am sure they are wrong in this assumption. I am sure that the American housewife and her husband do not want to get their frozen food a bit cheaper on the backs of underpaid, underfed and unprotected farm workers, and their children, and to the detriment of their countrymen as a whole.

Nor do we want our summer vacations in hotels cheaper, when the hotel worker often has to go on relief or unemployment insurance for six months out of the year because the hotels do not pay a living wage.

Certainly, we all pay for this sometime in some way--in relief, in unemployment insurance or public hospital expense and in exposure to those whose health is questionable. This is in the interest of consumers.

This unofficial subsidy that we all give to the farmer and factories is something we ought to think about with care. The farms and businesses which complain so about the welfare state would have many more complaints if this subsidy were not there and did not exist because as decent Christians, non-Christians, and Jews we cannot let people starve. We do not want to go back to the times when children were often exploited by both business and their parents, when men worked in factories a twelve hour day, and to the times when workmen's compensation did not exist, and many other reforms--to say nothing of the worthless consumer goods passed on the public by unscrupulous people--children's clothes that shrank to nothing after one washing, dentifrices that removed the enamel from teeth and opium filled cough medicines.

These slow steps toward an adequate living for all our people are not only humanistic but necessary. After all, if we want to boast about how much better our society is than others, we should be in a position to feel proud of it. We, as consumers, want not only to consume--we want also to return to the soil that which we take from it--the fertilizer that has been removed. Like, the good farmer we don't want to strip the land, and then move on to the next farm. We should replenish as much as we consume.

These interlocking aspects of our economy are as much the responsibility of the consumer as anyone's. Only if we do this will our society be as healthy as our economy. Only then will the consumer have assumed his full responsibility.