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MAIL ORDER MILLIONS by Paul Bolton.

A Warning to the Ladies

MAIL-ORDER FIRMS are a product of a society in which a large number of people feel that they need to consume a large amount of material goods but can't afford to buy these goods directly. Such firms arise to satisfy this need; by allowing people to buy on tick through HP type agreements they make it easy for working class people to buy all they need and usually more than they can afford. The firms themselves are parasitical, they do not produce any wealth, but merely transfer goods from producer to consumer at a fat profit.

One of the major centres for the mail-order trade is Lancashire. There are several reasons for this, the most important being the decline in the cotton trade. This provided the mail-order companies with several mills which could easily be turned into warehouses, and with a large number of female workers who could be employed in the warehouses doing work which is not particularly "heavy", they were also a very cheap labour supply.

The empire of the Moore's clan

SO THE MAIL-order firms grew strong in Lancashire, particularly in Bolton, Oldham and Preston. The companies involved are two semi-monopolies and a few smaller firms. The semi-monopolies are Littlewoods, of the famous Littlewoods Pools, shops etc. empire owned by the Moore's clan, and British Mail Order, part of the Wolsson empire which owns a large part of the British retail and distribution trade. Littlewoods produce about six catalogues including John Moore's, Littlewoods, Janet Frazer, and Shopping Post, whilst British Mail Order (BMO from now on) include Marshall Ward's, John England's, GUS and Driver's.

In the town in which I worked, Bolton, mail-order firms like BMO, Littlewoods and local ones such as Wiggall's are the main employers of female labour. At a rough guess, they employ 8 to 10,000 workers out of a total town population of 160,000. This article will concentrate on the two main firms, Littlewood's and BMO but reference will be made to other firms when necessary. Not all the information will be 100 % accurate, changes might have occurred since this was first written, and it's difficult to get facts and figures on the companies (surprise! surprise!).

1. Profits and sidelines

FOR A START, I cannot say how much profit these firms make exactly - only that it is very large. Workers in the firms are not allowed to know exactly how much goods are bought for and then resold for. But some guesses can be made. Both firms distribute thousands of articles per week, at an estimate the difference between the buying and selling price of an article is at least 200-300 %. Multiply this by the number of articles sold, deduct costs, and you have a large profit margin indeed.

This "normal" profit is boosted by little tricks such as selling the same goods at different prices in different catalogues, selling as new goods which have been returned and patched-up, and selling damaged stuff to outsiders who resell it on the markets.

2. Wages

WAGES IN MAIL-order firms are ridiculously low. At Littlewoods, the basic wages for men at 21 vary between £12 to £15 per week on a 5 grade system. Women at 21 have 4 grades of wages between £9.2.6 and £9.17.6. No one seems to know how your grade is decided, by your job, your ability to lick the bosses' arse, or whatever.

British Mail Order pay women £9.5.0 at 21, men get £12, there is no grading. Wages at smaller firms like Wigfall's are about £1 less!

Wages are made up in two ways:

(a) Bonuses. At Littlewoods the bonus system is a clever, vicious method of payment. Each job has its own bonus-rate as calculated by work-study creeps. Workers can make up to 35/- a day bonus (£1 for women). In fact, the average is about £2.10.0 a week or 10/- a day. To make much more than this you have to work yourselves pretty hard, at a mindless rush. And most jobs don't carry a high enough bonus rate to make much more than 10/-. What is worse, any day in which you fall below the bonus-rate you are "in the red" and have the amount deducted from your weekly bonus.

There are even more vile aspects of the bonus system - if too many people make too much bonus on a job, the job is reclassified and the bonus rate lowered. Then again, at any time the work-study can cut a bonus rate, it has happened that jobs have had their bonus rate cut by half!

BMO do it in a simpler way, as their recruiting ad says: "Twice yearly bonus equal to two weeks' wage!". Or, on top of your miserly wage we will pay you 15/- a week bonus, less deductions for lateness and time off. BMO also employ a "homework" system, workers were paid £1 per 100 letters into which they had to put forms which they also filled in. This is approximately 4 hours for 1 or 2 people. However, some Indian workers with larger families used to take home more letters than the whites, and the whole family did them over the week-end. The bosses decided they were earning too much! So the rate was cut to 10/- per 100, or, at the most, 2/6d per hour wage! The result of this was, of course, to increase racism amongst the white workers.

(b) Overtime. This is general and in both Littlewoods and BMO compulsory at 24 hours' notice. It is usually worked 2 or 3 nights until 6.30 (Littlewoods) or 7.00 (BM)). Saturday mornings are worked in the busy season, and, occasionally, Sundays.

Overtime is paid at time-and-a-quarter for the first hour, then time-and-a-half, time-and-a-half Saturdays, double time Sundays. Anyone refusing to work overtime which isn't given 24 hours' notice can't be sacked, but isn't too popular with the bosses.

This brings us on to:

3. Hours

OFFICIALLY LITTLEWOOD'S do a 40-hour week, BMO a 37-hour week. But as overtime is often seasonal, workers usually put in a 48 hour week when they can, just to make a living wage. Tax, National Insurance and graduated pensions soon reduce the wage to a minimum.

Breaks are minimal, Littlewood's kindly allow 15 minutes for morning and afternoon break, plus a whole half-hour for dinner! BM), whilst giving 3/4 hour for dinner, allow only 10 minutes for breaks. They have even threatened to take back the 10-minute afternoon break because people have abused this "privilege" by taking too long to return to work!

4. The Work

The work itself is invariably tedious, mind-destroying and routine. This applies also to "office" work which

is routine clerical, only the few people in office departments like Planning and Personnel escape the deadening routine.

Jobs are too boring to describe at length; some typical examples are: picking - which is going round with a truck into which the girl puts articles from the racks, then takes them and dumps them into a cardboard box, from which job she could make £1 a day bonus if she ran all day, but the average is about 8/- or 9/-;

feeding - of various kinds; it usually involves placing the full cardboard boxes from spot X to spot Y all day, at spot Y someone else takes them over;

coupling - or taking the articles from the boxes and sticking them into pigeon-holes;

wrapping - of boxes, all day. Etc.;

dispatch - putting the goods into mail-bags and slinging them out. Etc..

These examples are all from Littlewood's.

5. General Conditions

These vary. At BMO, generally accepted as "decent" and at Littlewood's the workrooms vary from gloomy sweaty ones to well-lit well-ventilated ones. One of the occupational hazards of the dispatch job mentioned before is flea-bites from the mail-bag fleas! Other jobs done on the feet all day certainly do not help the health of female workers - women's order picking leads to prevalent varicose veins by the age of 30.

Probably the worst working conditions are at Driver's, an offshoot of BMO, who only operate in the Christmas rush season, October to December. This place is notorious for its rotten heating, its dirt, its bad ventilation and straw-filled atmosphere, and its 3 lavatories for 400 women!

A more general obnoxious element is the plethora of signs, urging people to "THINK!", to remember that "Running in the warehouse will lead to instant dismissal" (at Littlewood's, and always ignored) and so on. The signs are not as bad as the inspectors. These are people whose function is to spy on you, to watch you work, to search you if you go out. And even in Littlewood's $\frac{1}{2}$ -hour dinner you have to be searched before you can go to the chippy. These inspectors create an atmosphere of distrust.

6. The Bosses and Discipline

The boss-structure in a mail-order warehouse is quite simple, ignoring the offices like Planning which have their own variations. It differs from firm to firm, but the basic outline is the same: workers, stock-keeper, supervisors, manager.

The supervisors are the main force for discipline, usually they run a floor or a section of one. Few women hold this job, unless it is to supervise other women. To get to this position of eminence requires a great deal of crawling, arseholing and knowing the right people. After you get to be a supervisor that's your lot, there is only one manager, or sub-manager or personnel manager above you. This helps the supervisor to become sour-faced hacks each trying to outdo the other in keeping the workers in place. Their function is that of a prison-warden, they keep the rules but have no power themselves. Needless to say, the manager is also subservient to someone, to the mysterious grey figures in "Head Office" who occasionally pop in for a visit. This means a massive clean-up and a toughening up of discipline, as the manager himself lacks job security. So we have a string of puppets whose strings are pulled by the top layer of the hierarchy and who take out their frustrations on the ordinary workers.

At Littlewood's and BMO workers can be fired on the spot. Without a Union or any rank and file organisations, this is easy to do. So the sack is another means of discipline. But Littlewood's especially have more "subtle" methods of keeping people in line. Apart from the bonus system, which keeps people's noses to the grindstone, they have a system whereby each year every worker is rated out of 5 marks for work-record, ability to work unsupervised, and co-operation. Anyone scoring 3 one's is fired, but a lot of 5's might make you a supervisor. Even better is the method of picking a select few to go on holiday at John Moore's hunting lodge in Scotland. This gives the workers the nice paternalistic touch, they feel "personally" cared for by the boss. The velvet glove and the iron fist work side by side so keep people in line.

7. Organisation

The bosses get away with their tricks because the workers aren't organised.

Both firms have what is known as "Staff Councils" of elected "representatives" of the workers plus 1 or 2 bosses. They meet every now and again to discuss "problems", like bad chips in the canteen. Any "suggestions" from the workers to the bosses are either fobbed off by reference to Head Office who can kill off anything too "dangerous", or are just stamped on anyway. There is no comeback, and if the workers don't like decisions they can do sod all about them. Because these farcical bodies are obviously a con, the workers ignore or scorn them.

The most obvious advantage of organisation would be proper enforcement of the Factory Acts. For instance, during the packing of catalogues, which takes place twice yearly, women are transferred from other jobs to the high-speed conveyor belt. The catalogues are heavy; the string cuts your hands and bloodies the next package; and worst of all, you stand from 8.15 to 5.30 or later. The Shops Act, Section 14, stipulate seats should be provided for sedentary work. One woman asking the floor manager (Mr Price of Littlewood's) for a stool, was told, "Don't you come quoting the law at me, or you'll get the sack." She was moved to the end of the belt where the noise prevented any conversation with the other women, and moved to a different job the next day. Unless the catalogues go out in time, no sales can take place. With even the most primitive Union organisation, such abuses of the Factory Acts could be prevented.

In no mail order firm does a Trade Union exist. Some attempt has been made to unionise. At BMO a few people joined the Shopworkers' Union, dues had to be paid secretly and union books hidden from the supervisors! Not surprisingly, the Unionisation fell through. There are tremendous difficulties in the unionisation of firms like these, but it must be said that the Trade Union officials have made hardly any attempt at it.

Neither does there exist unofficial workers' organisations. The workers are split by the bonus system, scared of the sack - after all, the work is unskilled and female labour is easily replaceable, and divided in lines of role and sex. The only unofficial action at Littlewood's involved a walk-out. The "leaders" were later promoted, carefully split off from the rank and file, and then messed around with until they got the message and resigned. They left without redundancy pay due to resigning, and without sympathy, for being bought off by the bosses.

In fact the only "opposition", if it can be called such, comes from "sciving" and thieving, both quite popular.

FINALLY, what about the Workers themselves?

As noted, most of these are women, about 80 %, most of whom are married women. The rest are either young people or middle aged men who have drifted into the job.

Because of the composition of the workers, and the nature of the work, workers' organisation is not easy to work at, in fact it is discouraged.

The women workers are mostly working for "extras", like the car, the holiday in Spain etc.. They are generally hostile to strikes, cynical about politics, and racist in their attitudes to coloured workers. The nature of the work and the need to earn as much as possible to maintain the family standard of living drives the women into individualistic attitudes. They are also spurred on by fear of the sack, an effective deterrent against organisation, and refuse to risk the right to improve conditions.

The men are either too young to know or care about workers' organisation or have not had the industrial experience of unions and/or unofficial militancy. They too tend to apathy and general cynicism.

However, these attitudes of cynicism and apathy are general in the working-class movement. Who can expect anything else from the system that working-class people are trapped in, and after the Labour and Tory Parties, the Unions and all the other "official" organisations of society have shown themselves to be part of the same game, completely indifferent to workers' interests, apart from when they need their votes or their money. The workers at the mail-order companies do express their reaction to their position; they are hostile to the bosses as well, they are pissed off with their boring jobs, they know and resent that they're underpaid. But for many of them the work is the best they can get.

There are encouraging signs, the fact that there has been a walk-out at Littlewood's, an attempt to unionise at BMO. If the workers at all the mail-order warehouses could get together they could bring the owners to their knees, especially at busy periods like Christmas when a strike would cost the owners a pile. But to get to this stage will need a lot more work, a lot of patience, a lot of time and effort, and then it might not succeed. But we should all be prepared to help the mail-order workers organise against the bosses who at the moment can do what they like with them. Otherwise, Lancashire will be host to a large, unorganised, exploited labour force that is an insult to the working class.

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