

DOCK LABOUR AT LIVERPOOL:  
OCCUPATIONAL STRUCTURE AND WORKING  
CONDITIONS IN THE LATE NINETEENTH CENTURY

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I

ANY examination of work organisation along the Liverpool waterfront is beset with the problem of the bewildering complexity of activity. The high brick walls that separated the town from the dock estate encompassed a world that was virtually unknown to the outsider except in the most superficial sense. It is as well at the outset to appreciate the variety of occupations along the waterfront. Dock labourers may have been the most numerous but other work groups played as important a role in the operation of the port. The Mersey Docks and Harbour Board (M.D.H.B.) employed few dock labourers (about 700 at the most<sup>1</sup>) but they had a considerable staff of engineers and their labourers, dock gatemen, maintenance men, and, in the six enclosed docks, warehousemen. In the graving docks were ships' painters and carpenters, as well as labourers and fitters, involved in maintenance and repair. There were, of course, ships' officers and engineers, together with sailors, firemen, greasers, donkeymen and the like. With the increasing importance of passenger steamships the numbers of ships' stewards, cooks, bakers and butchers increased. In addition to the personnel of seagoing ships, there were the crews of tugboats and flats (barges). General warehouse workers, in large numbers, were supplemented by specialist workers such as those in cold storage depots. Several thousand carters, some employed by cartage firms, others by railway companies, were engaged in the collection and delivery of goods from and to the warehouses, dock sheds and quays. How many in total

were employed on the dock estate at any given time is unknown but around 25,000 would appear to be a not unreasonable estimate.

The employers of dock labourers were of four kinds: master stevedores and master porters who were either independent firms working under contract to different shipowners or virtual nominees of a firm of shipowners; shipowners responsible for their own stevedorage and portorage; merchants who undertook their own portorage; and the M.D.H.B. who employed men directly in the six enclosed docks of Liverpool and Birkenhead.<sup>2</sup> Of these the M.D.H.B. was the least important as an employer of labour. The six enclosed docks were relatively small, somewhat old and used on a limited scale. From the 1870s they were of diminishing importance.

Firms of master stevedores and master porters operated under licence from the M.D.H.B. The granting of a licence was simply dependent upon the applicant being a householder, and dock labourers and the union frequently complained of the ease with which people of little experience could become masters, solely interested in quick profits rather than building a stable enterprise involving concern for the safety of employees. This fringe element encouraged the corruption and degradation endemic in the casual labour system. Although stevedorage and portorage were separate functions firms often undertook both types of work, although stevedoring costs were part of a shipowner's freight charges, while portorage was paid for by the consignee. Independent firms of master stevedores and master porters were found more frequently at the south end of the docks than at the north end. At the north end masters were, more often than not, no more than nominees of the large steamship companies that dominated that end of the docks. Stevedoring, in particular, was often undertaken by the shipping firms themselves as 'the Liverpool practice is for the shipowners "to load for his freight".'<sup>3</sup> It was at the south end, where smaller firms of shipowners operated, that independent firms of master stevedores and master porters competed for contracts. While portorage of general cargo was contracted out to master porters, merchants of specialised goods employed their own porters. Thus cotton porters were employed exclusively by cotton merchants, and, in similar fashion, fruit porters and provision porters were employed directly by merchants.

The job of the dock labourer was to load and unload the ships and transport the goods between quayside and dock sheds. Nevertheless the term is generic and it is important to appreciate that dock labourers were not employed as general labourers but undertook highly specialised functions. Job specialisation was of

\* possible to calculate from 1851 Census:

2553 Cartage,  
1456 Warehousing/Storage,  
5339 Porting.

bewildering complexity, probably understood only by those who worked on the dock estate. What follows is an attempt to give no more than an indication of the degree of specialisation.

The basic work division in all ports was between stevedorage and portorage. The stevedores 'do everything connected with loading the ship, including the bringing of the goods from the sheds or carts on deck and stowing it in the hold; they also unload the ship, that is, "break-out" the cargo from the hold and land it on the quay or "overside" into barges, etc.'<sup>4</sup> The stevedore proper was a highly skilled man responsible for ensuring that goods were stowed safely and suitably. Clearly the stability of the ship depended in part on the distribution of the goods stowed in the hold. Goods had to be secure to prevent movement and dangerous cargo had to be stowed in a fashion to minimise the risk of explosion or fire. Moreover, with ships proceeding to different ports of call, goods had to be accessible at each port as required. The stevedores supervised the labourers (shipmen) who worked in gangs of eight in each hold, receiving the goods from the hatch and distributing them according to the instructions of the stevedore. Each gang consisted of two stevedores: 'one has charge of the port side, and one of the starboard side. These two are responsible for every tier, and that that tier is chocked off securely so that when the ship rolls nothing should give way'.<sup>5</sup> Other shipmen included 'man over hatch' who lowered or raised the goods to and from the hold, 'man over rail' who carried the goods on and off the vessels, and the 'riggers' who fixed the rigging of derrick and blocks. Other shipmen controlled the cranes and winches and the supply of steam that operated the winches. All these jobs called for varying degrees of skill derived from long experience. Moreover, the work was often dangerous and the minimising of danger depended upon the skill of the men as they shouted instructions to each other as goods were fed on to the cranes and swung down into the hold. It was a team effort in which speed of operation was essential. A weak link could prove disastrous. Stevedores traditionally enjoyed a higher rate of pay than porters. The stevedore proper had a wage differential of two shillings a day above that of the shipmen, who, in turn, earned sixpence a day more than dock porters. These differentials operated from at least 1870.

Quay porters were not concerned at all with outward cargoes. They 'receive the goods on the quay and deal with them there and in the sheds, counting, sorting, weighing, marking and finally packing them into the consignees' carts or into trucks or barges'.<sup>6</sup> Clearly porters were not general labourers as they undertook specialist tasks. Some, of course, did no more than truck the goods, but others were concerned exclusively with marking,

weighing and checking. Although the work of the porter may have been less dangerous than that of the shipmen, skill of a considerable order was called for in the ability to manhandle heavy, cumbersome goods quickly and efficiently, as well as accuracy and speed in the checking and other processes mentioned above. Although the porter's basic pay was less than shipmen it did not denote work of an inferior nature; it was work of a different nature. Expert team work was called for to ensure the rapid flow of goods from quayside to shed, cart or barge. Experience alone provided the porter with the knack to cope with the pressure of exhausting work.

Stevedorage and portorage, with their various sub-groups, represented the basic work division at the waterfront. Nevertheless this pattern was complicated by specialised groups of porters and other workers. Cotton merchants, provision merchants, and fruit merchants, employed their own porters and such workers were, to some extent, looked upon as distinctive work groups separate from those who dealt with general cargo. Fruit porters, in particular, were highly skilled. Such men judged and classified the fruit once delivered on the quay, making up a catalogue for brokers in the fruit market who traded on the basis of the catalogue, the porter delivering the goods to the buyer on production of the broker's instruction. Coalheavers were an exclusive body with their own societies, at north and south ends, renowned for their physical prowess. According to James Sexton no man could withstand this type of work for more than five years.<sup>7</sup> Specialisation was, in fact, normal at the docks both in stevedorage and portorage. Men specialised, for example, in timber, bulk salt, bulk grain, or the loading and discharging of railway bars. This arose partly from experience and hence special ability, knack or talent that afforded greater job opportunity, and partly from pay incentives in that jobs requiring exceptional stamina, skill or exposed to exceptional danger normally carried higher rates of pay or bonuses. Nevertheless exclusiveness was rare. Although men kept to their specialism whenever possible, if jobs were not available many would be prepared to accept alternatives. Thus shipmen would undertake porters' jobs if necessary, and porters would seek any portorage job if their particular specialism was not required. Although men prided themselves on their particular skill, demand patterns would determine their job, if any, from day to day. Only in rare cases would individuals with an exalted concept of their own skill prefer unemployment to a job of purported inferior status.

## II

Liverpool was no different from any other port in that dock labourers were employed on a casual basis. Nevertheless unlike London and some other ports like Belfast, the minimum period of engagement was the half day, i.e. 7 a.m. to 12 noon or 1 p.m. to 5 p.m. At busy times there were opportunities for overtime extending into the evening and, exceptionally, all night. On Saturdays work ended normally at 4 p.m. and men were paid for the week's work during the afternoon and evening. The nature of casual employment has been much analysed over the last eighty years and it is proposed in this essay to examine the causes of casualism and those factors that might shed more light on the practice as it affected the Liverpool waterfront worker. Casual labour at the docks had been condemned since the late years of the nineteenth century yet it was not until 1967 that the system was finally ended. As early as 1883 William Rathbone was convinced 'it was not a good system for the employers and a wretched one for the men'.<sup>8</sup> Indeed the condemnation of the casual system by enlightened middle-class commentators was a constant theme. Rathbone's talented daughter, Eleanor, in giving evidence to the Royal Commission on the Poor Laws in 1910 eloquently summed up her views as follows:

Finally, I wish to say, although with a strong sense of the temerity of expressing an opinion on so limited an experience, that the evils of the present system of casual labour seem to me so great and the chance of . . . remedies being adopted on a sufficiently effective scale, seems so small that in spite of a strong bias in favour of individual effort I have been driven to the conclusion that the final remedy lies in the taking over of the whole work of loading or unloading ships in the port by the corporation or the Mersey Docks and Harbour Board, or some other public body with a representative element.<sup>9</sup>

Various schemes were suggested from time to time which would lessen the more demoralising features of the system. Most of them involved some element of registration but equally most of them foundered on the indifference or hostility of the majority of ship-owners and dock labourers alike. Although a scheme was introduced in 1890, in London, it was confined to a small number of firms and docks.<sup>10</sup> More ambitious was the Clearing House Scheme in Liverpool introduced in 1912 which, if not the success that had been hoped for, was a significant improvement, although at first strongly resented by a minority of the labour force.<sup>11</sup> The scheme involved the registration of dockers and preference of work being given to such men to reduce the influx of drifters into the docks and hence, in some measure, to influence the supply of

labour. 'Surplus' stands were introduced with the intention of increasing the mobility of labour. Men unsuccessful at a regular stand could gather at a surplus stand where foremen, short of labour at their regular stand, could hire them. A number of clearing houses were established along the line of the docks to which dockers were allocated. On each Saturday men drew their earnings from their clearing house irrespective of the number of firms they had worked for during the week. The scheme was supported by the National Union of Dock Labourers' (NUDL) leadership and the majority of employers but the dockers were instinctively suspicious. Any change was assumed to be for the benefit of the employers and the view was taken by many that the union had 'sold' the men. The introduction of the scheme led to a few sporadic, unofficial, strikes in Liverpool which soon died away but at Birkenhead a more prolonged dispute took place, the men ultimately being cajoled back to work under the threat of the expulsion of the branch. Although the scheme proved to work to the advantage of the regular docker, the surplus stands were never a success, neither the men nor the employers being prepared to support them. In any case the scheme was no more than a palliative as the fact of the matter was that the casual system suited the employers of labour admirably. Dock labourers were not prepared to press for change, partly because of a belief that any alteration would be primarily designed to benefit the employers, partly because of inertia, and partly because of an exaggerated belief in the virtues of independence. Even the dockers' union accepted the inevitability of the casual system although Sexton, the general secretary, pressed for reforms which would alleviate the chronic under-employment that was a persistent feature of the system.

Casualism developed at the docks from the twin factors of unpredictable labour demand and a glutted supply of labour. Demand fluctuated according to cyclical, seasonal, and local factors. The swings of the trade cycle affected the volume of trade through the port. Although this was clearly a factor of importance in the inter-war period, the years from the 1880s to the outbreak of the First World War were not immune from dislocation in the volume of trade. The 1890s witnessed a prolonged period of difficulty for those seeking work, especially if unskilled, and the period from 1907 to 1909 was one of high unemployment.

The problem was exacerbated by the fact that the flow of goods through the port was not spread evenly throughout the year. Significant seasonal fluctuations were experienced. The raw cotton crop reached Liverpool in the autumn. From October to the following April/May as cotton poured into Liverpool the

demand for labour rose significantly. Once the cotton 'season' ended work became more difficult to find, and although timber imports rose in the summer months and the emigration traffic reached a peak in spring and early summer it was not enough to compensate for the end of cotton imports. A master stevedore and master porter questioned in 1894 on the number he employed pointed out his labour needs fluctuated 'from one to six hundred, according to the number of vessels I have working'. He confirmed that although he dealt with all types of work 'it makes a lot of difference when the cotton season is over, and a great many dock labourers are not able to find employment elsewhere . . .'<sup>12</sup>

Local factors were also of considerable importance. If the vagaries of winds and storms affecting sailing ships were of lesser importance towards the end of the century with the spread of the steamship, weather conditions could not be ruled out entirely. A period of very bad weather would lead to a temporary slackening in the demand for labour. Of greater importance was the unpredictable nature of the number of vessels in port on a day-to-day basis. Moreover, as a quick turn round became more important, when vessels docked activity could be frenzied with demand for labour high, involving prolonged spells of overtime to discharge and re-load the ship. Thus there was an irregular pattern of demand. A certain minimum number of men required could be assumed; the pattern of seasonal variation led to an anticipated expansion of demand in the autumn and winter months; but no one could estimate with any accuracy the total demand for labour on a weekly basis. Employers faced with this situation clearly favoured a large enough labour force to cover all demand situations but without the need to employ men on a permanent basis.

Factors of supply allowed them to achieve this. There were few occasions when supply did not exceed the demand for labour. In general terms this arose from the glutted labour market of nineteenth-century England and, in specific terms, from the unskilled nature of dock work. Although the specialised nature of dock work has been stressed above and the skill required for an efficient labour force emphasised, the fact of the matter was that anyone could do the job and there were no barriers to entry, such as apprenticeship. Anyone could drift down to the docks and take his chance at the stands. Clearly there were considerable differences in the quality of supply. The experienced man, skilled, efficient and well known would stand a better chance than an unknown casual drifter and when demand was slack the latter scarcely stood a chance of employment. But when demand was high even the less well equipped might be taken on and, hence,

be encouraged to remain as a fringe element on the supply side. When pressure to service vessels was considerable and demand for labour high, the foreman might curse the need to take on the inefficient flotsam and jetsam that hung around the docks but their labour was better than none. In that sense the supply of labour was expanded by those who had drifted down the social scale; the next step after the docks was often the workhouse.

The detritus of society was by no means the only element to swell the supply of dock labour. Men temporarily out of work in their normal trade might try their luck at the docks. For example building workers, both skilled and unskilled, subject to unemployment during the winter months, and gas workers, surplus during the summer months, would drift down to the docks establishing a seasonal fluctuation in the supply of labour.

In addition, local factors were of importance. It was a happy coincidence from the employers' point of view that emigration from Ireland coincided with the expansion of the port of Liverpool. The proximity of Ireland to Liverpool and the cheap passage from Irish ports, not only encouraged many Irishmen and their families to try their luck in Liverpool, but allowed news of work opportunities to travel fast. Dock construction called for a large labouring force of navvies, many of whom subsequently sought work at the docks they had built. As the docks at the north end were extended so the northern outskirts of the town, and the Bootle area, were built up to accommodate the new arrivals. Furthermore, as an emigration port, Liverpool catered for a considerable number of people in transit. Some never did leave Liverpool for the New World. Personal or domestic problems might deter some from taking the final step of leaving the country; others might run out of money and seek work, initially for a temporary period, to repair their finances.

Finally, Liverpool had a reputation for high wages that attracted many to the town from all over the country. The nominal wages of dock labourers were good: five shilling a day for shipmen and four shillings and sixpence a day for porters were the basic rates from the 1870s to 1915. A potential income of £1 7s. od. to £1 10s. od. a week were highly attractive rates for unskilled labour. But nominal wage rates bore no resemblance to actual wages in a casual labour market. Few men enjoyed that sort of security. Nevertheless garbled information encouraged some to Liverpool in anticipation of high incomes.

Farm labourers from the agricultural districts of Lancashire, Cheshire and North Wales were the most obvious short-distance migrants who came to Liverpool anticipating a higher standard of living. Of course such men were known to be novices and could

hope for work only in the winter months of high demand for labour. But by the time the slacker summer months had arrived such men had acquired enough experience to represent a threat to the Liverpool men at the stands, particularly the young and strong, even if some returned to agricultural districts for the summer period.

The supply of labour at the Liverpool waterfront was, therefore, always more than enough to cover demand, even at the busiest times. Hence the casual system met the needs of ship-owners admirably. Their fluctuating labour demands could be met exactly without the need to carry under-utilised labour resources. It allowed, furthermore, each employer to act according to his own needs, without reference to other employers, in terms of labour relations. Ultimately that individual freedom had to disappear and uniformity of treatment proved to be necessary. This occurred as a result of the transport strike of 1911, although it had been foreshadowed in the dispute of 1890. But uniformity of treatment, involving the recognition of the union, did not mean the disappearance of the casual system. That system provided in normal times just enough incentive to the labour force to maintain, indeed to support, the system and led to protest if any suggestion of change was made. UB

To understand more clearly the acceptance of the casual system by the labour force it is necessary to examine the methods of employment more closely. It is important to realise that the vast majority of the dock labour force looked to the docks for regular employment. Concentration upon fringe elements misleads. A large proportion of dock labourers were Liverpool born who had started work at the docks as boys. The influx of Irish immigrants was absorbed as the docks expanded on both sides of the river, and their children had, therefore, sought employment as Liverpool men. Such men would expect to secure preference of employment over outsiders at the stands. For a proper understanding of the labour market the hiring system needs to be examined with care. Much has been written of the degrading nature of the stands and pens where men congregated to be hired or 'put on' by the foremen: the jostling and shoving to get to the front, the occasional fights, the shouting to catch the foreman's eye, and the bribery of foremen by men desperate to secure work. These are among the least savoury aspects of the casual system. It must be appreciated, however, that there were over 100 stands along the Liverpool waterfront. There were few pens in Liverpool, the stands being places at or near the quays where traditionally men gathered to secure work. All the stands assembled at the same time, 6.45 a.m. or thereabouts and 12.45 p.m. Thus each stand

represented a labour market of its own. Dockers traditionally went to one or a small group of stands only and hence sought employment within a narrow range of docks. Thus the regular men would be well known by the putter-on, and the experienced, trusted men would normally secure work. At any given stand the men would be in two groups: the regular men, the casuals, and the fringe element of totally unknown or irregular men, the 'casual casuals' as they were called. It was this latter group who secured work only if the supply of regular men was exhausted. By the 1890s, if not earlier, the system had become more refined at the north end. The large steamship companies issued numbered tallies to their regular and trusted employees. At the stands the putter-on would simply call up the numbers required for the day. Such men were 'permanent' employees, although remaining casual labourers. In 1894, for example, the Cunard Steamship Company had 600 cargo men and 320 coalheavers with tallies, receiving preference in employment. Occasionally at busy times Cunard employed up to 1,200 cargo men, although in normal times nearer 700 to 800. The company had an explicit policy of work sharing so that all their tally holders would secure work for a few days a week. Stevedores and hatchmen could expect permanent work; quay porters who were markers and weighers averaged four days a week; the remainder averaged three days a week.<sup>13</sup>

At the south end, where the union was recognised from 1890, union men were taken on first at the stands. Of course even the most 'preferred' or 'blue-eye' was at the mercy of the demand situation in that he was never guaranteed a job for the day. He was, nevertheless, in a much favoured position compared with the 'casual casuals'. Thus resentment against the casual system was muted to the extent that the regular Liverpool docker secured enough work in normal times to avoid the worst impact of deprivation. His resentment would grow, however, if persistent low demand denied him an acceptable level of income over long periods of time or when outsiders appeared to be taking work from him. The greatest persistent complaint of the Liverpool docker was the muscling in of outsiders, non-Liverpool men.

We can, therefore, suggest a somewhat refined grading system at the stands ranging from the preferred men with tallies who would under normal conditions of demand expect to secure work; those who had no tallies but were well known and, indeed, hopeful of securing tallies in the future, who would get work if all preferred men were taken on; and, at the bottom end, the 'casual casuals' who might pick up a job for up to two or three days a week when demand was high but could expect bouts of consider-

able unemployment in the slack season. This was the situation to be found, particularly at the north end, until 1911. At the south end the position was somewhat different. The small firms that tended to use that end of the docks did not issue tallies but the well known, experienced man would be preferred. However, from 1890 the National Union of Dock Labourers (NUDL) was recognised by most of the firms at that end of the docks and union men were taken on before non-union men. A union delegate attended all the stands, the men displaying their union badge or button. Men congregated in two distinct groups, union and non-union men, and the latter would be taken on only when all union members had been employed, although once taken on union badges had to be removed from the lapel. From 1911, when the union was recognised throughout the port, this system was adopted at the north end as well. Union membership became almost essential for getting a job, except at the busiest times when the total supply of union men, whether they be preferred tally holders or 'casual casuals', had been exhausted at a particular stand.

Such a system, of course, did not guarantee work; neither did it always meet the demand for labour at a particular stand. One of the most iniquitous aspects of the system was that under-employment occurred through the immobility of labour and the rigidity of the system. It was a frequent occurrence that at one stand there could be an over supply of labour while a mile or two away at another stand there could be a shortage of labour with foremen desperate to find men. Apart from the specialist pretensions of men who sought work of a particular nature, it was physically impossible to appreciate the nature of supply at more than a couple of stands. All stands were called at the same time and there was no method of communication between them. A man seeking work, appreciating his chances of being taken on were dwindling at a particular stand, might run to the next dock or two, by which time the stand might have ended. Such efforts to secure work were understandably confined to a relatively narrow range of docks. Men did not seek work at the south end if they normally worked at the north end and vice versa, and hence shortages could occur unknown to the disappointed labourer a few miles away. Sexton campaigned for years for a telephone system to be installed so that stand gluts and shortages could be lessened. He was unsuccessful until the Clearing House Scheme was introduced in 1912. Even then resistance to mobility among the men persisted and firms were reluctant to support a system which led to unknown men being taken on. The surplus stands introduced at that time to combat the problem were never successful.

Acceptance of the casual system by dock labourers did not rely exclusively upon advantages it gave the young, the strong, and the experienced man. Indeed it would be incorrect to suggest that slightly-built and older men found it difficult to get work. Experience and steadiness were qualities appreciated by foremen. Over many years work relationships forged between men in gangs and between labourers and foremen counted for much at the stands. Young, powerful men, but lacking in experience, might be impressive for short spells when they rushed at a job, but the older experienced man might work slower but for very long periods of time at a steady pace and get the job done very efficiently. The master stevedore and master porter quoted above explained: 'We generally keep the same run of men all the time . . . I have been in the concern 30 years, and I have got men there now as long'.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, support for the casual system came precisely from such men who feared that any system of registration or of the employment of permanent men, would damage their chances of getting work. The middle-aged or older man felt that the end of casualism would mean that he would be relegated to the scrap heap. It was believed that a system based upon personal relationships, extending over many years, gave greater security.

Moreover, there was a persistent belief that any change supported by employers was designed solely to serve the needs of the employer and would be against the best interests of the worker. Men did not need to rationalise the situation; it was to them a fact of life derived from experience, and hence any alteration in the system was treated with suspicion and usually rejected. Union officials might seek to persuade the men that a change was in their interests, worked for by the union, but this did not cut much ice.

Finally, men argued that the casual system gave them an independence denied many workers. In perverse fashion the disadvantages of the system were transformed into a merit. By the last quarter of the nineteenth century a tight discipline was usually experienced in a factory or workshop situation, with a standard week of so many hours. Many dock workers prided themselves on their independence; they worked when they wanted to. A day off caused no problem to anyone and pathetic pretensions of freedom retarded any movement against the casual system. In particular the young and strong liked the freedom and excitement of the system. They were opposed to changes that might demand regular attendance, especially on Mondays.<sup>15</sup>

Hence although middle-class observers such as the Rathbones in Liverpool and the more enlightened employers might condemn the casual system as degrading and perpetuating grinding poverty, for most the forces of inertia and active opposition from the

majority of employers and employees encouraged the persistence of the system, marginal changes taking place against a background of resentment, suspicion and sporadic strike activity.

### III

We may now turn from an analysis of the pattern of work structures and the casual labour system to an examination of their operation in practice in terms of hours of work, rates of pay and earnings. It is impossible to make generalisations covering dock labour without hedging conclusions with considerable reservations. There is a deficiency of data to make accurate statements for more than occasional years and there were enormous variations of hours and earnings deriving from the nature of casual employment. However, some information is clear, especially on rates of pay and, from the historian's perspective, Liverpool was a much examined port from the 1890s until the outbreak of the First World War. Reports exist giving information of considerable value for 1893, 1894, 1904, 1912 and 1913.<sup>16</sup>

Superficially wage rates present the least problem. During 1870 basic wage rates emerged as 5s. od. a day for stevedores' labourers (shipmen) and 4s. 6d. a day for quay porters. Apart from a brief period from February 1879 to May 1880, when they were reduced by 6d. a day, they remained constant for the astonishingly long period of 45 years, until 1915. Thereafter, in wartime conditions, they rose rapidly, receiving a final boost as a result of the Shaw Enquiry of 1920. However, the downturn in trade that occurred from 1920 was reflected in falling rates in subsequent years. The table overleaf provides the details.

These rates were, of course, supplemented by a multiplicity of extra payments for particular types of work, e.g. discharging bulk copra, trimming coke (for shipmen), marking, weighing, scribing (for quay porters). Thus in 1912, for example, some shipmen had a rate of up to 8s. od. a day and some porters a rate of up to 6s. od. a day according to specialised tasks when the basic rate was 5s. od. and 4s. 6d. a day respectively. Moreover, such rates exclude overtime. Overtime rates were necessarily complex according to the number of hours worked during the evening and night, with special rates for the week-ends and public holidays, and extra bonuses according to the type of cargo or specialised task being undertaken. It must also be appreciated that some workers were paid on piece rates rather than time rates. Shipmen employed on ballast, phosphate rock and other ores, and rock salt were paid by the ton; and porters engaged on bushelling were

TABLE I *Basic Day Wage Rates in Port of Liverpool, 1870-1922*

| <i>Date</i>    | <i>Stevedores</i>              | <i>Shipmen</i> | <i>Quay Porters</i> |
|----------------|--------------------------------|----------------|---------------------|
| 1870           | 7s. od.                        | 5s. od.        | 4s. 6d.             |
| February 1915  | 8s. od.                        | 6s. od.        | 5s. 6d.             |
| July 1916      | 9s. od.                        | 7s. od.        | 6s. 6d.             |
| April 1917     | 10s. od.                       | 8s. od.        | 7s. 6d.             |
| September 1917 | 11s. od.                       | 9s. od.        | 8s. 6d.             |
| May 1918       | 12s. 6d.                       | 10s. 6d.       | 10s. od.            |
| October 1918   | 13s. 6d.                       | 11s. 6d.       | 11s. od.            |
| April 1919*    | 14s. 2d.                       | 12s. 2d.       | 11s. 8d.            |
| May 1920†      | Minimum daily wage of 16s. od. |                |                     |
| May 1921†      | Minimum daily wage of 14s. od. |                |                     |
| March 1922†    | Minimum daily wage of 12s. od. |                |                     |
| October 1922†  | Minimum daily wage of 11s. od. |                |                     |

\* Hours reduced from 51 to 44 for a normal week.

† National wage agreement.

SOURCES:

*Transport Workers—Court of Inquiry*, Vol. II (Cmd. 937), 1920 (Shaw Report). Appendix No. 52.

*First Annual Report of TGWU*, 31 December 1922, Appendices II-V.

paid by a day rate supplemented by payment per 100 sacks.<sup>17</sup> On the whole men employed on piece work enjoyed higher rates per day than those on time rates, although there were prolonged controversies regarding the actual measurement of tons. It is clear, therefore, that when, for convenience, basic day rates are used to illustrate the pay of dockers, the complexity of the wage rate system makes such figures unreliable.

In any case wage rates must not be confused with earnings, a factor that was frequently pointed out by the local press and the union in the latter part of the nineteenth century. The nominal day rates and the fact that men were employed for a minimum of half a day were very favourable compared with other ports and other occupations of an unskilled nature. Men were drawn to Liverpool, much to the annoyance of the indigenous dockers, in the expectation of high earnings deriving from generous wage rates. The influx of outsiders into the already glutted labour market tended, of course, to depress earnings.

In considering earnings it is impossible to make generalisations of anything other than the broadest nature. Clearly the seasonal variation of activity would affect earnings in that the autumn and winter months were the busiest, yet seasonal fluctuations in employment opportunities were no less serious than day-to-day fluctuations reflecting the number of ships in the port and the varying pressures for a quick turn round. Adverse weather conditions such as storms and fog could make a significant

difference to demand for labour and hence earnings. Broadly shipmen suffered more than porters. Shipmen could work only according to the ships in port. Normally the berthing of a ship led to intense activity to discharge and load in the quickest time possible, thus giving opportunities for long hours of work involving overtime. But once a ship caught the tide the shipmen's work ended until another berthed. Once on the quay, however, the movement of goods could be undertaken at a more leisurely pace and, hence, the porter's work was less subject to bouts of frenzied activity, followed by lack of work. Shipmen's earnings were subject to greater fluctuations than porters'.

Eleanor Rathbone's study of Liverpool dock labour published in 1904 provides valuable information relating to the year 1899, though she did not claim the work was comprehensive. What emerged from her study was, firstly, the problem of irregularity of earnings and, secondly, the distinction that must be made between 'constant number' men, i.e. the tally holders, whom she referred to as 'the aristocracy of dock labour (who) have little in common with mere casuals',<sup>18</sup> and the casual casuals referred to above. The former secured employment from four to six days a week for the same firm and, as one foreman commented: 'If a regular man does not average between 35s. od. and £2, he is in a fair way to becoming a casual; and a casual does not often get more than 15s. od. to 20s. od'.<sup>19</sup> The employment of 'casual casuals' varied enormously from half a day to up to three days a week. Apart from the intrinsic poverty permanently suffered by such workers, even the aristocracy of dock labour was subject to considerable weekly fluctuations. Thus, over an eight week span the following weekly income was earned by a porter in 1899: 22s. 8d., 40s. 4d., 28s. od., 22s. 2d., 9s. 8d., 17s. od., 13s. 8d., and 29s. 11d. 'How (remarked Eleanor Rathbone) is the wife of an unskilled labourer to plan out the expenditure of a weekly income that zig-zags in this bewildering way?'<sup>20</sup>

Overtime was of great importance in boosting income. The practice of allocating overtime for shipmen varied but normally those who had worked on a ship during the day had first option of evening or night work. Such work began at 6 p.m. after an hour's tea break and could go on to 4 a.m. with a supper break from 10.30 to 11.30 p.m. At exceptionally busy times, to catch a tide, for example, work could continue for 48 hours, with breaks for meals, for the same men. Although the union discouraged excessive hours of work which increased the possibility of accidents, the men favoured long spells as it brought high overtime earnings. Those who worked during the day considered they had a right to the more lucrative night-work rates. Some foremen

claimed that it ensured continuity in that a fresh gang of men would not understand how to take up the work left by the original day shift.<sup>21</sup> Overtime distributed in this fashion exacerbated the problem of widely fluctuating income as well as encouraging irregular patterns of work. Men who had an opportunity to work prolonged hours of overtime were often forced to take a couple of days off to recover. There was, in any case, a temptation to take a day or two off knowing that overtime had boosted the week's earnings.

It is not surprising that irregular and fluctuating incomes encouraged malpractices that became notorious among dock labourers. The preferred man might escape but the majority of the 'casual casuals' were driven to practices that ensnared them in a poverty trap from which it was impossible to escape. The young, strong single man unencumbered by family ties might survive with least scars but the married man with a family or a single man with dependents was less fortunate. Age and declining strength brought its worries of increased insecurity and the prospect of reliance in old age upon the support of children or ultimately the workhouse. These were forbidding prospects. The risk of accidents was high, and although dismissed with bravado, there were enough casualties leading to disfigurement, disablement or death to make the most carefree pause from time to time. Death or disability could lead to the total impoverishment of the family. Under these conditions it is not surprising that dock labourers secured a reputation for hard living.

How to survive in conditions of severe poverty was the ever present problem that faced the majority. A man who had secured no more than a half day or a day's work in the week would be desperate for employment. The possibilities of corruption to induce foremen to take him on involved bribery in terms of a proportion of his potential income, or drink or worse. 'Subbing' was widespread along the line of the docks involving small payments in anticipation of income so that a man could buy lunch to sustain him during the day. Moreover, it must be remembered that wages were paid once a week on Saturday afternoon and evening. Thus a man who had worked, say, Tuesday and Wednesday, would not receive payment for a further two days. Even then (until the Clearing House Scheme was introduced in 1912) he would be forced to queue for wages from each employer, a time consuming and frustrating process if a man had worked for three or four different firms during the week. In addition, there was the fringe element of confidence men who preyed upon the dockers, offering small loans at enormous rates of interest, the 'Gombeens' as they were popularly called. Sexton wrote in acid terms of

these tricksters who 'infest the Liverpool docks'. Such men, he wrote, assumed many guises but had the common feature of expropriating high rates of interest for small loans. One example was the itinerant milk vendors who went round the docks ostensibly supplying milk to the thirsty docker but who were, in fact, lending him money for drink at a rate of interest of 3d. in the shilling per week. The corrupt foreman who retained the men's tallies, collected their wages, deducted principal and interest of up to 1,200 per cent per annum for small loans granted, before handing the balance to the docker, was another parasite exploiting the enforced poverty of the men.<sup>22</sup> Publicans and shopkeepers gave credit but each exacted his rate of interest. The pawnbroker was an essential feature of dock life for the majority. Only the most frugal or thrifty could hope to avoid the clutches of those who existed parasitically upon the deprivation of the majority of dock workers and their families. The sub-standard dreary rented accommodation, chill and forbidding, that was the lot of the docker hardly encouraged him to sustain a respectable family life. It is not surprising that the traditional stereotype of the docker of the nineteenth and early twentieth century has persisted: men and their families brutalised by appalling conditions of work, their social lives correspondingly barren of civilising influences, the flotsam and jetsam of society rubbing grubby shoulders together in the harsh business of survival in an unfriendly world.

Yet such a view, like most generalisations, can mislead. Despite the deprivation most dock workers and their families endured, many maintained dignity of attitude in difficult circumstances. Many dockers were proud of their family life and the bonds of the community were strong. It is, of course, difficult to establish empirical data to support this view but such as exists, based mainly on oral evidence, suggests that stable family life was as commonplace as the reverse. Influences of religion, of club and union membership, support for local sport, the community of the street to help out in times of adversity, all point to the development and maintenance of a vigorous working-class culture. It would be a gross distortion of the life style of the dock labourer to accept the somewhat lurid portrait of the drunken brute bereft of civilising influences. Behaviour at the stands which, from time to time, was characterised by unsavoury incidents, was the result of the debilitating circumstances that the dock labourer was forced to endure in order to secure work. It was not necessarily characteristic of a man's normal behaviour in more favourable conditions.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, it is necessary to distinguish between the permanent Liverpool docker and the fringe element who drifted into dockland on the downward journey of personal inadequacy or private catas-

trophe. Such circumstantial evidence that exists suggests that the less salubrious behaviour of some can be attributed to 'roughs' rather than the typical docker. In the strikes of 1879 and 1890, for example, dockers reacted sharply to charges of violence and vandalism that were levelled against them and the police were quick to point out that the fringe elements of local 'roughs' were more to blame than dockers. One of the criticisms of blackleg labour imported by employers on such occasions was that they scoured the workhouses, recruiting tramps and the riff-raff of society. There was, no doubt, an element of exaggeration in the emotional atmosphere of a strike but it was broadly accurate. If we reflect on the adverse forces that pressed upon the dock labourer and his family it is his phlegmatic stoicism that is impressive rather than his purported personal failings.

#### IV

It is difficult to establish with any degree of accuracy how many dock labourers sought work relative to the demand for labour. The first serious effort at statistical analysis did not take place until 1912. Before that, estimates are all that are available. Moreover, there is no means of distinguishing between those who sought work regularly at the docks, the genuine dockers, and the fringe element of men who drifted down to the docks on an irregular basis on the chance of an occasional job. Furthermore, any statistical analysis must take into account seasonal fluctuations in both demand and supply of labour and, more important, daily fluctuations. Thus, although estimates of a general nature might be helpful in terms of providing an order of magnitude, the irregular pattern of demand and supply makes such general estimates of limited value.

Eleanor Rathbone's paper on Liverpool dock labour published in 1904 is without doubt the most detailed attempt, before the introduction of the Clearing House Scheme in 1912, to provide accurate information on the issue. In addition, James Sexton, general secretary of the NUDL, gave estimates which were not far removed from those of Eleanor Rathbone. In terms of supply of labour both agreed that around 1900 some 20,000 to 25,000 men sought work at the docks though not necessarily on a regular basis, Sexton's estimate tending to be on the higher side.<sup>24</sup> Demand for labour is more difficult to gauge. The state of trade and the introduction of labour-saving machinery are obvious complicating factors. Seasonal fluctuations were considerable though less than might be thought. Thus, although the winter

months were the busiest time when demand for labour was at its maximum, the average number employed during the slackest months of the year was between four-fifths and five-sixths of that employed during the busiest months, according to Eleanor Rathbone.<sup>25</sup> Stevedorage and portorage were affected in roughly the same proportions. Daily fluctuations were more serious, the two busiest days being Wednesday and Thursday, the two slackest being Saturday and Monday. Moreover, stevedores were more subject to daily irregularities of employment than porters. When goods were out of a ship and on the quay the urgency of their movement lessened and hence portorage could be carried on in more leisurely fashion. Other factors making the issue of demand more complex are those of overtime opportunities and the distinction between the casuals and the 'casual casuals' mentioned earlier. Sexton's estimates of work available usually distinguished between the busiest season and 'normal' conditions. Under normal conditions he estimated that between 12,000 and 15,000 men were needed; in the busy winter months this would rise to some 16,000 to 17,000.

A more comprehensive analysis was attempted in January 1912 by Roland Williams, Divisional Officer of the North Western Division of the Labour Exchange in presenting his proposals for a scheme to reduce the deleterious effect of the casual system. Every shipowner supplied information on a daily basis for the month of January, 1912, chosen as the busiest month of the year, giving details of men employed in the various categories. It was 10 January that proved to be the busiest day when 15,673 men were taken on for day work, the various categories being as follows:

|                      |       |
|----------------------|-------|
| Quaymen discharging  | 6,326 |
| Shipmen discharging  | 3,107 |
| Dock porters loading | 5,363 |
| Coalheavers          | 877   |

In addition overtime was worked by 3,901 men and there was an overall shortage of 287 men. Thus the total demand for labour on the busiest day of 1912, in what was admitted to be an exceptionally busy year, was 19,861. By 1912 the NUDL was recognised throughout the port and union members secured employment at the stands in preference to non-union men. As such, therefore, the union membership of the Mersey district gives an indication of the supply of labour. Excluding such members as bargemen, the total membership was 27,200 which, therefore, represented the supply of men who sought work regularly at the docks. Thus, at the busiest season some 7,000 men were surplus to demand and, clearly, that figure would rise at slacker periods in the summer

months.<sup>26</sup> Such figures suggest that the waterfront can be treated as a single labour market. As has been shown earlier this was not the case. Each employer tended to have his own regulars or permanent men; and, in addition, men tended to concentrate at a narrow range of stands where they were known and hence more likely to secure a job. Thus, the waterfront was made up of a large number of labour markets with their own patterns of demand and supply. Williams' analysis showed the maximum demand for labour required by each individual employer on his busiest day, the busiest day varying from one firm to another. Clearly firms would seek to retain this number of men on less busy days as a reserve as the time when the maximum number would be required could not be anticipated. The maintenance of the reserve was achieved by ensuring that men secured some work each week, even if it be only a day or two. It was, perhaps, not surprising that the maximum demand for each employer, when aggregated, reached 28,514, a figure which was strikingly close to the total supply of labour, as measured by NUDL membership, 27,200.

## V

It is abundantly clear that the system of employment and conditions of work were weighted heavily in favour of the employers. If occasionally employers were short of labour these were minor irritants compared with the outstanding advantages they enjoyed of a permanent excess of supply of labour in the port deriving from the casual system. Whatever the purported advantages to the dock labourer they were largely a delusion, self-deception based upon pretensions of independence. For a minority of permanent men, working for the large steamship companies, reasonable and regular incomes might be available, but for the majority the overwhelming characteristic of working at the docks was the perennial struggle against poverty which derived from irregular employment.

The efforts of a small number of the enlightened middle class in exposing the iniquities of the casual system were nullified by the indifference of the majority of the employers of labour. In any case exposing the evils of the system was less difficult than advancing a convincing system of fundamental reform. If the casual system stood condemned, reforms suggested were no more than palliatives, e.g. linking stands by telephone, registration schemes, surplus stands and the like. Even such modifications, if seriously considered or introduced, met with hostility from many employers and dock labourers, discouraging more fundamental

reforms. The Liverpool dock labourer and his family was, therefore, condemned to a life style that encouraged fecklessness, corruption, and brutality both at work and at home. The struggle for individual survival absorbed the energies of waterfront workers and their families, limiting their horizons, dulling their sensibilities, and leading to an apathetic acceptance of the conditions of employment and their corresponding social deprivation. Yet change, if it was to come at all, to ameliorate or alter fundamentally the conditions of labour, required the initiative of the workers themselves to widen their horizons and to exert pressure upon employers. It was a problem that was not faced, in any meaningful sense, until 1889 when the newly-formed National Union of Dock Labourers began to exert its influence at the Liverpool waterfront, and it was not until after the Transport Strike of 1911 that the union was strong enough to influence conditions of work throughout the port. Nevertheless neither the Port Working Rules accepted by the employers following the strike nor the Clearing House Scheme, introduced in 1912, sought to abolish the casual system. The union, the employers, and the labour force accepted its inevitability. Moreover from 1922, when all the unions of dock labourers in the country amalgamated to form the Transport and General Workers' Union, casualism persisted. It was not until 1967, in vastly changed economic and social conditions, that the casual system was finally swept away.

## NOTES

- 1 Eleanor Rathbone, *Report of an Inquiry into the Conditions of Dock Labour at the Liverpool Docks* (Liverpool, 1904), p. 10.
- 2 *Ibid.* p. 7. The six enclosed docks were the Stanley, East Waterloo, Albert, Wapping, Birkenhead, and Birkenhead Grain Docks.
- 3 Stuart Mountfield, *Western Gateway: A History of the Mersey Docks and Harbour Board* (Liverpool, 1965), ch. ii, esp. p. 33.
- 4 E. Rathbone, *op. cit.* p. 8.
- 5 Evidence of James Sexton to *Royal Commission on the Poor Laws and Relief of Distress, Minutes of Evidence*, Cd. 5066, Vol. VIII, 1910, qu. 84182.
- 6 E. Rathbone, *op. cit.* p. 8.
- 7 *Sir James Sexton, Agitator. The Life of the Dockers' M.P. An Autobiography* (1936), p. 113.
- 8 Letter to his son quoted in E. Rathbone, *William Rathbone: A Memoir* (1905), p. 388.
- 9 Evidence of E. Rathbone to *Royal Commission on Poor Laws and Relief of Distress, Minutes of Evidence*, Cd. 5066, Vol. VIII, 1910, qu. 27.
- 10 J. Lovell, *Stevedores and Dockers. A Study of Trade Unionism in the Port of London 1870-1914* (1969), p. 135.

- 11 For details of the Clearing House Scheme see R. Williams, *The Liverpool Docks Problem* (Liverpool), 1912, *passim*.
- 12 Evidence of Joseph Curphey to *Commission of Inquiry into the Subject of the Unemployed in the City of Liverpool* (1894), p. 2, qu. 3 and 9.
- 13 Evidence of Captain Watson, General Superintendent and Director of the Cunard Company in *Ibid.*, pp. 8-12.
- 14 Evidence of Joseph Curphey in *Ibid.*, p. 4, question 45.
- 15 See, for example, *Royal Commission on Poor Laws and the Relief of Distress, Minutes of Evidence*, Cd. 5066, Vol. VIII, 1910, qu. 25.
- 16 *Liverpool Labour Conference* (1893); *Report of the Commission of Inquiry into the Subject of the Unemployed in the City of Liverpool* (1894); E. Rathbone, *Report of an Inquiry into the Conditions of Dock Labour at the Liverpool Docks* (1904); R. Williams, *The Liverpool Docks Problem* (1912); R. Williams, *The First Year's Working of the Liverpool Docks Scheme* (1913).
- 17 This information is drawn from the *Agreement as to Terms and Conditions of Dock Labour in the Port of Liverpool* (White Book Agreement), 1911 (effective from 15 July 1912), *passim*.
- 18 E. Rathbone, *op. cit.* p. 35.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p. 38.
- 20 *Ibid.*, p. 43.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 10.
- 22 James Sexton in (Liverpool) *Weekly Courier*, 19 March 1898, p. 6.
- 23 These observations are drawn, in part, from conversations held with Mr J. L. Jones, General Secretary, Transport and General Workers' Union, Mr A. J. Langshaw, J.P., and Mr Burns.
- 24 E. Rathbone, *op. cit.* p. 22; James Sexton in (Liverpool) *Weekly Courier*, 6 February 1904, p. 5.
- 25 E. Rathbone, *op. cit.* p. 24.
- 26 R. Williams, *The Liverpool Docks Problem* (Liverpool, 1912), pp. 7-13. See esp. Table 1.