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Battle of livelihood

Professional workers living conditions in Finland in 1908-1909

Finnish factory workers living conditions was the subject of an inspector Vera Hjelt research, when she started her statistical research in 1908–1909. It contained a huge amount of work for Vera Hjelt and her assistants. The whole study appeared in 1912.

This study has been reviewed as a separate study, and the most up to date statistical methods including 380 families. Based on this, Vera Hjelt, defined the subsistence minimum of working class families and described various risks. The aim of the study was to find out how the consumption of the population in Finland became a target of social interest and production of statistical data in the early 20th century, and what efforts have been made to influence consumption with social policy measures at different times. Questions concerning consumption are examined through the practices employed in the compilation of statistics on it.

The research material consisted of Finnish documentation on the compilation of statistics on consumption, publications of social programmes, and reports of studies on consumption. The analysis of the material focused especially on the problematisations related to consumption found in these documents and on changes in them over history.

The research is divided into the text part and table part as is usual in statistical publications. The longest chapter “Family studies” consists of 162 pages, and contains more or less detailed stories about ten families’ history, consumption and way of life. This part of study was also in focus in this study.

Between 1908 and 1909 food prices rose especially in big towns as Tampere and Helsinki. It meant that that working families resorted to their savings, sold their chattels or took the debt to cope with the expenditure. Vera Hjelt admitted that workers' real wages had stagnated for some time at a time when food prices had risen. Rising food prices, together with the seasonal unemployment and precarious employment conditions of workers was marked by the years 1908-1909.

Vera Hjelt drew attention to the economic costs of households and made during the visits in families specific questions and comments on housing, nutrition, employment history, working conditions and health. By looking at the statistics, for each example of a family of income and expenditure on a monthly basis, we have opportunity to make observations about occasional unemployment, industrial accidents and diseases like tuberculosis. Accidents at work and diseases had an immediate impact upon families' livelihood.