

The White Lead Controversy

Painters Brotherhood Overlooks Best Interests of Its Members by Taking Side of Prohibition—Speech by John Dewar—Convincing Arguments on Value of Foremost Pigment

IGNORING the all-important part that white lead plays in the painting industry, and the journeymen's best interests as well, the annual convention of the Brotherhood of Painters, Decorators and Paperhangers of America, which convened at Dallas, Tex., in September, placed itself on record as approving the proposed prohibition of white lead at the International Labor Conference in Geneva, Switzerland. This approval came about indirectly, through indorsement of the annual report of National Secretary J. C. Skemp, which embodied the letter that had already been sent by the executives of the Brotherhood to Geneva.

Inquiry among some of the delegates to the convention, after their return home, leads to the belief that a large number of those delegates were uninformed of the gravity of the action that had been taken by the convention, and showed that those among the delegates who were not in favor of indorsing prohibition never had an opportunity to voice their sentiments.

An effort to place before the convention a resolution similar to that passed at the recent International convention of the master painters in Louisville, presented by Delegate Jackson, was ruled out of order by the chairman. This resolution was offered subsequent to an eloquent plea made by John Dewar of Pittsburgh to have the journeymen unite with the master painters in saving for the trade the pigment which helped to make them craftsmen rather than laborers. A second attempt to introduce the Jackson resolution on the last day of the convention was again ruled out of order by the chair.

Dewar Pleads for White Lead

Past International President Dewar journeyed to Dallas in defense of white lead. When given the privilege of the convention floor he proceeded to defend the pigment as harmless when properly used. He declared that its prohibition would cancel 50 per cent of the painters' skill and reduce him to a brush hand or sprayer with prepared paints. A resume of Mr. Dewar's address follows:

"I desire to call your attention to a lamentable condition existing, the result of which is a menace to your profession as skilled artisans worthy of the title. There is to convene next month at Geneva an international labor conference. One of the five questions which this meeting is called to act upon is the prohibition of white lead in painting. In the Daily Intelligence of May 10, 1921, issued by the Labor Office at Geneva, is a statement that the Brotherhood of Painters and Decorators of America are on record officially in their office as favoring the prohibition of white lead in painting. Some reasons given by the Brotherhood are that the use of white lead in painting is a serious menace to the life of the painter. It also says that if the use of white lead is prohibited there can be little doubt that various substitutes would be perfected at once. This is an honest acknowledgment that there is no present substitute for white lead.

"Let us compare the healthfulness of our trade with others, say, that of

marble and stone cutting, plastering, mining and numerous other trades. To be unhealthful lead must be taken into the body through the mouth. Cleanliness of the person is the solution. How many cases of colic can you recall? One in 3,000 painters, and then the cause was neglect of the person.

"The New York Life Insurance Co., which has for thirty years compiled data on the mortality rate in the various vocations, lists painters as normal risks, together with farm laborers, machinists and others regarding which there is no question as to the healthfulness of their vocation. The Metropolitan Life Insurance Co. has similar data. Two per cent only of all painters insured by this company have died from lead colic; as against two per cent by suicide. These two companies have not reported any increase in the mortality of painters, but regard them as normal risks. During my business career I have employed thousands of painters and have not known one to suffer from the effects of lead.

"The International Association of Master House Painters and Decorators, also the Canadian association, are officially on record at Geneva as opposing prohibition of white lead in painting. They ask you to go along with them. In my many years' experience as a painter I have always sought the best possible materials for lasting results. My reputation has been built by the use of white lead. There are other pigments that occupy a substantial place in that category, but there is no

one paint pigment that can take the place of white lead, and there is no substitute for it in combination with other pigments. The use of white lead can be traced back 2,000 years, notwithstanding it is sought to destroy it. What would they offer for its replacement?

"What would its prohibition mean to you, Mr. Journeyman Painter? The requisites of a skilled painter worthy the name are that he be able to mix his paints to any required color or shade, so that they will meet the necessary requirements of the foundation or surface to which they are to be applied, and that he be skilled in the application of his paints.

"Mark this well. With the prohibition of white lead you will lose about half your present essential knowledge as a skilled artisan. The result will be prepared paints of which you will know absolutely nothing. And you will as a natural consequence become simply a brush hand or perhaps a sprayer.

"There is but one way that this can be avoided. Have your convention pass a resolution recalling the attitude of your Brotherhood now on record as favoring the prohibition of white lead, and go on record as practical painters condemning such prohibition."

Applause greeted the close of the speaker's address. Mark Jackson, of Washington, rose to present such a resolution asked by Mr. Dewar, which he had already prepared, but was ruled out of order. He declared that he would offer the resolution later.

Convention Indorses Secretary's Action

At an earlier session of the Dallas convention, before Mr. Dewar addressed the delegates, the convention had voted approval of Secretary Skemp's report, thereby indorsing the officers' action in putting the Brotherhood on record as favoring the prohibition of white lead. Secretary Skemp's report was not read on the floor of the convention, however, before its adoption. It contained the following statement:

"At the request of the General Executive Board, the general office forwarded to Geneva a brief statement of the attitude of the Brotherhood regarding the enactment of legislation to prohibit the use of lead as a painting material. While the data obtainable is limited, the evidence of the serious effect of the use of white lead upon the health of the men employed in the painting industry is indisputable. We owe it to ourselves and those dependent upon us to take an active part in the

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agitation for the strict regulation of the use of lead, so long as it is permitted, and to secure the abandonment of its use at the earliest possible time.

Statement Sent to Geneva

The letter upholding prohibition sent by the Brotherhood executives to the International Labor Office at Geneva, which letter was also made part of Secretary Skemp's report, included the following gratuitous and unsubstantiated statements:

"Of 5,286 deaths occurring during the past six years and nine months, fifty-five were due directly to lead poisoning. In forty-two cases lead poisoning was given as the secondary cause. Of 864 cases of permanent and total disability, eighty-one were attributed directly to lead poisoning, and in thirty-seven cases this was a contributing cause.

"Incomplete and unofficial tests of substitutes for white lead made in the United States indicate that zinc white and plumbous white are satisfactory, both for inside and outside work. There is little difference between the opacity of white lead and that of plumbous zinc containing from 2 to 5 per cent of sulphate of lead, but this is incidental and comparatively unimportant.

"The fact that where three coats of white lead might suffice, four coats of zinc might be necessary, should not be given a moment's consideration if the expenditure of this additional labor will preserve the health and save the lives of the men employed in the painting industry. Should the use of white lead be prohibited it is beyond question that the various substitutes would be perfected."

In speaking to a representative of the Magazine during the convention period, Secretary-Treasurer Skemp justified the action of himself and his brother officials in these words:

"Certain factions which are behind the movement to prevent the prohibition of the use of white lead have no regard for the welfare and health of the workers, but are seeking their own selfish interests. There is no room left for doubt as to the harmfulness of lead in view of the statistics gathered both in this country and in Europe.

"Use and manufacture of white lead has been prohibited in France and Germany, and practically all other countries of Western Europe except Italy and England. Exhaustive investigations were made which showed that hundreds of deaths among painters were due to this substance.

"England would have also stopped the use of lead but for the fact that the inquiry started by the Royal Commissioner was interrupted at the beginning of the war.

"Hundreds of deaths have been indirectly due to lead poisoning, which were not reported in this country as such because of complications with other diseases.

"The action of the convention in adopting my report which contains a record of the action of the executives opposing the use of lead means that the majority of the delegates are of the same attitude."

Regulation, Not Prohibition, Is the Remedy

(Editorial Published in the "Oil, Paint and Drug Reporter," Sept. 26)

THOSE who seek to bring about, through the International Labor Conference at Geneva, the prohibition of the use of white lead in painting, are actuated by a variety of motives, not all of which, to judge from the handling of the preliminary stages of the discussion, are ingenious. Granting, however, that many of the advocates of such prohibition are influenced by the commendable purpose of safeguarding the health of those who are engaged in the vocation of painting, it must be contended that the means they suggest, are unnecessarily rigorous.

There has been adduced no testimony which can impartially be accepted as evidence that the hazards alleged to attend the use of white lead paints are wholly inherent in the pigment, and not in large part the result of carelessness on the part of those using it. It has not been proved, even with the benefit of doubt, that the comparatively few authenticated instances of injurious results of the handling of white lead paints could not have been prevented through attention to simple hygienic precautions, voluntarily given by the painter or enforced by official regulation. Why, then, is prohibition sought, rather than such regulation as is admittedly of sufficient efficacy?

Prohibition—we speak in a general sense—is the recourse of the inefficient. That is why it so seldom prohibits. It is the panacea of the one-idea folks of the world. That is why its enforcement requires a greater complexity of regulations and a greater number of officials than would have been necessary to eradicate the evils by less destructive means. Why should the public be deprived of the obvious benefits of white lead paints in order that those engaged in its manufacture and application be protected against their own thoughtlessness?

Autos, and Axes, and Other Things

Automobiles kill a hundred persons for every one who succumbs to lead poisoning—and in the automobile casualty the victim is seldom contributorily negligent. Does any thinking person advocate the prohibition of the use of automobiles rather than a strict regulation of their handling? An axe is not infrequently employed as a homicidal implement. Fatal accidents oftentimes befall those who are wielding axes for a useful purpose. Are those occurrences put forth as reasons why the manufacture and use of axes should be stopped by law?

Even the thoughtlessness of one-idea folks is of limited absurdity. There is no reason why that thoughtlessness should not stop short of the proscription of white lead paints, because proper regulation of the manufacture and use of such paints has clearly been shown to afford sufficient safeguard for the workers therein.

Simple regulations enforced in white lead factories in England have resulted in a decrease of 97½ per cent in the cases of lead poisoning. Only 19 such cases occurred in the latest year for which data are available, and the hazard is infinitely greater when the

pigment is handled, as in factories, in the dry form than in the use of lead paste or fluid. White lead must be taken into the system to be injurious; it cannot be absorbed through the skin. Inhalation of lead dust can easily be guarded against by the use of suitable respirators.

The dry scraping of painted surfaces or the removal of lead paints by burning can be replaced by wet removal processes. White lead cannot be inhaled from a fluid paint. It can, it is true, be ingested with food if the painter will not thoroughly cleanse his hands before eating. A regulation requiring that painters be allowed wash-up time would be a simple matter, and an efficacious safeguard.

The United States Government, through the Public Health Service, has issued simple instructions for avoiding the hazards of working with lead. The literature of the paint industry is full of useful advice toward the same end. As recent developments seem to indicate a lack of familiarity with these suggestions, on the part of those for whose benefit they have been offered, a campaign of education would appear to be in order.

Each Thinks His Own the Worst

It is a peculiar circumstance that men engaged in a particular vocation are prone to consider theirs the most hazardous calling. Street car employees believe that they suffer extraordinarily from pneumonia. Statistics do not support that belief. Farmers claim to be the especial victims of rheumatism—when a rheumatic farmer meets a rheumatic coal-miner the claims in that regard are close to 100 per cent on both sides—but available data indicate no "favored" group. Actuary statistics give painters a better than average bill of health and indicate that by far the greater part of their occupational afflictions are due to the effects of solvents and not those of pigments.

It is time that plain facts and figures were brought into the discussion of the prohibition of the use of white lead paints. A great deal of misunderstanding exists among those who are interesting themselves in each side of the question. This will not be cleared up by exaggerating the dangers or by minimizing them. It can be shown that they have been and are being exaggerated. It can be proved that they are preventable through proper regulation and education.

Should the prohibition idea be approved at Geneva, the case for effective, reasonable regulation will be seriously weakened. It is necessary, therefore, that the days to elapse before the International Labor Conference convenes be well employed in driving home the truth that the purpose aimed at does not necessitate prohibition, and that ill-considered interference may subject labor to a well-founded charge of depriving a numerous body of workers (including many of those whose protection is purposed) of a means of livelihood, through the destruction of a legitimate industry now performing a useful public service.

As to Substitutes for White Lead

In arguing that the use of white lead in painting may well be prohibited because it is non-essential, the ad-

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cates of such prohibition hint at, rather than declare, the existence of substitutes which would wholly replace the pigment that they seek to proscribe. They say that substitutes have been found to be satisfactory, but they do not state to what extent. They foretell the perfecting of substitutes which would fill the place of white lead, but they do not tell what these are to be or whence they are to come. Doubtless they recognize the wisdom of not claiming too much. But what about the claims they do make?

There are other white pigments; white lead is not the only one. For certain uses other pigments may be, no doubt some are, better than white lead. In other regards, white lead stands alone. If this were not true, the popularity of white lead would not withstand competition of price or the desire of the users or furnishers of paints to get, or give, the best.

Experiments carried on in this country, in England, and in other countries, from the standpoint of the good of the public, have shown the greater durability and covering power of white lead, hence its economy, especially for outside use. Certain experimenters report the difficulty of repainting surfaces originally painted with substitutes. As this necessitates the removal of the original coating, its economic significance is noteworthy. British authorities point to the greater cost of applying substitutes because they do not work so easily under the brush, hence more time is required to paint a given surface than when white lead is used.

These are not so much matters of this or that branch of the paint industry; they have to do with the general public. It is the general public, which, in the final analysis, will decree the status of white lead in paints. Therefore, the general public should not be left under the influence of statements which beg the question, such as the following unwarranted assumption in the questionnaire of the International Labor Conference: "In view of the fact that it is now technically possible to replace white lead in painting by efficient substitutes." That assumption does not state a fact permitting universal application and the public should know the fallacy of that premise.

The Probable Effects of Prohibition

(From the London "Journal of Decorative Art")

STUDENTS of human nature are finding it a little curious that labor, which has so solidly opposed the prohibition of intoxicating liquor, notwithstanding the evils that admittedly attend strong drink, has officially, through the Geneva Labor Office, embraced the policy of prohibition in regard to white lead in paint, because painters are sometimes poisoned.

In both cases the champions of prohibition claim that there are "efficient substitutes," but in the one case labor protests there can be no substitute for beer, while in the other official labor

would ride roughshod over important trade considerations in its pursuit of a discredited ideal, for discredited prohibition certainly is among a people who boast that science and restraint can conquer most human ills. As well prohibit the electric street car, pleading that the horse tram is an "efficient substitute," because some cars have overturned or run amuck. Prohibition is, in short, reactionary. It is the policy of weaklings.

While it is admitted by all that white lead is poisonous if absorbed into the human system, the extent to which sickness amongst painters is due to this cause is open to considerable controversy. So much is this the case that master painters as a rule are extremely skeptical as to the alleged danger. Assuming, however, for the sake of argument that lead poisoning is prevalent among painters, it is wise to consider whether the drastic step of prohibiting the use of white lead is necessary or practical, or whether the evil could not be adequately disposed of by the alternative of regulating its use.

Let us consider frankly the probable effects of prohibition. First, the dictum of the International Labor Office that "it is now technically possible to replace white lead in painting by efficient substitutes" will be stoutly challenged. Without discussing the point in detail, it may be stated that there is very considerable ground for the belief that the compulsory use of substitutes for white lead would result in loss of efficiency in paint as regards its most important function, that of protection.

Other Pigments Will Cost More

Apart from this there is the question of cost to the consumer. Prohibition would eliminate competition, and create a virtual monopoly for another material. Assuming that the manufacturers of this product would not take advantage of their fortunate position to raise the price (as has been done in other industries), the effect of prohibition would nevertheless be costly to the community. The expenditure of every State and of every individual who is concerned with the protection of property by paint would be seriously increased by the compulsory use of sub-proved, are most costly in application and still more so by reason of the necessity for more frequent repainting.

stitutes, which, as experience has To look at the matter from another point of view, the ostensible reason for the proposed abolition of white lead is to protect the painter by eliminating the risk of poisoning. But it is well known, and has been clearly demonstrated by recent researches, that lead is not the only source of poisoning in paint. The danger arising from the use of substitutes prepared from other metals—a danger which although of less degree is none the less real—would remain. The particular zinc oxide recommended as a substitute, for example, actually contains a variable percentage of lead compounds, and the danger of lead poisoning would remain in a peculiarly insidious form, the worker being given a false sense of security.

White Lead Made the "Goat"

Apart from this we have the fact that many assumed cases of lead poisoning have been shown by modern medical research to arise from quite a different cause. "Painters' colic," popularly attributed to lead poisoning, is now known to be largely caused by the toxic effect of breathing the vapor of turpentine and its substitutes, essential ingredients of paint, which evaporate freely during the operation of painting. This source of "paint poisoning" would not be removed by the abolition of white lead. Indeed, as substitutes necessitate the use of a greater proportion of such thinners it would be increased.

Those who, like the present writer, frankly and honestly believe that white lead has properties which render it invaluable as a protective paint material, and disbelieve as a result of their experience that substitutes are equally efficient as surface protectors, contend that it is far better to accept white lead as a potentially poisonous material and regulate its use so as to eliminate the risk of poisoning. Exhaustive investigation has placed it beyond doubt that the main and practically exclusive risk of poisoning from lead compounds lies in their inhalation in the form of dust, and it is claimed that if all processes of painting which result in the production of dust were abolished the risk of lead poisoning to the painter would be practically eliminated.

The most fruitful source of such lead-charged dust is the scraping and dry rubbing down of old paint. It is contended that if this dry rubbing down were prohibited in toto the main source of lead poisoning would be removed. A regulation to this effect is considered quite practicable.

No Hardship in Regulation

Next to dust, the chief source of poisoning arises from paint being conveyed from the hands into the mouth in the handling of food, etc. Here a regulation insisting on personal cleanliness would meet the case. There is no hardship in such a regulation. The progressive employer of today insists on cleanliness amongst his employees, and takes care to provide adequate facilities. Cleanliness and order are the surest indication of efficiency, and it will generally be found that the self-respecting painter who is cleanly in his habits and person is the most efficient in his work.

Periodical medical inspection and the compulsory notification of all cases of paint poisoning should form part of the regulations. It has been objected, with some show of reason, that such a code of regulations would be vexatious to the employer and difficult to operate. Accepting this objection for the sake of argument, would not prohibition involve regulations almost as extensive? It is quite certain that large numbers of painters would not, except under constant supervision, abandon the use of white lead, as they believe in it and are frankly skeptical as to its alleged dangers. Surreptitious use would be far more dangerous than acknowledged use under careful regulation. Prohibition would, in short, entail an army of inspectors, and the systematic analysis of all paints sold

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