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Conference of Women Workers

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NOTES AND MEMORANDA

CONFERENCE OF WOMEN WORKERS¹

THE aim of this Conference, held at Nottingham under the able presidency of Mrs. Creighton, is to bring together for consultation and mutual sympathy, women of many shades of opinion, and representative of associations of workers, whether political, social, industrial, educational, or religious. Recent changes in the Union of these associations which enable information as to women's work, both at home and abroad, to be centralised, may do much to utilise the scattered time and energies of women in the upper and middle classes. The subjects discussed at this annual meeting cover a large area. We find the Franchise and the Factory Acts, Education both general and technical, Temperance Work and Nursing, and some of the more difficult problems of Poor Relief; in fact, when glancing through such a programme for a three days' meeting, one cannot help wondering whether anything of value can result. On a more careful survey, however, some of the addresses seem to have permanent interest, and the discussions which follow are business-like and to the point. Among the papers which one would most like to have heard are Mrs. Fawcett's and Mrs. Sandford's on the Parliamentary Suffrage; those on Women's Work in country villages; Miss Coleridge's on the Responsibility of Refinement, and Mrs. A. H. Lyttelton's on the Morals of Money Spending; but there are three which seem specially appropriate for some account here.

Mrs. Sidgwick in her paper on the Prospects of the Teaching Profession contrasts the efficiency and earnings of women in secondary schools with those of thirty years ago. She points out that there has been a great rise in the social position of women teachers not only through their increased efficiency, but because many now enter the profession who need not make money by it; that 'the dignity of a profession is raised by its being pursued as an art or vocation rather than a trade.' A view is sometimes expressed that women to whom the salary is not of importance should not take teaching posts lest they should keep out others who are less well off. But Mrs. Sidgwick is

¹ *The Official Report of the Conference of Women Workers*, 1895. (Office of the Union, 25 Mecklenburg Square, W.C.)

clear that not only are the public simply concerned to have the best teachers, whether wealthy or not, but that 'from the purely professional point of view it is a gain to have these disinterested members.' The rise in salary during the last thirty years she thinks hardly adequate considering 'that no woman should enter the profession without if possible making provision for retiring at fifty-five at latest.' She is told that headmistresses at high schools are seldom appointed over thirty-five years of age, that they naturally prefer young assistants, and that experienced teachers may be thrown out of work in middle life. This is interesting; for teaching is not an employment in which one would expect the modern tendency of youth to 'tread on the heels of the old' to be so pronounced.

The discussion on Technical Classes covers some familiar ground as to the superior power of French and Belgian housewives over English in making cheap and simple food go a long way, but adds the interesting suggestion that the mere poverty of mechanical appliances in the English cottage is a bar to good cooking. 'Go into the house of any English labourer or artisan and you will observe at once the scantiness of the culinary utensils; and then go into a French or German home of the same class and you will at once note the difference.' The *Haushaltungsschule* in Germany are referred to, where girls of the poorer classes are taught to spend small earnings wisely and well. And middle class school girls are not only taught to housekeep on small incomes, but also 'to plan for small Sunday afternoon holidays throughout the summer.' Such German schools should be studied by those who are interested in the art and science of workmen's budgets. As to salaries, Miss Pycroft tells us that in Domestic Economy schools they vary from £100-£120 for head teachers and from £80-£85 for under teachers (dinner and tea on school days being included); and that travelling teachers get from £90-£100 exclusive of travelling expenses. Some thought these sums 'miserable,' but with this Miss Pycroft did not agree, account being taken of the short time spent on training.

Mrs. Sidney Webb puts forth a powerful plea for Further Restrictions on Women's Labour; all the more powerful because she hastens to agree with her adversaries that the test must be 'whether the legal regulation of women's labour makes for women's advancement. . . . We must seek, in every way, to increase their economic independence and efficiency as workers and citizens no less than as wives and mothers.' This indicates a tendency to legislate for adult women from the point of view of the women themselves, rather than from that of the children. This tendency is seen throughout the paper; nearly all the arguments being applicable to the restriction of men's labour as much as of women's. In fact Mrs. Sidney Webb seems to think that in respect of restriction, women are to be envied rather than pitied. She says: 'Though I regret . . . that working men cannot get their own hours protected by law, I do not see that this is any reason why women should be denied this

boon.' She thus differs fundamentally from many of the more moderate advocates of further restrictions of women's labour, who are in favour of them, not so much because they 'make for women's advancement' as because the regulation of women's labour has a more direct bearing on the happiness and health of child life than has the regulation of men's labour.

She argues that the common middle class objection to Factory Legislation, its interference with the individual liberty of the operative, springs from ignorance of the economic position of the worker. That our long series of legislation is due to the fundamental economic fact 'the essential and permanent inequality between the individual wage-earner and the capitalist employer. . . . No competent authority would now deny that individual bargaining between capitalist and workman inevitably tends to result, not in the highest wage that the industry can afford, but in the lowest on which the workman and his family can subsist.' This is a strong statement. There are many industries both at home and abroad in which trades unions have very little power and yet in which wages are not low.

She goes on to show that other matters besides wages cannot be left to individual choice. 'Directly we get machinery and division of labour . . . there must be one uniform rule for the whole establishment.' Work having therefore to be carried on under general rules, who is to settle them? If they are left to the employer to frame 'what this means we know from the ghastly experience of the early factory system.' The two methods left are that of collective bargaining called trades unions and that of factory legislation, the one method of overriding the individual being best for certain matters, the other best for certain others; but both being 'equally inconsistent with the so-called liberty of the individual workman to make his own bargain.' This classing together of trades unions and of government action as being 'equally' inconsistent with liberty, perhaps crowns the many bold statements which can be gathered from Mrs. Sidney Webb's eloquent and suggestive address; but it is one which we should hardly have expected from such an authority on trades unionism.

Her conclusion is that women, even more than men, are unfitted to use the method of self-help till they have been raised to a higher level by State intervention. Only in so far as her hours of work have been shortened, and its sanitary conditions improved, has woman been raised up to this point of collective bargaining by means of trades unions; it is in those industries in which she has been most carefully restricted, for instance in the cotton trade, that she is most emancipated, most able to combine in defence of her interests. Where she has been most coerced there is she most truly free. 'It is the law in fact which is the mother of freedom.'

MARY P. MARSHALL