

THE WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE MOVEMENT AMONG TRADE UNIONISTS

BY EVA GORE-BOOTH .

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*Lancashire and Cheshire Women Textile and other Workers
Representation Committee.*

July, 1904.

Fellow Workers.—During the last few years the need of political power for the defence of the workers has been felt by every section of the labour world. Among the men the growing sense of the importance of this question has resulted in the formation of the Labour Representation Committee with the object of gaining direct Parliamentary Representation for the already enfranchised working men. Meanwhile the position of the unenfranchised working women, who are by their voteless condition shut out from all political influence, is becoming daily more precarious. They cannot hope to hold their own in industrial matters, where their interests may clash with those of their enfranchised fellow-workers or employers.

The one all-absorbing and vital political question for labouring women is to force an entrance into the ranks of responsible citizens, in whose hands lie the solution of the problems which are at present convulsing the industrial world.

In view of the complicated state of modern politics, and the mass of conflicting interests, the conclusion has been forced on those of the textile workers who have been working unceasingly in past years to secure the votes for women, that what is urgently needed is that they should send their own nominee to the House of Commons, pledged to work in season and out of season to secure the enfranchisement of the women workers of the country.

A committee has been formed of women in the trade from various Lancashire and Cheshire towns, whose duties are (1) to select a suitable and zealous candidate, and (2) to collect and be responsible for the spending of £500, which is the amount absolutely necessary for one candidate's election expenses. A balance sheet will be submitted to each town subscribing.

Any one who wishes to better the position of her fellow-workers, and the thousands of women outside the ranks of the skilled cotton operatives, who are being overworked and underpaid, should remember that political enfranchisement must precede industrial emancipation, and that the political disabilities of women have done incalculable harm, by cheapening their labour and lowering their position in the industrial world.

What Lancashire and Cheshire Women think to-day England^r will do to-morrow.

Yours fraternally,

Pro THE COMMITTEE:

SARAH DICKINSON,
SELINA COOPER,
SARAH REDDISH,
ESTHER ROPER,
EVA GORE-BOOTH.

So ran the manifesto of the Lancashire Textile Workers in 1904, when, after years of patient work on the old lines, they came to the conclusion it was time to adopt newer and more forcible methods. In 1901 and 1902, petitions signed by 67,000 textile

workers had been taken to the House of Commons by deputations of women employed in the trade, deputations of enthusiastic workers who could not believe in the indifference of the well-to-do world to the claims of unenfranchised wage-earners, and came back to Lancashire sadder and wiser women. A good deal of stir had begun inside the Cotton Unions, and, in various towns, votes were taken as to whether Women's Suffrage was to be a Trade Union question. It was felt by the women that the Cotton Unions should make a practical effort to secure the benefits of political enfranchisement for their 96,000 women members. It is noteworthy that, wherever this vote was taken (Bolton, Clitheroe, Colne, Nelson, Hyde, Haslingden), majorities of over 1,000 decided in favour of immediate action, and there were but few dissentients. The Burnley Weavers' Union specially instructed their Committee to bring the matter before the Trade Congress.

For many years, enthusiastic meetings and demonstrations had been held in all the great Northern towns and centres of industry. The matter was one very familiar to the working people. For it will easily be understood that a grievance that is hardly felt by women of money, and position, and influence, may become well nigh intolerable in its practical bearing on the lives of those who are industrially an independent force, and politically the helpless toy of the amateur philanthropist, of the exploiter of cheap labour, and of that narrow spirit of exclusion and oppression that is bred among the very workers themselves by the severity of our present industrial

competitive system. As time went on, and as the political power to which they were admitted in 1868 assumed more and more importance in the minds of working men, the question of the women's enfranchisement became more and more prominent amongst working people.

The climate of thought in England is not tropical. We are not subject to sudden cataclysms and earthquakes and cyclones. We pride ourselves on the absence of sudden and violent Revolutions, and on the slow growth and gradual fruition of our political ideas. During the last fifty years a great change has taken place in the minds of the more progressive working people, a change that was observed in the making by some of our more long-sighted politicians, notably Lord Randolph Churchill. "The Labour community is carrying on at the present day a very significant and instructive struggle. . . . It realises that it now possesses political power to such an extent as to make it independent of either party in the State; the struggle it is carrying on is one . . . for the practical utilisation in its own interest of the great political power it has acquired. The Labour interest is now seeking to do for itself what the landed interest and the manufacturing interest did for themselves. . . . We are now come, or are coming fast, to a time when Labour Laws will be made by the Labour interest for the advantage of Labour. The regulation of all the conditions of Labour by the State controlled and guided by the Labour vote appears to be the ideal aimed at." ¹

¹ "Lord Randolph Churchill," by Winston S. Churchill.

Strangely enough, when the Labour Representation movement began to make itself felt in Lancashire, it was by the votes of women that it stood or fell. For there is one thing that women are usually allowed to vote, and that is their money (unless, of course, it is taken from them by the autocratic will of Parliament). Those progressive people who would deny votes to women for the statesman-like reason that they were supposed to vote Conservative in the London County Council election, would do well to place beside this hypothesis the incontestable fact that before the Cotton Unions could subscribe £900 a year to the Labour Representation Committee, and before a candidate could be run and his salary paid as Labour candidate for Clitheroe, a ballot had to be taken of the women who far outnumbered the men in the Unions. The women did not grudge their money for Labour Representation, and at the time Mr. Shackleton himself pointed out how large a part of the burden fell on the shoulders of these unrepresented workers. When Mr. Shackleton was returned unopposed for Parliament in 1902, 5,500 women trade unionists in the Clitheroe division petitioned him to bring forward and press on the Women's Franchise question so that they too might share in the benefits of Parliamentary Representation. Then came a period of apathy on the men's part to the women's claims, a period during which the unpleasant truth gradually soaked into these women's minds that those who had been their equals and comrades in industry, had passed wholly out of their sphere of influence, and were as deaf to the appeals

of the politically helpless as were the "princes" in whom the working men of old time "put their trust." Among the Lancashire working women there is a strong inherent sense of commercial honesty and personal independence, and it is no exaggeration to say that among the more progressive workers there has grown up a deep feeling of bitterness and disappointment, a feeling which culminated this year when the Labour Party, led away by a theoretic inclination for the very stale red-herring of immediate complete and entire adult suffrage, refused to fulfil their written pledge and press forward a measure for the enfranchisement of women. It is apparently a very easy matter for men to muddle the issues with high-sounding protests against the terms of their own enfranchisement, a measure by which they do not themselves refuse to profit. Their position is absolutely indefensible. They have built up the whole of the Labour Party on what they are pleased to call a property qualification, a qualification that gives votes to houses and lodgings, not to flesh and blood, a qualification that, according to their own often repeated statements, no democratic person could accept, or even compromise with as a temporary instalment of justice. If what these Labour men say is true, then it follows that the Labour Party is built in sin and founded on unrighteousness. If, on the other hand, what they say is not true, comment is surely superfluous. So far we have not observed amongst them any disinclination to use their own votes; nor do they even shrink from representing in Parliament thousands of arrogant enfranchised

houses and politically emancipated lodgings without an effort to enfranchise poor enslaved flesh and blood. In fact, they have eaten their cake, and enjoyed and digested it; it is only when a hungry beggar asks for a slice that they find out that it is poisonous.

The working women had answered to the Labour appeal; they had supported with their votes and money the new movement for what they had fondly dreamt was the representation of working people, and now they understand that those workers who are most in need of the protection of the franchise are still to be outside the pale. They do not undervalue the kind offices of individual friends, but it is a Party they supported in the time of need generously, and on a large scale, and it is to that Party that they appeal. "Be just before you are generous," is the simplest appeal in the world, and surely it is the fundamental basis of all right doing and political honesty.

It is easy to blame the Lancashire women for their reckless confidence. Certainly they scattered their bread on the waters with a princely disregard of consequences. There is a curious power in this world, the working of which we all of us feel instinctively, the force that Emerson called "The Law of Compensation." As much as you give out you draw in; what you pay the price for you earn.

Again, according to the philosopher, "There is no god dare wrong a worm"; "Power to him who power exerts." The justice inherent in things always in the end asserts itself. If you cast your bread

upon the waters, you shall most certainly find it again. But alas! that all these good hopes are only fulfilled "after many days." Surely the working women of England have paid the price of political emancipation over and over again! It is no mere insignificant statistical fact that these millions of workers live laborious days of poverty-stricken and upright independence, and produce by their labour so large a proportion of the material wealth of the country. Here is a force that must in the end be reckoned with. "Power to him who power exerts." We know of course that it is only a question of time; that there is no government in the world, however autocratic, that can in the end keep five millions of its responsible workers out of all political rights whatsoever. "Great is the truth and shall prevail," says Coventry Patmore; "when no man care if it prevail or no." This, at all events, does not seem likely, for the working women's representatives get more and more urgent in their appeal. Every month and every year that this measure of justice is denied to us, the condition of the working women becomes more and more desperately difficult. In fact, we are bound to care more, not less; and this for a very simple reason: Every year that goes by sees the slow development of the tendency to nationalise all industrial questions. Political and industrial issues can be no longer disentangled. The very trade unions that forty years ago shouted down their more progressive members with cries of "No politics," are now running candidates of their own at elections. Industrial questions are gradually shifting

their ground and becoming political questions, and, as this happens, the working women are more and more beginning to feel the disadvantage of not being able to enter the sphere where questions connected with their bread and butter and hours of labour and weekly income are fought out.

Anybody who studies with an impartial mind the industrial position of women in England must surely come to the conclusion that there is something radically wrong and unfair in that position. To begin with, wherever they are employed, with few exceptions, they are paid at lower rates than could be offered to men, and their work is restricted to the poorer and lesser paid parts of those trades. In fact, they get all the kicks and none of the halfpence. And when they have gone home with the wretched 7s. or 10s. which they are forced by hunger to accept for wages, they are bitterly reproached by men for undercutting, and for "having a lower standard of comfort than men." This low rate of wages among women is, of course, not due to original sin, or to some strange sex aberration which makes them unable to understand the usefulness of money. Neither is it due to want of organisation. There are thirty thousand women members of the National Union of Teachers, and yet, under every Education Committee in England, there is a reasoned-out scale by which every girl pupil-teacher is paid less than every boy pupil-teacher. And this principle is carried through right up to the head-masters and head-mistresses, irrespective of qualifications or training. Even in the cotton trade, which is, I suppose, the

best trade for women in England, and where there are ninety-six thousand women in the Unions, the average is quoted by Miss Collet (Board of Trade) as 14s. a week, a sum far below the wage of even an unskilled labouring man. In this connection the experiences of the men are somewhat illuminating. During the last sixty years, Mr. Sidney Webb points out, the wages of working men have increased by 50 to 100 per cent., whilst the wages of working women have remained stationary or grown less. Since their enfranchisement the agricultural labourers have been able to increase their wages largely, in spite of the fact of their Union falling to pieces.

The present tendency of Government to involve itself more and more in direct industrial enterprise has caused great enthusiasm among progressive politicians, who welcome it as a way of securing good industrial conditions for thousands of working men. Beyond this again, as Mr. Sidney Buxton pointed out last year, the Government, as the biggest employer of labour in the country, exerts a very great, if indirect, influence on the whole labour market. Thus the men workers are in the position, not only of having their biggest employers elected by public election, but one of the great forces that react on the male labour market is also at the mercy of public election. The Trade Unionist politicians were right to congratulate themselves. They are able to keep up the rate by unceasing vigilance and application of political pressure in the House of Commons, with the result that Government is a model employer for men. But not for women.

In the evidence before the Royal Commission on the Wages of Postal Servants, it is very clearly shown how the Government wages for clerks are lower than those given by other employers. Lancashire employers are able to give weavers the same rate whether they are men or women, but everywhere in Government employment wages are carefully calculated according to sex and not work. So that, in the Pimlico Clothing Factory, the skilled woman worker gets an average of 15s. a week, while no man labourer gets less than 23s. The Government mechanically gets its female labour as cheap as it can, unchecked by political considerations. The example spreads to public boards and private employers, who cannot afford to be undercut by one another, and thus their political weakness first depresses the wages of thirty thousand women, and then, through them, depresses the standard of women's remuneration all over the country.

I once heard a learned Professor assert with beautiful simplicity to a crowd of tailoresses earning about 7s. a week each, "Your low wages are due to yourselves. Perhaps, some day, if you work very well, you may be worth 14s. a week." This was, no doubt, a comforting doctrine for the Professor, whose salary could not have been less than £400 a year. But I think most people must realise nowadays that your payment is not so much for what you do, and its value to the world, but for what you are. The parlour-maid may be a better worker and a more valuable servant than the footman, but he gets higher wages for being a man.

Social barriers are growing less and less amongst men, since the working men have become the ruling political force in the nation, but still, you will find that a Foreign Office clerk, without any Trade Union at all, is able to get a higher rate of pay for his work than an engine-driver or skilled engineer, however valuable his services may be to the community, and in spite of the fact that he belongs to one of the strongest Trade Unions in England. A Government clerk may be a very valuable member of society, but the proportion of his salary to the wages of the engineer is hardly accounted for by a correspondingly lower rate of utility in the engineer's highly skilled work. If you want to increase a person's industrial value, you must increase his importance, you must make it worth somebody's while to please him. A hundred years ago the working men had no political importance, and they suffered from fining and low wages exactly in the same way that women do now. It is not one party or the other party that has improved their position, it is the pressure of the working men's votes on all parties. In practical life, these things are not doubted by working men. "My opinion should have some weight," said the Weavers' Secretary at a Lancashire Trade Council meeting, "for I represent by far the biggest Union in the town." "What's the good of your Union?" said the Engineers' Secretary, "why, it's all women; mine mayn't be large, but, at all events, they're voters." One vote more or less may be a matter of small importance, but an organised industrial Union of voters is a weapon of real political force, and the possession of this

weapon makes society very sensitive to the grievances and claims of the band of workers who are so well equipped. There are some people nowadays who still see the world in water-tight compartments. They will tell you that industrial results are due to economic causes, political results to political causes, social results to social causes. But we have seen a war a great political event that was undoubtedly the result of economic causes; we have watched every Factory Act that passes the House of Commons become more and more fraught with consequences to the industrial lives of women; we have seen indeed the gradual widening of the social chasm between the men who have emerged into political power and position, and their women comrades who are still washing dishes and cooking dinners. And we realise that all the arbitrary limits between the political and industrial world are only limits of the imagination. They do not, in fact, exist. Few people will deny that money is power; the discovery of this generation of English people, the discovery which is gradually working its way into the minds of the poor, is that power is money. Industry, society, politics, there is one magic key that opens the doors of prosperity in all the worlds, and that key is power. In the case of the working women, they have to break through a vicious circle of political disability working itself out in industrial weakness and social impotence. There are many causes given for the low rates earned by women, and doubtless many factors go to decide the vexed question of wages; but I

venture to assert that there is not one of them that you can impartially examine and not find that it is but a new form behind which masquerades the ancient and ubiquitous fact of the political subjection of women. It is unjust of people to reproach us with the fact that we are people of one idea. Because it is not we who follow the idea, but the idea that follows us. It dogs our footsteps wherever we go. In the mills and workshops, it regulates our lives and depresses our wages. It holds the constant threat of abolition and starvation over the heads of those who work in their own homes. It follows us on to the pit brow, and waits for us vindictively on all licensed premises, even showing its face in the harmless railway restaurants, and scaring the poor manageress who has attained a position of responsibility through hard work. It walks abroad among the variety artistes, and thinks nothing of proposing that ten thousand people should be turned out of their work because, contrary to human experience in that profession, they might break their legs. It arranges the education of children, and the hours of labour—the poor woman can never escape from the harassing experiences of her subjection.

As regards the more educated classes, it stands as a lion in the path between them and the higher branches of the professions, or the recognition of their abilities.

But it must never be forgotten that the sufferings of the poor are the most urgent sufferings because, though the opportunities of educated women may be stunted, and their careers spoilt and their ambitions thwarted, they can at least possess their own souls'

light, and, like Wordsworth's "forgotten taper," to the last "drive from themselves all frightful gloom," whilst the very life itself of the poor is stunted by that terrible struggle with poverty that leaves them, too often, neither leisure nor energy nor physical strength enough for self-development or education or the joy of life.

This is what the Trade Union women realised when, in 1904, the Women's Textile Committee and the Manchester and Salford Women's Trade and Labour Council laid their plans for the General Election. The need of strong and effective action had been brought home to them by recent events. They decided on a wholly new policy. They were not Party women; they would take up and use the only real political weapon that it is in the power of women to use at present. They would lead the way in a new warfare; they would choose a constituency and fight an election in the interests of the working women's franchise against all comers. They would appeal from party feeling to the industrial knowledge and sympathy of working women. People said they would not get five votes. They said then they would do with four, and always they hoped that this election would be the beginning of a new movement. They would try again and again, no matter how few votes they got, and then other women would join in the fray, and by degrees the idea would spread and Women's Suffrage candidates would be brought forward in all the bye-elections.

When they went to Wigan the expected happened, and they were repudiated by all parties and sections.

They appealed from the parties and organisations to the men at the mills and factories and workshops and mines and football fields. After a fortnight's work of twenty women and three men, unsupported by parties or organisations, a vote of 2,200 was gained by Mr. Thorley Smith, the women's candidate, and he was second at the poll in a three-cornered fight. Thus our appeal is from the Government to the nation, from the House of Commons to the electors, from the rich to the poor.

The rich may say that "women should stay at home and cook the dinner"; the poor know that if women did stay at home there would often be no dinner to cook. The Government says, "We have nothing to do with you, you can bring no pressure to bear on us"; but the nation says, "We feel the pressure of your poverty." In spite of the deafness and blindness of the political parties to human needs, working men everywhere are beginning to realise that the exclusion from all political rights of a body of 5,000,000 workers is not only a source of industrial weakness and poverty to themselves, but a danger to the whole of the world of labouring people.