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JAMES J. DAVIS, SECRETARY
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MARY ANDERSON, Director

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WHAT INDUSTRY MEANS TO WOMEN WORKERS

By

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U. S. DEPARTMENT OF LABOR,
WOMEN'S BUREAU,
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SIR: Transmitted herewith is the address made by Miss Mary Van Kleeck, Director of the Department of Industrial Studies, Russell Sage Foundation, New York, at the Women's Industrial Conference held by the Women's Bureau of the U. S. Department of Labor, January 11 to 13, 1923.

This paper is important because it deals in a very comprehensive way with the work of the Women's Bureau as it affects the women workers. Miss Van Kleeck is an expert in industrial problems affecting women workers. She was the first Director of the Women's Bureau and in that capacity guided the bureau during its first year.

Respectfully submitted.

MARY ANDERSON, *Director.*

Hon. JAMES J. DAVIS,
Secretary of Labor.

WHAT INDUSTRY MEANS TO WOMEN WORKERS.

From one point of view it is quite impossible to define "What Industry Means to Women Workers," even if I had hours to speak, because, according to the census of 1910, it means eight and one-half million different things. Or if you do not wish to define industry as including all gainful employment, we may say that it means in manufacturing and mechanical pursuits, one million nine hundred thousand different things; and in professions, one million different things; and in trade, that occupation which has been growing, so far as the employment of women is concerned, at a more rapid rate even than manufacturing, industry has for women six hundred thousand different meanings. We are confronted with diversity of occupations and diversity in the characteristics of the women working in them, and we must be very careful in generalization. But we can correct the inadequacies of the experience of any individual by accumulating the records of a great many individuals.

No woman in any one occupation in all this varied list can speak from her own experience for all the women in all the occupations. But women have discovered that it is not impossible to pool their experiences, and the Women's Bureau in the Federal Government represents the pooling of the experiences of women in industry, and its findings may be taken, therefore, as expressing what industry means to women workers. My speech, therefore, should be to summarize these 27 bulletins that the Women's Bureau has issued in the period since it has been organized, setting forth facts that it has gathered together from the experience literally of thousands of women in industry in this country. If these facts be studied carefully, we shall not need to generalize from too narrow an experience, because our experience is accumulating all the time.

That is the first point for us to bear in mind in a conference of this kind; that in all our discussion we are going to be guided by the composite picture of what industry actually means in the lives of women to-day; and that we are unwilling to base our decisions upon the theories of any groups, unless they are tested by adequate experience. The Women's Bureau has had the hearty support of many women's organizations, and they have thereby committed themselves to the support of this basic work of accumulating experience and reaching decisions on that basis.

Let me say, first, that there are two points of view from which we might approach a problem like the employment of women in industry. We may emphasize, on the one hand, the possibilities of individual action. That is very natural for us in America. We are apt to say that the individual has complete control of his or her own fate, that the individual who works hard and is faithful and loyal is going to win out, and, in the familiar American faith, will "get ahead" in whatever career or vocation he or she has chosen. To be sure, if we did not believe that the spring of action is in the individual, we would not be getting together here for conference in the belief that we as individuals can take some effective action.

Another group, however, believes that the environment masters the individual, and that the environment must be controlled, because as problems get more and more complicated the individual is lost.

Surely it is also true that if we did not believe that there were forces which must be controlled in the social and economic life we would not be getting together here for this conference.

But I take it that what this conference believes is that in the experience of a great many individuals are certain common elements, and that as industrial and social life has grown more and more complicated in this country, and in other modern industrial nations, the individual must draw on the experience of other individuals. We do not "get ahead" alone. We act in groups, and there is an interplay between the life of the individual and the environment. The more conscious is our group thinking, the more clearly we comprehend that we are all involved in situations which are affected by influences which are impersonal in their origin, but that nevertheless we can control those elements in the interest of the common good. The more we realize this relation of the individual and the group to impersonal forces, the more fundamental will be our thinking about women in industry. Thus we are brought back to the fact that the only basis for common action or for group thinking in the realm of industrial problems is a common fund of information, which is drawn directly from the experiences of women themselves in industry, and formulated and brought together for our enlightenment. These facts must be the starting point for the discussions of this conference.

We are not without a considerable body of information in this country. One of the very earliest investigations that was made by the old Bureau of Labor organized under the direction of Carroll D. Wright was the study of working women in large cities, and in that investigation there were brought out certain familiar facts. In the eighties, those investigations observed the effect of the Civil War upon women's economic position, and the way in which the withdrawal of men into military service, or the injury or death of the breadwinners in the families had driven women into industry. The complaint of

the sewing women was reflected in our daily papers in the period following the Civil War, and during that period the evils of long hours of work for low wages were again and again emphasized.

And then about 20 years later, in 1907, we had a nation-wide investigation of the condition of employment of woman and child wage earners. Nineteen volumes were published at that time by the Federal Government. Thorough studies were made of certain typical industries of importance in the employment of women—the cotton textile industry, men's ready-made clothing, the glass industry, and the silk industry. Other studies were made of the employment of women in stores and factories, costs of living, and the health of women in the textile industy. In those 19 volumes we have a foundation for efforts toward improvement which must continue to have our attention until the problems there outlined are under some sort of control.

Then we come to the time of the organization of the Women's Bureau in the war period and the accumulating data which are coming out of its investigations made since the war. The significant feature of these investigations seems to me to be that the Women's Bureau has been engaged in the very practical task of trying to show the women in the various States just what action they can take. This very thorough study in 1907, that I have referred to, valuable as it was, was not directly focused upon the possibility of local action to correct conditions. It was implied in it, but it was not clearly the purpose of the investigators, and although to a certain extent differences were shown in different localities, the community and its own problems, and the possibility of action by its citizens, were not the focus of attention. In contrast, as you know, it has been the purpose and the policy of the Women's Bureau to make its investigations upon invitation from groups in various communities who showed that they were eager to follow up the results by action, and it has been the response of the women's organizations in various localities which has made possible that kind of practical procedure.

I wish to call attention, also, to certain special studies, which the Women's Bureau has made, that illustrate the typical problems in the employment of women throughout the country. There is this most recent bulletin, "The Occupational Progress of Women," which outlines the differences in the proportions in which women's employment has increased in the various industries between 1910 and 1920. It shows that the increases have been larger in professional work, and in what is called "trade and transportation," than in manufacturing. That indicates the widening of new opportunities for women in occupations in which the conditions are distinctly different from those of manufacturing pursuits.

Then there is this report on "Industrial Opportunities and Training for Women and Girls," which stresses again the fact that closely involved with the range of opportunities open to women should be the opportunities to be trained in a variety of occupations. The picture which that report gives is one of many resources for industrial training for boys in various communities, but a very narrow range of opportunities for training open to women, even in those communities where the number of occupations in which they are employed has been greatly enlarged, especially during the war.

Here we have a report on "Some Effects of Legislation Limiting Hours of Work for Women," which shows the intention of the Women's Bureau not only to describe conditions before laws are passed but also to study the effects of legislation. I am calling attention to these bulletins merely to indicate the types of problems that are before us in considering women in industry.

Another very interesting study relates to "The Family Status of Breadwinning Women." The basis for it is the material regularly gathered by the Bureau of the Census, and here analyzed by the Women's Bureau more fully than the funds of the Bureau of the Census permit for any specialized topic. The Women's Bureau, taking the census material for a typical industrial community, has analyzed the exact family status of women who work, so we no longer have to guess about whether married women are working and whether the majority of those in industry have young children. It has been said here to-day that the married women in industry are not mothers of little children. This bulletin tells a different story, which I shall come to presently. These references are made now merely to illustrate the topics on which we have information which can guide our thinking, so that we need not feel that we are without a practical basis for decisions.

What then, on the basis of available information, does industry mean to women workers?

It seems to me that it means three things that we should emphasize here. First, it represents a chance to earn a living; how good a one it offers can be discussed later. Second, industry has constituted for women what one might call an endurance test. Third, it is an opportunity for women to join in the constructive upbuilding of a better order. It is possible to suggest only the outlines of these three large subjects.

First is the chance to earn a living. It is quite true, if we study the experience of women in industry, that their entrance into various occupations has resulted from the necessity to earn money for themselves or for their families. Thus, they are carrying out their traditional responsibility of being helpmates—as a previous speaker has defined their function. In a moment I shall have something to say

about what the chance to earn has actually meant, but let me first say that industry also means for many women a joy in work. We are not talking accurately about the problems of women in industry if we forget the real joy that women take in a job which gives any opportunity for expression of their powers. Those powers are varied, and they find expression in different types of occupations. There is such a thing in industry as real joy in work. Women are gaining an increasing sense of power through economic independence. Because of it they desire to break down the prejudices which exclude them from certain occupations.

All these various aspects of economic independence and joy in a job as an opportunity for independence have been summed up repeatedly in the phrase "equality of opportunity." I suggest that equality of opportunity is a very inadequate goal for women. In the first place, it seems to indicate that men in industry all have perfectly satisfactory opportunities. In the second place, it seems to set limits to our achievement. If I have undertaken to do a certain task, I desire freedom to accomplish that task as sucessfully as my own capacity permits. I do not think that I spend a great deal of time thinking whether I am equal to any man in that job, or whether I am having the same sort of opportunity as a man. I believe that the habit of measuring ourselves as women with men as a group is a remnant of all the trouble that we have been through to get the vote! The basic purpose that we must have in mind is that every worker—and that means every human being, because every human being needs work for the full expression of personal power—that every individual in society must have a chance to use his or her own characteristic powers. And I am not a bit afraid of discovering, if we are given a fair chance, that women can do certain things very much better than men; and likewise, I am not at all concerned, if given a fair chance, should we discover that men can handle certain tasks more easily than women. As a slogan in the primitive stage of thinking about our economic opportunities "equality of opportunity" may be all right, but as a goal or a program it is not large enough for us.

If, then, we have in mind as our objective the best development of the powers and capacities of the individual in the industrial order, as we find it, what are the present obstacles? What do we mean by saying that industry means for women an endurance test? It is impossible to do more than to sum up these obstacles to progress. We mean, in the first place, that as a matter of fact, wages for women have been lower than for men. We must not forget that fact when we talk about possible methods of changing the basis of wage determination for women. It is not, after all, because they are women, but because they are the low wage group that we must study their problem and discover the basis for determining their wages.

Mr. Cheney has outlined certain very interesting facts as to what constitutes wage determination in the experience of an employer. I found in my mind, as he was talking, a running commentary of additional questions. I wanted to ask, for instance, how valuable prolonged experience of any worker, man or woman, is to an industry. I wanted to ask why it is that in certain industries sometimes as low an age as 35 years, and often 40 or 45, is set at what men call the dead line, after which a man will not be newly employed, so that industry seems, as it is organized to-day, to be throwing aside experience and saying that it has no use for the older workers. In other words, though it may be true that in the more highly skilled occupations the amount spent by the management in training should be returned by the worker in prolonged service, is it not also true that in certain occupations the young, untried worker is more valuable than the older worker, using "more valuable" in the sense that Mr. Cheney has defined it as measured in low costs of production? A great deal more is involved in that whole question of length of service than appears on the surface. Involved in it is the exact requirement of the particular occupation rather than generalization about the length of women's service.

We need an entirely different approach to our wage problem. We need an analysis of what should be the factors in determining wages. The fundamental point of controversy, however, is that the question of what the wages should be is less important to both employer and employee than the crucial issue of who sets them. If wages are set by a very large industrial organization, with no voice expressed by the wage earners in it, then is it not true that the rate will be determined primarily in accordance with the demands of cheap production, and that little or no consideration will be given to the social aspects of wages as income?

When we advocate minimum wage legislation for women we are not favoring a uniform rate to be paid throughout all industries, in all parts of the country, but rather we are saying that the best way to settle the question of wages is to get together representatives of employers, representatives of the workers, and representatives of the public, who, sitting around the table, will study the facts and determine that wage which will represent a balance between social needs as reflected in standards of living and the needs of the industry as reflected in costs of production. Those who advocate minimum wage legislation are not proposing that manufacturers should be told what they should pay and that the rate should be determined arbitrarily by groups quite outside the industry. The proposal for a new method of setting a minimum through a representative commission is the outgrowth of experience in setting wages in certain industries with due consideration of the needs of all the groups involved, in contrast with

the more prevalent practice of ignoring the needs of the less articulate groups. Wherever arbitrary power is exercised in decisions involving so many different interests, the probability is that the less powerful will be forgotten.

Some of the engineers in the country are considering the possibility of making a study of the basis of determining wages. The American Federation of Labor recently passed a resolution suggesting the same kind of investigation. Progressive employers, including Mr. Cheney and his associates, are experimenting in better methods of weighing all the elements involved in wages. The war taught us that the cost of living should enter into the determination of earnings and must, therefore, be considered as a factor in setting rates, and with that necessity we face one of the very complicated problems of industrial management. First, facts are needed, and, secondly, its solution demands insight into the social consequence of the wage scale. Facts and insight are what is being sought now for the low-paid group of workers who happen to be women in industry.

Then, there is the whole question of hours of work, but it is impossible to take time to discuss it adequately. I would like to suggest that Mr. Cheney has shown us that the organization for which he speaks has studied its problems and sought to maintain a high standard. It has not been a fly-by-night enterprise, which has tried to make as much profit as possible to-day regardless of what happened to it or its workers to-morrow. Hence, experience in dealing with women in industry in Mr. Cheney's organization is very different from the record of experience in less well organized, less socially managed factories. But consider the question of hours of work even in a well-managed plant. It is not within the power of the individual to determine her hours of work where there are 5,000 employed. Mr. Cheney has even said that it is exceedingly difficult to set different hours for women as compared with men in that plant. And how utterly impossible it is, therefore, for an individual girl in a large establishment to choose what hours she shall work. May I add in that connection that if there are days when women are weaker as it was expressed here this afternoon, taking care of health every day of the month and never permitting excessive hours would go far toward converting weakness into strength for women in industry?

Experience shows that the most effective results are achieved for the industry and for the worker by keeping daily hours always at a reasonable level. Exact medical examination of the individual is not necessary to demonstrate the desirability of the eight-hour day. I remember one meeting at which I happened to be present when a group of employers were asking that some representatives of women's organizations should demonstrate in connection with a proposed eight-hour bill that nine hours of work a day were dangerous to the

health of women, but that eight hours were not dangerous. Unless, they said, you can show us exact medical statistics on that point we shall not support the eight-hour bill. Obviously exact statistics on that point are not available. To secure them would require much more elaborate physical examinations than are now made in any industry. We need here a combination of what might be called social common sense and scientific procedure. We have had scientific procedure in determining that fatigue is physiological, and that from fatigue one must rest if it is not to become exhausting. That is the scientific basis for setting some limit to the machine which otherwise would run all day long, and all through the night, because the machine does not know fatigue. But it is not necessary for us to study every one of the occupations in industry and determine a different working-day for each of them. We have had an accumulated social experience through years and years which trade-unionists and unorganized workers are expressing in their desire for an eight-hour day. That is just as scientific a fact, this desire of theirs for the eight-hour day, as any kind of physical measurement of individuals or of output might be. Upon the basis of a growing social standard we must build, using as our method the scientific and technical facts which show us how to arrive at the goal which is set by our social vision. Our social vision grows out of our experience as to what is good for our communities.

All these illustrations merely show the surface of the problems affecting women in industry, but perhaps they will indicate that here is an opportunity for women to join in the building up of industry on a new basis. We need not argue the need for that. If you pick up any newspaper and read news that is of general significance from abroad or from different sections of this country, can you find very much that does not go back to labor and economic conditions? Is it not clear that labor is the fundamental international problem of our day? Is it not necessary to civilization that women be prepared to do their part in constructing a better social order?

Experience has shown us that women have suffered from industrial conditions, and that they have actually suffered in a way that men have not, because women are the bearers of children and responsible for taking care of the home. Let me point out that contrary to some statements made here this afternoon, the study of the Women's Bureau of the "Family Status of Breadwinning Women" does not demonstrate that the married woman in industry is one whose children are grown. This was a study of census material, not open to suspicion as a biased inquiry by investigators trying to make a point, but gathered by census agents in the regular house-to-house canvass. It shows that in the families of working mothers the children were young. The report says that "approximately 60 per cent of the

employed mothers had children under 5 years of age." This and other information in that study are facts. They show that industry presses upon women and through them affects the home and the children. Facts indicate, also, less economic power on the part of women. Experience in all countries is showing the necessity for exerting some measure of control over the industrial environment in which women are employed.

A recent statement by an officer of the United States Steel Corporation that physically and socially the eight-hour day is right, but economically it is not possible now for the steel industry, a statement made in the face of the fact that other steel companies now in this country are operating with the eight-hour day, brings up the question of whether or not we do not also need more effective control of men's work. In the answer to that question, however, much is involved. Meanwhile, if we are really practical in our approach to the problems of women in industry, we must recognize that there are differences in the social effects of the employment of women as compared with men, differences in the conditions which they encounter, differences in their power to control their environment, and reasons, therefore, why the community, in order to give more, not less, freedom to the individual woman should control these conditions in her environment which restrict individual freedom. If we women are to approach this very large task successfully, two of these suggestions may be useful to keep in mind.

The first is the necessity for that habit of thinking in terms of facts. From this habit we shall become vigorous in the support of fact-finding agencies in State and Federal Governments. I think that nothing is more cheering, since women have had the vote, than the vigilant support that the women's organizations of this country are giving to the Women's Bureau in the Federal Government. They are thereby proving that they recognize the importance of facts.

Second, as a means of preparation for an effective share in the reconstruction of industry is the strengthening of the voluntary organizations of women. I am thinking of a number of them. I am thinking, for instance, of the National Consumers' League, with its beginnings in the effort of a group of women in New York City who suddenly began to realize that the conditions in the stores ought to be controlled by the women who purchased there, and then gradually they extended that idea to the discovery that in the last analysis the consumer is the employer. From stores they carried their activities back to the factories, and in the working out of the idea that the consumer is the employer to its logical conclusion the league has recognized labor legislation as expressing the standards of the largest number of consumers; that is, all the citizens of the country.

Then we have the General Federation of Women's Clubs, and all that they have been doing especially in recent years to support labor legislation, and to encourage their members to study how higher standards can be secured for women in industry, whether by labor laws or by voluntary action in industrial establishments. More recently, the organization of the National League of Women Voters comes as a reenforcement of great importance in legislative programs affecting women. The National Women's Trade-Union League is another of our assets in this effort, representing as it does the banding together of the wage-earning women themselves, and their interest in the support of those expressions of the standards of the community which we call labor laws.

I am thinking to-day of another organization, a religious organization, which has been making a valiant fight for recognizing that industry in its effect upon human beings is a matter of religious import, and I am thinking of a leader in that organization, whose work on earth has so recently ended, Florence Simms. Thirteen years ago I happened to meet her at a student conference. That was in 1910, before many organizations of women had been taking an interest in industrial questions. I remember her saying then how important she felt it to be that the Young Women's Christian Association should make the students in the colleges realize the meaning of industrial problems. I need not tell you how steadily she kept that vision before her, how through experience abroad, following the armistice, she saw the big forces that were sweeping upon us, and felt that religion was a power which must seek more adequate expression in industrial relations; and then how important was her influence in leading her organization to that brave stand at the Cleveland convention, taken in the face of threats that if an industrial program were adopted there the business men of the country would withdraw their contributions from the Young Women's Christian Associations. Though that threat was clearly printed and circulated at the convention, the association overwhelmingly adopted its industrial program.

It is good for us to think to-day of the valiant work that is being done by these voluntary organizations, to get higher standards accepted and adopted in industry. Is not the keynote of all this work the release of women's powers, giving them freedom to develop to the fullest their capacity for their own happiness and for the service of society?

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