

The National Unity Congress and Working Women

Pamphlet No. 1

HD6

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# UNEMPLOYED WOMEN

and

the



A Workless Family Evicted.

# SLAVE BILL

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.....ONE HALFPENNY.....

## UNEMPLOYED WOMEN AND THE SLAVE BILL

FELLOW UNEMPLOYED WOMEN,

Try to imagine yourselves with £54,500,000 to spend! Think of the millions of loaves of bread, pounds of butter, eggs and milk, clothes, pairs of shoes that it would buy and every other article needed in the lives of the unemployed. Unfortunately, we have not got it to spend. It has been stolen from us during the past two years by the unemployed economies of the National Government. Sir Henry Betterton, who is the man in charge of this branch of work for the Government, stated in the House of Commons (17th November, 1933) that from October 1st, 1931, to October 1st, 1933, the Government had "saved" through the 10 per cent. cut in unemployment benefit £26,750,000. He also says that through the Means Test they have saved £27,750,000. They have saved it to buy bombing planes and battleships, whilst our misery and sickness has increased. Our homes have been broken up, we have sold and pawned every possible thing, debts have piled up and we have been compelled to throw ourselves upon the mercy of our already over-burdened relatives. Tens of thousands of us have had to leave our own trade and go into "Uninsurable Occupations," faced with the streets if it suits the "Missis" to sack us. Thousands of us have had our medical benefit taken away, and to crown all we are now faced with the terrible position of no Maternity Benefit should there be "another mouth to feed."

This is the working woman's bitter experience of the two years of "saving on unemployment" by the National Government. It now threatens us with "worse to come."



## THE NEW BILL AND BENEFITS

Have you realised that they are trying to make law a new Unemployment Bill? This Bill has been rightly named: "The Slave Bill," for it proposes to force women to work in the Training Centres as a condition of Unemployed Relief and will assist the masters to make slaves of the women in the workshops. Another little pamphlet will deal with what it means to the women who have a job, but we will now have a look at what they intend to do with the unemployed women.

1.—It is proposed that Unemployment Benefit shall be for 26 weeks only, unless the applicant can prove that she has worked for  $3\frac{1}{2}$  years out of the past 5 years. Only about two out of every three women are in that happy position, and a quarter of a million women would be almost immediately affected by this decision.

2.—The possibility of extended benefit is thus very small and, in addition, all women who draw "benefit" may find themselves forced to attend Training Centres either in their home towns or even in Resident Centres, miles away from home, as the custom has been for Domestic Service Training. It is well to remember the number of disallowances that have already been made because the applicant refused to attend classes. The following example, although it deals with men, should sound the warning as to what is likely to happen if the Bill is allowed to become an Act:—Two men were at the Court of Referees in Arbroath (Scotland) on the 24th October, 1933, disallowed benefit on the grounds that they failed to attend a course of instruction. "They were under the impression that the instruction was to be held only in the day time, whereas the particular training was held in the evening."

### PENALTY FOR "MISCONDUCT"

Numerous cases can be quoted of women and girls who have lost days of benefit through alleged "misconduct" in the Training Centre. In one well-known incident in Lancashire,

"misconduct" consisted in powdering the nose. "Misconduct" in the Training Centre or failure to attend will be considered a just reason for stoppage of benefit. When it is understood that quite a lot of trainees in the already existing centres ran away rather than tolerate the conditions, it is easy to realise that an extension of these centres with the new proposals will force unemployed women to accept slave conditions or starve.

Moreover, single and married women alike will be forced to attend these Training Centres. It does not require much imagination to understand what this will mean, with homes broken up, children left without their mother, young girls "stranded" miles away from home if they cannot stand the conditions in the resident centres.

3.—The new Bill says that in future the woman must prove "that she is capable and available for work." This claim has many times been used against the women. The Court of Referees, held at Basford (Nottinghamshire) on 7th November, 1932, disallowed a married woman because she had a child whom it was claimed prevented the claimant from taking a job. The fact was that the grandmother was acting as nurse to the child.

### NEW PENALISING CLAUSE

The new Bill goes further and says that the claimant must prove "she is unable to obtain suitable work." Typical cases in the past are those from S. Wales, where girls have been disallowed for having "refused offer of suitable situation"—a shop assistant (Abertillery) was disallowed, 29th August, 1933, because she refused to accept a job as chambermaid waitress in a hotel miles away from her home. In the future, unless the working women decide to make their protest heard along with the men, the applicant will have to prove that she could not find "suitable" work. The explanation of "suitable" will lie with the authorities and not with the women,

and it is quite easy to see how weavers and tailoresses may be forced to become general servants, and rendered unfit for their own trades and also become "uninsured persons." It may be used to force skilled workers to take unskilled jobs at lower rates and also to be used as strike-breakers.

In Wigan on 21st October, 1932, a woman was "disallowed" because she refused to take up a job in a firm where notices had been posted owing to a trade dispute. It will be extremely difficult to "prove" that any woman could not get a job.

4.—The new Bill also proposes to stop all benefits of unemployed workers during recognised trade holidays. This means that the tens of thousands of women employed in the textile areas will receive no benefit during Wakes Week. We are to starve for a week because the masters find it useful to close the mills.

#### FURTHER RESTRICTIONS IN "DOLE" PAYMENTS

5.—There are to be no benefits for women engaged in trades where it has become customary to work week about, whether owing to shortage of orders or to organised short time work in an attempt to keep prices up. This will, of course, affect all those women weavers who have been employed on the More Loom system in the mills where this has been the rule. It will also mean that in workshops where, owing to "slackness," it has been usual to work three days and "sign on" three, there will be in future no "dole." Payment will be for actual working days only.

6.—Hundreds of women have in the past been "disallowed" because they left their jobs or were discharged for "misconduct." On 25th October, 1932, the Shepherd's Bush Court of Referees disallowed a woman on the grounds of "misconduct." The facts are that this woman had a sick friend, and got the permission of the boss to stay off work. She was a day

late in reporting back, having to take her friend to the hospital on that date and was sacked, but the Court decided that she must lose six weeks' benefit. Moreover, cases can be quoted of women who could not tolerate the bad wages and conditions and who would have been absolutely broken if they had put up with it. The Slave Bill says that any woman who leaves her job twice in a year, or is sacked for "misconduct" twice, will be sentenced to 26 weeks loss of benefit.

#### HOMES TO BE BROKEN UP

7.—Space will not permit of a full description of all the evils of the new Bill. But every working woman should understand that her man may be sent into a Training Centre and she will be left to face all the household worries with only her "allowance" and the children's "allowance." This in many instances will scarcely pay the rent, and will mean that homes will be broken up and the struggle to make ends meet will be harder than ever.

8.—It is also proposed that in the future the Public Assistance Committees will not be able to make "allowances" in addition to those granted at the Exchanges. Consequently many housewives will find themselves 6s. to 7s. a week worse off.

#### MEANS TEST TO REMAIN

9.—The Means Test, which is to be extended, will be used to "nose" into the family business more than ever, with the result that the employed workers will have even more responsibility for the unemployed. In addition, where there is an invalid in the family, no consideration will be given to her special needs when calculating the income.

Fathers of families may be forced into the workhouse before they can get relief for the families, parents may be fined because their growing boys and girls refuse to go to training schools, and their children may even be taken entirely out of their custody.

## UNITY IN ACTION NEED OF THE HOUR !

10.—It is clear that in these circumstances we cannot allow these proposals of the New Unemployment Bill to become law. There is only one thing that can prevent it, and that is by all workers coming together and declaring that they will not stand for it. Already the Independent Labour Party, the National Unemployed Workers' Movement, and the Communist Party have asked the leaders of the Labour Party, the Trade Union Congress, and the Co-operatives to join together to call a National Conference of workers' representatives and to organise a march of the workers from every part of the country to London.

The Labour Party, the Trade Union Congress, and the Co-operative officials have refused. But a United Front Committee has been set up and is being supported by many well-known people such as Ellen Wilkinson, John Jagger, Alex Gossip, Harry Pollitt, W. J. Brown and others. Arrangements are going forward for both the Conference and the March. Every unemployed woman should be doing her utmost to make it a success. Only the strength of the workers, employed and unemployed, can prevent the National Government carrying through this Slave Bill. Talk about this Conference to your neighbours and friends, raise it at the Exchange and in the Social Service Centre. Send resolutions to the papers and to the National Unity Committee.

Help in the work of the local Unity Committee, get delegates elected to the local and National Conference. Hand your name in to take part in the March—help raise funds and send your representative to the National Unity Conference in the Bermondsey Town Hall, February 24th and 25th, 1934.