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**NATIONAL UNION OF SOCIETIES FOR EQUAL  
CITIZENSHIP.**

15, Dean's Yard, S.W.1.

**WOMEN AND THE LEAD PAINT (PROTECTION AGAINST  
POISONING) BILL.**

*Statement on Clause II. of the Bill, submitted to the House of  
Commons by the N.U. of S. for E.C.*

**General Position of the National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship.**

We desire to make it clear that we are not in a position to commit ourselves to an opinion with regard to the controversy that has arisen as to the respective merits of regulations or of prohibition of the use of white lead in paint.

We fully recognise the dangers of lead poisoning and wish to see the evil abolished; whether that result be obtained by regulations or total prohibition.

The object of this memorandum is to urge the deletion of those parts of Clause II. of the present Bill which would exclude women from the painting industry, and would impose on them regulations not imposed on men. We claim equal treatment for the adult woman worker.

**The Genesis of Clause II. of the present Bill.**

We consider it important that members of the House of Commons should, in the first place, realise the manner in which Clause II., which bars the painting industry to women, has become fossilised in the Bills which have been brought before the House since the International Labour Conference issued its draft Convention on this subject in 1921.

At that meeting of the International Labour Conference the International Commission of Experts, whose duty it was to report to the Conference on the subject of lead poisoning in the painting industry, submitted a Majority Report and Draft Convention *which did not discriminate against women or bar the painting industry to them.* A Minority Report and Draft Convention, embodying the prohibition of the use of lead paint, except in certain specified industrial undertakings, contained a clause excluding women altogether from the painting trade. After urgent lobbyings, an eleventh-hour compromise was arrived at *by a one vote majority* and the Minority Convention was accepted. In the six sittings

of the Conference that ensued, every conceivable point and every conflicting interest—the interests of manufacturers, employers, workpeople, and of many nations—were fully discussed. *But no mention was ever made of the introduction of a clause which has the practical effect of closing a gainful occupation to a whole sex.* Such an attitude towards the interests of women does not create confidence in the seriousness or fairness of the body which displays it, and we urge the House to give very detailed and serious attention to the whole question of women and lead poisoning, before supporting a measure (Clause II.) which will practically exclude women from a well-paid trade which is essentially suitable for them.

#### Women and Lead Poisoning.

We believe that the attitude of the International Labour Conference on Clause II. of the present Bill is due to the current opinion—an opinion which has reached the stage of dogma—that:

(a) Women as a sex are specially susceptible to lead poisoning;

(b) Since lead is a racial poison—involving a high percentage of miscarriage, abortion, still-birth and disease, and early death rate of progeny—women must be responsible, and must be excluded from or specially protected in industries involving the use of lead.

These two points, *i.e.*, lead as a sex poison, and lead as a race poison have been confused: and the second *fact* used in support of the first *opinion*. They are two entirely separate questions. We are of the opinion that women are not specially susceptible on sex grounds alone to lead poisoning. That lead is a race poison is certain. *But the lead-poisoned father is equally liable with the mother to pass on the ill effects to progeny.*

#### Lead as a Sex Poison.

*Are Women as a Sex specially susceptible to Lead Poisoning?*

There can be little doubt that the opinion that sex is the determining factor in the incidence of lead poisoning has arisen from the facts—facts which we do not for a moment dispute—that in the earlier days in lead industries, and particularly in the Potteries, a very much larger proportion of women than of men were affected. The disastrous results on the maternal function undoubtedly helped to emphasise in the minds of medical observers the belief that women as women were more liable to the poison than men.

A study of the history of lead poisoning—both in its medical and statistical aspects—leads us to the conclusion that *far too little weight has been given, in the case of women, to the predisposing causes which were universally prevalent in the Potteries at the*

time of the 1910 inquiry which resulted in the imposition of special restrictions on women's work.

Among the principal predisposing causes to lead poisoning are:—

(a) *Poverty and consequent Malnutrition.*

“ . . . With a chronic intoxication, such as lead poisoning, malnutrition and starvation, with its attendant depression of all the vital forces of the body, is essentially a predisposing cause of poisoning, so much so that even the fact of commencing work without previously partaking of food may operate directly as a cause of poisoning.”\*

(b) *Anæmia; general debility; inactivity of the normal intestinal functions; any chronic septic condition of the mouth—pyorrhœa, etc.*

The women workers in the Potteries were notoriously the lowest paid, the poorest and least nourished, working *in the most dangerous processes under the worst possible conditions*—often without any proper washing or lavatory accommodation. We look upon them—and they should then have been looked on in this connection—not as a sex, but as a particular group of workers whose poverty, squalor, overwork and underpayment was such as to make them specially susceptible to the malign influence of lead poison.

It is principally from the horrible records of those earlier years that we have received and codified in our legislation the belief that women, as a sex, are more liable to lead poisoning than men. Since the introduction of regulations and restrictions—all of which, in our view, should be applied regardless of sex—there has been a marked diminution of lead poisoning among workers in dangerous processes; and a peculiarly marked diminution in lead poisoning among women. That may be attributed not only to the special regulations for women, but also to the fact that conditions in factories generally are better, and to the somewhat improved status of the woman worker as a wage-earner—though that status is far from what it should be. It is of particular interest to note that, though in the Potteries alone the attack rate of poisoning among women is a minute percentage higher than that of men—(it should be remembered that women work in a large majority in two of the more dangerous processes, ware cleaning and colour blowing)—the proportion of women certified as suffering from lead poisoning in the whole range of processes and trades involving the use of lead, is much less than among men similarly employed.

We are of the opinion that a dispassionate and unbiased investigation would prove that there is not, among women, a

\* “Lead Poisoning and Lead Absorption.” Legge & Goadby. 1912

susceptibility to lead poisoning which can justifiably be called a uniquely sex susceptibility: and that in lead, as in other forms of industrial poisoning, apart from specially predisposing causes, susceptibility is an individual, family, or type characteristic. We would be in favour of such individuals, families, and types, irrespective of sex, being specially restricted in or excluded from processes involving the use of lead.

#### Lead as a Racial Poison.

Lead undoubtedly acts as a racial poison. The obvious results—abortions, miscarriages, still-births—have caused undue emphasis to be placed on the effects of plumbism in the mother as the determining factor.

While there are differences of opinion as to the relative influence on progeny of paternal and maternal plumbism, there is a mass of evidence to show that paternal lead poisoning is so disastrous to the race (in the view of several observers more disastrous than maternal plumbism) *that there is no ground left for making regulations for women which do not equally apply to men: and that no other method than that of restrictions applied irrespective of sex will defeat racial poisoning.*

#### The Effects of Paternal Lead Poisoning on Offspring.

Dr. Carrozi of Milan found that of 455 pregnancies of women, whose husbands were type-smelters, there were 277 living births, 117 still-births, and 67 miscarriages.

Of 199 pregnancies of women whose husbands were lead mine workers: 36 living births; 108 still-births; 55 miscarriages.

Professor Lewin: Berlin. Of seven women married to male lead workers: 32 pregnancies, *and only 2 living children.*

Dr. Carozzi found that with leaded fathers there was a death and miscarriage rate of 51.6 per cent.

Frogia found with leaded fathers a death and miscarriage rate of 82 per cent.: and with leaded mothers 44.1 per cent.

Deneufbourg in a thesis on the effects of paternal plumbism on the products of conception gives the following figures:—

He divides cases into three groups:—

(1) Women married to lead workers but themselves free from lead.

(2) Women who were leaded but married to men free from lead.

(3) Women leaded themselves and married to leaded men.

The number of pregnancies, premature deliveries and still-births, also proportion of living children who died during first year of life:—

	No. of Pregnancies.	Abortion.	Stillborn.	Per cent.	Born living.	Survived first year.	Per cent. of living survived first year.
Father leaded	442	66	47	25.5	329	246	74.4
Mother leaded	134	17	6	17	111	82	73.9
Both leaded	23	4	4	35	18	10	66.6

It is, of course, in the third group that the effect of lead is the most striking. If we compare the two other groups, the effect of paternal plumbism seems to be quite as disastrous as the effect of the maternal and, indeed, the abortion rate is actually higher. Prof. Ouin mentions a case of Pinard's: that of a woman married to a lead poisoned man; she was pregnant five times and always prematurely delivered of a dead child, but she afterwards bore to a healthy man a perfectly normal child. Pinard called it an experimental demonstration of the effects of paternal lead poisoning.

The fact that men equally with women transmit the evil effects of lead poisoning to their offspring cannot be controverted. This was even made clear in the debate on the Bill introduced by the Labour Party. The inference is obvious: that there must be stringent regulations *for both sexes equally* in any process that involves the use of lead: and that in the case of the painting industry—whatever the form of the Bill—*women and men must be treated equally.*

#### The Woman Wage Earner: What Clause II. of the Lead Paint (Protection against Poisoning) Bill means.

We ask members of the House to realise what Clause II. means to wage earning women. It means, in practice, that a whole industry will probably be closed to them—an industry which is essentially suitable: a trade which has already attracted the attention of the woman pioneer in decorative work, and which should in the future attract the woman industrial worker in greater numbers than heretofore. *It is well paid work.* One of the reasons—indeed the chief reason—for the continued low wages and status of women industrial workers is that they are perpetually crowded into the lower ranks of industry, and that there are comparatively

only a small number of occupations open to them. Everything that restricts the use that may be made of women workers automatically restricts the field of their employment, and keeps them at the same dead level of inferior and ill-remunerated work.

Legislation which closes employment to women—and this Clause closes the painting trade to them—tends still further to crowd them into already crowded employments, and reduces the wage level for all. Are you prepared to shut the painting trade to women? and if so on what grounds? We submit that neither the interests of women nor the interests of the race will be served by such legislation; and that it is to the very vital interests of women that this trade should not be prohibited to them, and to the very vital interests of the race that there shall be such regulations of the trade, for both sexes equally, as shall reduce to the minimum, or eliminate, the dangers of lead poisoning.

July, 1926.