

Price 4d.

APRIL, 1919.

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## The Programme of the National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship.

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No. 5.

# Equal Pay for Equal Work.

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Resolution passed at the Council Meeting of the N.U.S.E.C. in  
March, 1919:—

“That this Council adopts the principle of Equal Pay for  
Equal Work.”

THE problem of women's wages, and more especially of their relation to those of men, is one of the most important and the most difficult that is now awaiting solution in the industrial world. It is therefore useful, and, indeed, essential, to examine it with care and impartiality; to see how it has come to be and what are permanent, what only transient, elements in it; to make clear to ourselves what the final solution should be, what action we must take and what pitfalls we must avoid in order to advance towards it and in the end to realise it completely.

An exact study of the problem is not possible, as detailed and reliable facts are scarce; only in the textile trade were there for women before the war well-established trade unions and trade union rates. Private investigators could do no more than take samples

and hope that they were typical. Government inquiries were rare, and those that were made were not always published; they depended on voluntary response and could not be expected to reveal the lowest payments. It is, however, worth while to give the figures that were collected by the Board of Trade from the most important trades in the country for the year 1906:—

### AVERAGE WEEKLY EARNINGS.

#### MEN'S WAGES.

TRADE.	For full time.		For less or more than full time.	
	s.	d.	s.	d.
Textiles .. .. .	28	1	27	3
Building and Wood Working .. .. .	32	0	30	8
Food, Drink, Tobacco .. .. .	26	4	26	5
Paper and Printing .. .. .	34	4	34	2
Metals, Engineering, Ships .. .. .	33	11	32	3
Public Utility Services .. .. .	28	1	27	0
Railway Service .. .. .	24	4	26	8

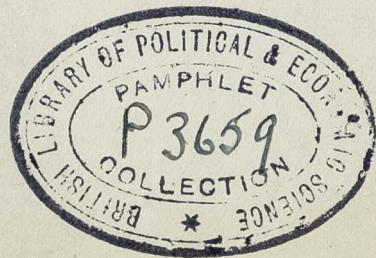
#### WOMEN'S WAGES.

Textiles .. .. .	15	5	14	10
Clothing .. .. .	13	6	13	0
Food, Drink, Tobacco .. .. .	11	5	11	3
Paper and Printing .. .. .	12	2	11	11

These figures cover trades employing only about one-third of all the women returned in the census as "occupied," and relate only to one-third of the women in those trades. They are, therefore, far from complete, and it is safe to assume that the wages which are not recorded are lower than those which we know. There can be no doubt that before the war a woman usually earned only half a man's wage for a full week's work.

The minimum rates fixed by the Trade Boards shortly before the war for the chain-making, lace-finishing, cardboard box-making, and ready-made tailoring trades gave the same ratio: the rates are fixed for the sex and not for the process; the men's rate, where there was one, was 6*d.* an hour, the women's rates ranged from 2½*d.* to 3¼*d.* an hour.

Woman -  
Employment  
- U.K.



It must, of course, be clearly understood that this does not mean that women were paid half as much as men for doing the same work. Before the war, with a few important exceptions, women were rarely employed in exactly the same processes as men, and when they were the actual task was usually different. In weaving, for instance, women were usually in charge of fewer looms, in printing some of the heavy lifting had to be done for them by labourers, in many trades women handled lighter articles; again, where processes were carried out in some parts of the country by men, in others by women—such as coal-sorting at the pit brow—the conditions were varied to suit the workers.

But whatever the differences in the task may have been, the rate of pay was determined, except in the textile trade, not by the work done, but by the sex of the worker. There were two standards of value for industrial work: one for men, and another, only about half as high, for women; and the wages for any particular job or process were fixed by one standard if it was done by men, by the other if the workers were women.

How did these two standards come to be? There seem to be two root causes which can be clearly distinguished, although they act and re-act upon each other. In all spheres of human activity one of the most powerful forces is custom or habit; and this force exerts a particularly strong influence in questions concerning the industrial classes, for it can only be effectively overcome by education in its broadest sense. An inquirer fresh from the study of the "economic man" of the text-books and the revolutionary aims of some proletarian programmes will certainly feel surprise when he learns to know the point of view and attitude of mind of the men and women in the industrial world; the conservatism and devotion to custom which he will find amongst the employers, and still more amongst the workers, will force him to remodel all his theories of industrial organisation and to recast his schemes for bringing about the millenium. Without doubt, the double standard of to-day depends largely on custom which arose under conditions now long past. It dates back to the time when households were self-contained and wages were only a small part of the means of supplying them. When men went out to work for wages custom changed, and this had a curious effect upon women, who still worked, for the most part, under the old conditions. For now it became customary for the household to be supported by wages earned outside it and it was difficult for untrained minds to think of payment for services rendered in any other form than that of a wage in cash or its exact equivalent, especially since the Truck Acts and the gradual disappearance of payment in kind, at any rate, in men's trades.

But a large number of the women classed as "occupied" in the census (including domestic servants, who in 1911 were 36 per cent of the "occupied" women, and many dressmakers and milliners) still lived as in pre-industrial days and received a large part of their wages in the form of board and lodging, with only a small cash payment in addition. A still larger number of working women neither received nor expected any cash payment at all for their services to their husbands and children in their own homes. Their expenditure of time and energy in domestic occupations was not and hardly could be appraised at such and such a value in money. Thus, naturally perhaps, but wrongly, it was thought to have no economic value at all, or only a very small one. And so the time and energy which a woman put into industrial work seemed worth much less than those of a man, since after all she might, and, as many thought, should, be at home, where she would be earning no money at all. This attitude of mind was supported and the low wages resulting from it were made possible by the fact that nearly one-half of the "occupied females" were under 25 years of age and more than a quarter were under 20 years. Thus, a very large number of women and girls working in industry lived in their parents' home, or, at any rate, were expected to be able to do so; and it was not felt to be a disgrace either to their employer or to themselves if they did not contribute the whole cost of their keep to the family purse. For their mothers and sisters who stayed at home and looked after the house and family earned no money at all, but appeared to be entirely supported by the wages of the others.

Again, it is customary to provide for the renewal of the race to a very large extent through the wage paid to men for the work they do. Thus it is both natural and necessary to pay a higher wage to men who, as a rule, have families to keep than to women whose financial responsibilities are usually far smaller. For even bachelors are often saving up to establish a home of their own and the families of widows have lost their most expensive member. The women who contribute to the support of others are probably not more in number than those who are partially dependent. For, in contradiction to the economic theory that wages cannot fall below the level of subsistence of the workers, many women and girls were paid before the war less than a living wage. It is estimated that more than one-fifth of the "occupied" women and girls received less than 10s. for a full week's work, and must have had some of their needs provided for them by others. But this well-meant generosity of fathers, brothers, and sweethearts only made it harder for all women and girls to obtain wages sufficient for them to live on. It is not necessary for men's wages to be high enough to enable them to support parasitic trades in addition to their own families.

The other chief cause of the double standard of wages is the large group of facts which are perhaps best summed up in the phrase "the prospects and fact of marriage and motherhood." These facts are too subtle to analyse, too elusive to enumerate, but we all know some of their manifestations and of their effects. They handicap women very heavily in the contest of economic forces, by which the amount of wages is now most frequently fixed. For skill and experience, organisation and esprit de corps are the things which nowadays secure high wages and which are hard for women and girls to obtain.

Skill takes both teaching and time to win. Now, girls have few opportunities to be well trained for industry; there are as yet no permanent trade schools for girls outside London, apprenticeship is rare, workshop training, though more frequent, is limited and unsatisfactory; future efficiency is apt to be sacrificed to present production. Yet it is impossible to deny the force of the argument that it is not worth while, either to the girl herself or to her employer, to spend much time and effort, and often also valuable material, in acquiring a skill which she will use only for a few years. The expectation of marriage, even if it is never realised, is strong enough to make industrial training a risky speculation. And most girls do marry and give up their wage-earning work, at any rate for a time. If for any reason they wish to resume it later, they are apt to find the discipline and restraints of factory life irksome; more important still, their hardly-won skill has to some extent passed away from them as a result of disuse, it may even have become completely superseded in the factory by some newly-discovered process. The value to a girl of highly specialised technical skill is limited.

In the matter of gaining all-round experience of workshop processes, the same considerations apply, but not with the same force. For the specialisation is not carried so far, and experience teaches many things, which not only make a girl more valuable to her employer, but are needed and strengthened in domestic and social life as much as in the workshop. It is worth while for a girl to gain experience of this kind, for it will be of permanent value to her for whatever work she may be called upon to do in later years.

The expectation and fact of marriage is a great practical difficulty in creating any corporate feeling among girl workers; for each one hopes that in time she will be desired as an individual and will have a home of her own. Her ideal is a purely individualistic life, in which public affairs are an intrusion. It is very difficult to persuade the girls to take any interest in matters common to all of them, to agree

to any form of collective action, and join any form of organisation. They often dislike even to disclose the contents of their weekly wage envelope to their fellow-workers, and in such an atmosphere no trade union can flourish. To the great majority of the girls their industrial work is but an interlude and their wages a secondary consideration. It is not easy to rouse the girls to win a living wage for themselves; still harder is it to obtain that sustained enthusiasm and steady membership which alone gives a trade union lasting strength and power. Out of the five million women employed in all occupations before the war, only about 350,000 were organised in trade unions.

Another cause of women's low wages which must be grouped with those arising out of her womanhood, is her lower physical strength and endurance. There has been very little scientific inquiry into particular processes in order to discover whether if carried on under suitable conditions they are more harmful to women than to men, and so far only processes involving the use of lead have been ascertained to be especially dangerous to women. But, apart from any definite disability of this nature, there is obviously a class of work for which women are not as well suited as men, and a still larger class for which they are supposed to be less well suited, and this fact is a powerful, though illogical, argument against a general increase in their wages. It is also true that many women are more easily tired, less alert and interested than men. This is often due to the domestic duties which they have to do in addition to their industrial work; figures have been quoted showing that women are more frequently absent from work owing to illness, but it is not stated whether this illness is their own or that of another member of the family whom they have to nurse. Women also have a lower standard of comfort and of health than men; they spend less on their food and recreation, and so need less wages and are less energetic workers. It is difficult to say which is cause and which is effect; the higher war wages have enabled working women to feed themselves better, their output has exceeded all expectations, and they have earned better pay.

Thus custom and womanhood appear as the two underlying causes for the double standard of wages and for the low pay earned by women. Until the war their male fellow-workers did little to help them. Organised labour was fully occupied in fighting the battles of its own members, and it is of the utmost importance to the whole working class, men and women alike, that their standard of living and wages should be kept up. In the day-to-day struggle it was natural that the men should fail to grasp the wider issues and should seek

to protect themselves against the competition of workers accustomed to a lower standard of living by the direct and simple method of refusing to admit them into their trades wherever they were strong enough to do so. The women, unable to enter most skilled and well-paid trades, were forced to crowd into those in which the wages were already lower, and by their competition depressed those wages still further.

Women have, in fact, been held in a vicious circle. Low wages reduced their self-respect, dulled their ambition, diminished their energies, limited their choice of trades, hampered their organisation, and as a result their wages became lower still. This circle has been broken by the war. The urgent demand for labour of all kinds, the need of employing women in place of men wherever possible, the chances given to women of acquiring training, skill, and experience, the self-respect and public spirit inspired by their new experiences, all these things have worked together to raise women's wages. Some women employed on what has been defined as men's work have been paid at skilled men's rates; others, as forewomen or as trained for specially skilled work, have earned comparatively high women's rates; all are receiving far higher money wages than before the war. Although they often cannot buy more with them owing to the increased prices yet they make the worker feel that she is worth a higher wage. Women's trade unions have grown by leaps and bounds, and have received active support from some of the men's; other men's unions have admitted women members for the first time, as, for instance, the National Union of Railwaymen; the general unions have made special efforts to enrol women members. Women have enjoyed the novel experience of getting some of their battles fought for them by their men fellow-workers.

But when we look at the relation between men's and women's wages, we still find as a rule the old proportion; for many of the exceptional conditions have influenced men's wages as much and more than women's and deep-seated causes cannot be removed by the lapse of a few years, however crowded with new experiences. The average wages of men employed in munition factories are still about double those of the women and the same proportion is found in most of the advances of wages awarded by the Committee on Production. Even where the right of women to the same rate of pay as the men they displaced has been recognised, it has been whittled down by definition, change of process, and other methods not difficult to devise with the complicated systems of wage payment now in vogue. For instance, the railway women, for whom the promise of equal pay had been definitely obtained by the National Union of Railway-

men, entered the same grade as the men whose place they took, but were paid the minimum rate of the grade; again, when women had qualified themselves as acetylene welders, the process, which was a new one and had been generally considered a skilled trade but was not yet securely established as such, was declared by the Munitions Tribunal to be only semi-skilled on the astonishing ground that it had been learned by women, and a lower rate of pay was awarded. It was often necessary to divide the work of a skilled man, so that the woman or semi-skilled man only did a part of it, and was thus disqualified from earning his full rate; it is not suggested that the work was altered to give an opportunity of lowering the rate, an accusation which has often been brought and seldom substantiated; the need for rapid and standardised production compelled a change of method which had that result. In other cases women have received the men's rate, but not the war bonus granted to meet the higher cost of living.

But although women's wages have not increased as much as is commonly supposed, if we take the increased prices into account, yet there has been a lively interest in the question and a decided change of attitude, not only among the workers of both sexes, but also among employers and the general public. The existence of the two standards has been frankly recognised, its results examined, its necessity questioned; the formula of "equal pay for equal work" has been bandied about, discussed, adopted, and, rarely, put into practice.

One is driven to ask why there should be a desire to change an economic system which seems to be supported on one side by century old custom, on the other by the facts of nature itself. It was perhaps obvious that women should question this arrangement as soon as their experience had enabled them to form an opinion and their organisation had given them courage to express it. Their own wages were intolerably low; men received higher pay for no greater effort; the claim for "equal pay for equal work" satisfied their sense of justice and met their immediate need; its implications and remoter effects were left to the future to reveal. How was it that this claim, which was first made at the Trade Union Congress in 1888, remained unheeded for so long and then suddenly won such widespread acceptance? The change must certainly be attributed in part to the growing knowledge of the facts and the awakening social conscience which have led to many recent reform movements. Appeals to the heart stimulate an Englishman to immediate action rather than to analytic thought, and so the Trade Boards Act of 1909 was passed. But its object was to abolish the worst underpayment, not to satisfy the claims of justice, nor to remove the deep-seated causes

of low wages. The rates were fixed with reference to what the trades could bear and not to any abstract theory of right. The abolition of the double standard was considered impracticable, and the old relation between men's and women's wages was enshrined in legal regulations.

Since the war, however, the question has presented itself in a new light. Men and women were forced into direct competition and the consequences which might have been foreseen were unrolled before the eyes of all. The standard rate of men, the mainstay of the industrial class, was threatened. For if women were allowed to do men's work but to be paid for it at women's rates, it was clear that when the men came back after the war, their former security would have gone. They would either have to accept the lower rates or seek other work. For they knew that the ordinary employer would not pay higher wages than he must; he has not yet discovered "the economy of high wages," because he does not possess the skill in management nor the power to take long views which it presupposes; he still tries to keep the cost of production low by employing cheap and docile labour whenever he can. Yet when the very existence of the country was at stake, the men could not resist the pressure to employ women, and so they adopted the formula of "equal pay for equal work" as the most direct and simple method of self-defence in the emergency. By its means they hoped to safeguard their own hardly-won standard rate, while the obvious fairness of the proposal was in harmony with the general spirit prevailing in a country fighting for justice and the rights of the weak. It was therefore accepted as one of the principles of the famous Treasury Agreement on which all later action was based.

The necessity of bringing women into men's trades has shown up the inevitable consequences of the double-wage standard and thereby made many converts to the "equal pay" principle. But competition between the sexes is in fact continually at work in normal times also, although it is not so clear-cut and easy to see. For industry is not a stagnant pool, the waters of which stand always at the same height and lap the same shores; the work is not done in the same way by the same workers for the same wages year in year out all over the country. The industrial world is much rather like a flowing sea with its rising and ebbing tide pushing its way into one creek, and leaving another high and dry; whole trades expand and contract, processes become now more simple, now more complex with each new invention, at one time it is machine-minders, at another skilled craftsmen who are most urgently wanted. Industries, processes, forms of skill are in constant competition with each other,

and in this fierce struggle the most dangerous competitors of all are workers with a lower standard of wages and of living.

This fact had been realised long before the war and, as we have seen, trade unionists attempted to protect themselves by excluding women workers by trade union regulation. It is well known how for instance the London Society of Compositors successfully kept women out by insisting on a degree of skill which only one woman was able to gain. It is possible that a strict application of the principle of "equal pay" will be used again with the same object.

But even where no such sinister design exists women are seldom able to do exactly the same work as men. They have in the first place certain natural disabilities which have already been discussed among the causes of women's lower wages. Besides these, the conditions of industry as they exist to-day have been made by men to suit the nature and habits of the men working in them; women need other conditions in order to do their best work. We have learnt a good deal during the war about the effect on output of environment and thoughtful care for the individual. We know that women and men alike will be more valuable workers if, for instance, the length and arrangement of the working hours suit them, if hot meals are available during the working day or night, if the journey to and from their work is comfortable, if, in short, they are treated as human beings. Now, in many of these details the needs of women will be different from those of men; if, therefore, a standard suitable for men is set up, women workers will not as a rule be able to work their best under it; they will not do "equal work," and will thus not be entitled to "equal pay." We must also recognise that if the work is "equal" and "equal pay" has to be given, natural conservatism and (may we add?) natural prejudice will still lead employers at the present time to prefer the employment of the sex with whom they are used to dealing, and men will continue to hold the field.

Thus we see that to ask for "equal pay for equal work" is not enough to secure industrial stability. By itself it will only lead us back by another route to the same unsatisfactory state from which we are beginning to emerge. "Equal pay" must be given for unequal work as well, by which is meant that there must be only one standard of wages for both sexes. Rates of pay must be fixed, not according to the sex of the workers but according to their skill and experience, the amount of labour available, and all the other factors which determine the distribution of wages among the workers of one sex to-day.

There are many processes which are best suited to the average man, just as there are others best suited to the average woman; as a rule men have greater physical strength, women greater nimbleness of finger. There is a natural and sound tendency for them to take up different forms of work. This tendency only becomes dangerous when the difference in the class of work is accompanied by a difference in the rate of pay. For then work will be done by one sex or the other, not because it is best suited to its nature and capacity. The men will fight hard to retain or to claim all the jobs they can secure, while the employers will unite with the women to get them for the lower-paid labour. The old disputes over the demarcation of work will be continued, with all the bitterness of sex prejudice added to it.

It is clearly the double standard which has been the cause of so much harm in the past. It is this which has prevented a free movement among the workers of both sexes from one trade to another according to their suitability and inclination. It is this which has hampered progress and experiment in manufacturing processes, since each change was accompanied by disputes as to the standard of pay to be assigned to the new job. It is this which has involved a heavy loss in productive capacity, for women have been excluded from work for which they have now proved themselves to be especially well fitted. It is this which has given women a lower industrial status and for this reason degraded the quality of their work. They certainly do not desire to return to the old conditions, nor would any one benefit if they were forced to do so.

Our ultimate aim, then, must be to secure one standard of wages for men and women alike. What practical steps can we take to reach it? Obviously "equal pay for equal work" must be granted and granted, too, with the honest intention of paving the way towards the single standard. Equal opportunities for gaining skill and experience must be offered to girls and to boys. Wages in women's trades must be raised so as to reduce and finally to abolish the existing differences between women's and men's pay. Resolute attacks must be made upon the underlying causes of women's low wages. The change in our habitual attitude of mind towards women's industrial status must be hastened. Pocket-money wage-earning must be condemned. The supplementary wage-earning of women caused by the irregular employment of men must be made unnecessary. Increased attention must be paid to the health of girls and women. Factory arrangements must be devised to meet the needs of the individuals who work under them. Relief must be brought to the overburdened housewife. Serious consideration

must be given to the whole question of providing for the nation's children, with particular attention to its effect on women's status and wages.

The programme is indeed far-reaching, but nothing less will suffice if we wish free and happy workers to live in a secure and prosperous world.

DOROTHEA M. BARTON.

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Printed by FRANCIS & CO., 13, Bream's Buildings, Chancery Lane, E.C.  
 Published by the National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship.