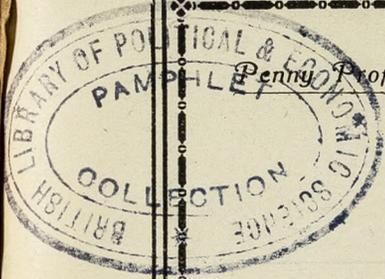


With Kind Regards. JF2(9)



Penny Propaganda Pamphlet No. 1

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WOMEN

and the

Labour Movement

By

ELIZABETH R. McCOMBS, M.P.

with a Foreword by

M. J. SAVAGE, M.P.,

Leader of the Opposition

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So many Branches of the Labour Party and other organisations have been kind enough to invite me to visit their districts, and to address meetings, that it would be quite impossible for me to cover the ground in a reasonable period of time. It has been suggested, therefore, that I should send out the following message as a goodwill offering. I do so with a great deal of pleasure because I feel that it will be accepted in the kindest spirit by those to whom it is addressed.

Elizabeth R. McCombs

Woman - Employment - New Zealand



foreword

ALTHOUGH there still remains, among a section of the people, the mistaken idea that men only are endowed with the faculties for intelligent government, women are gradually forcing their way into the public affairs of the nations. It is true that their progress in New Zealand has been somewhat slow, but the election of the author of the following pages to represent Lyttelton in the Parliament of the Dominion is, at least, an indication that they are on the move.

The title of this pamphlet, "Women and the Labour Movement," is in itself significant, and calls for more than passing attention from the women of New Zealand; while the matter which has been compiled by one of the Dominion's ablest women, Mrs. E. R. McCombs, M.P., gives evidence of the life-long study of economic and social problems by its author. Like her distinguished husband, the late James McCombs, M.P., the author of this pamphlet has rendered conspicuous service in bridging the gap, which should never have existed, between women and the Labour Movement, and her praiseworthy attempts to reach all sections of the community with the printed as well as the spoken word should meet with unqualified success.

While this pamphlet is of interest to all citizens, it is especially recommended to women as a sample of the ideals and capacity of the first woman to enter the New Zealand Parliament.

M. J. Savage

Office of the Leader of the Opposition,
Wellington, N.Z.
December, 1933.

WOMEN and the LABOUR MOVEMENT

It is now forty years since women were granted the franchise in New Zealand. Ours was the first of the British-speaking countries to give women the right to take part in the election of Parliamentary representatives.

In his book "State Experiments in New Zealand," one of New Zealand's statesmen, the Hon. W. P. Reeves, said: "So one fine morning the women of New Zealand woke up and found themselves enfranchised." That sounds very well, but in actual fact the gaining of the franchise was not so easy.

True, the women of New Zealand were not asleep. Those of them who settled early in New Zealand were inspired by the same high ideals as many of the men whom they accompanied to these shores.

The early laws of this country were designed to give protection from many of the abuses that had grown up in older lands. Responsibility for this was not confined to the men. The women also had high ideals. Desiring a greater freedom than they had known in older lands, they wished to help make the laws that governed this young country, and the movement for women's franchise was early afoot. A petition signed by many thousands was presented to Parliament, and the franchise was actually granted in 1893. It was not until fourteen years ago, however, that women were granted the right of election to Parliament, and now in 1933 the first woman has been admitted to the councils of the nation; but New Zealand is far behind many other countries in utilising the services of women to assist in the government of the country. Even to-day here, women are not yet eligible to sit as members of the Upper House. It was left to the Legislative Council to decide whether they should become eligible for nomination, and the members of that august assembly decided, in their wisdom, that this privilege should not be granted until our "House of Lords" became elective. Can anything more illogical be imagined? Surely if the electors should have the sole right to say whether women may become members of the Council, it is logical that they should now decide what men may sit there also. The Labour Party will settle that matter when it comes into power by abolishing the nominated Chamber altogether. Meanwhile it should not be within the power of any non-elective body to veto the decisions of the people's representatives. The power of veto should reside in the hands of the people themselves, and this could be accomplished by means of a general referendum law giving 10 per cent. of the people the right to demand a plebiscite vote on any proposed legislation, or the right to initiate legislation.

At the present time there are many electors who hold strong views regarding certain public questions; many who are taking an interest in economic reform. Take, for instance, the students of the Douglas Social Credit Scheme. Under such a law as the Labour Party proposes, the students of that system would be able to demand that Parliament should debate that subject on the Floor of the House. Or when the Government took power to extend the life of Parliament, under the Labour Party's proposed law the people could have insisted that Parliament take a vote of the people before it extended its own life for a year.

The Labour Party stands for a scientific system of election. Under Proportional Representation, such as is now on the Labour Party's platform, women will be able to secure the representation they desire. Parliament will become what it is claimed to be—representative of the whole of the people.

I am sometimes asked by women why I joined the Labour Party. My experience in public life has taught me that if one wishes to get things done it is necessary to co-operate with others. It is ineffectual to work alone. The Labour Party stands for many of the reforms in which I am interested. It is the only Party that is out to make more people happy, and happy in a better way while preserving what is good in the existing order. The Labour Party is trying to bring about a better order of society in which the good things of life shall be enjoyed by all who render social service.

Many of the reforms for which the women's societies are working are already written into the Platform of the Labour Party. The Labour Party stands for:—

- (1) The removal of the political disabilities of women.
- (2) The extension of pensions to include all widows and incapacitated persons.
- (3) Perfect equality between the sexes in all departments of life, with equal rights of both parents, unless proved unfit, to the guardianship of the children.
- (4) The national endowment of motherhood.
- (5) Equal pay for equal work for both sexes.
- (6) Wholehearted support for all efforts to secure disarmament by agreement between the nations.

These are matters of general principle.

The Labour Party offers practical solutions of many problems now confronting the Dominion. Take, for instance, the problem of unemployment. Does anyone really think that in New Zealand that problem has been dealt with scientifically or satisfactorily? The lack of commonsense in dealing with the whole matter is almost unbelievable. When I think of the present Government and unemployment, I am reminded that there are ten Ministers of the Crown, each of them with twelve thousand million brain cells—all unemployed.

The downright injustice of the Government's attitude in taxing women to the extent of £750,000, and at the same time taking up an attitude of indifference towards unemployed women and girls, is nothing short of a scandal. The fact that the Government has been so callous in its attitude towards unemployed women has aroused the indignation of all thinking women in the Dominion, including members of the Government's own party.

Every little working girl earning ten shillings per week is taxed on her wages. If she gets board as well as wages she is taxed also on the amount assessed for board. If she is a restaurant worker and is given meals, the meals are assessed at 1/- each, and she is taxed on that.

In one case where the meals were sold to customers at 9d., the proprietor stated that the meals supplied to the waitresses were not worth so much because the girls partook of what remained after the customers were served, yet those meals are assessed at 1/- and the girls are taxed accordingly.

Hospital nurses working six and even seven days of 8½ hours a week are taxed on their wages and on their board. In some cases junior nurses are getting only 7/3 weekly. When these girls are unemployed, in some centres they are given two weeks' work at 5/- weekly and then stood down for two weeks. Some of them are assisted also with meals and something towards room rent in stand-down weeks. Is it any wonder that many of these girls are driven to the point of desperation under such conditions?

Another aspect of the unemployment problem that calls for the sympathy of women is the fact that no provision whatever is made for youths over sixteen and under twenty. All boys are taxed upon

their earnings. If they are given board in addition to their wages, they are taxed upon that also. If they are given board and no wages, they are taxed on the board. If they have incomes they are taxed on their incomes. Yet boys between sixteen and twenty get no assistance whatever from the Unemployment Board.

Until a boy reaches the age of sixteen, his father, if he is a relief worker, is given work in respect of that boy; but directly the boy reaches the age of sixteen, that work ceases. Yet no work is found for the boy. The result of this neglect on the part of the Government is that the boy is thrown on his own resources. From the Government's point of view he practically ceases to exist. Since educational facilities have also been reduced, and many of the sons of working people have been thereby deprived of secondary education, a serious position has arisen. To meet this, voluntary organisations of business men have undertaken to provide recreation and other means of keeping these boys off the streets. Of course there are large numbers who, by their parents' efforts and even by their own, are making good in spite of adverse conditions; but there is no doubt that some of these lads are falling into evil ways.

With regard to the problem as it affects the whole community, we have been watching over again the application of the old remedy of placing an ambulance down in the valley instead of a fence at the top of the precipice, and a very inadequate ambulance it has been.

The fact that the depression as it developed in New Zealand was aggravated unnecessarily by the mistaken methods adopted to deal with certain phases of it, is one on which some of us hold strong views. Take, for instance, the wage-reduction policy which brought about further huge curtailment of purchasing power. In a country already suffering from that very cause this was disastrous. It is estimated that the total loss in buying capacity occasioned by the wage and salary reductions was not less than £12,000,000.

The cessation of many necessary public works drove numbers of men out of employment. To take men off necessary and reproductive public works and put them on to unnecessary and unproductive works seems little short of madness.

The Government's ill-advised attempts to assist certain wealthy classes of the community have also increased our difficulties. The main fact that confronts us now, however, is that this country is passing through the worst period of its history, and it is imperative that some action be taken in the immediate future to bring New Zealand out of her difficulties.

The Labour Party has a constructive plan which provides assistance to primary and secondary industries and includes all the useful people of the community.

There are at present, according to the latest figures, 80,000 unemployed in New Zealand. This number does not include women and girls, nor does it include boys under 20, for whom no provision is made.

It has been estimated that the actual number of persons unemployed in the Dominion, if we include women and youths, is nearly double the official figures. Added to these there are a very large number of men and women who are working part time or half time. These are earning in many cases no more than relief rates of pay.

This group of workers working part time probably equals or exceeds the number of totally unemployed. Is it any wonder that the business of the country suffers when nearly a quarter of its adult population with all their dependants are deprived of the means of purchasing sufficient of even the bare necessities of life?

Private citizens in every city and town are trying to mitigate the sufferings of those in desperate circumstances. Relief depots and

soup kitchens are everywhere. The people generally are now protesting against the continual appeals made for private charity.

Under the Labour Party's plan real work for real wages would take the place of charity. You know the story of the tramp who was asked if he had never been offered work. He said, "Only once. Apart from that I've met nothing but kindness." Well, kindness is what the unemployed are getting. It is true that they are getting plenty of it; but what they want is real work and real wages to vary the monotony.

I cannot believe that the people of New Zealand are willing to tolerate these conditions of poverty and charity much longer. We have traditions of independence, initiative and resourcefulness, and we can alter our conditions without waiting for the world to recover. It has been amply demonstrated that measures such as wage reductions, high exchange, and sales tax have served only to increase the difficulties for most sections of the people.

So far as this country is concerned, Empire Conferences and discussions have borne no fruit.

We want a new outlook. There must be no repetition of past mistakes. Inaction cannot be tolerated. If we are to wait for better conditions in New Zealand until there is world recovery, then we must make up our minds to a long siege.

There is an old proverb which says that a journey of a thousand miles begins with one step. The Labour Party says, "Let us take that step even if we don't go the full distance."

The Labour Party has repeatedly asserted that the way to restore normal conditions is to build up the buying power of the mass of the people. As a matter of fact, we have precedent to guide us. Forty years ago John Ballance and Richard Seddon in somewhat similar circumstances lifted this country out of the depression through which it was then passing. They put in hand a programme of public works and land settlement, and so gave work and adequate wages to large numbers of the people. Under their administration many progressive measures were placed upon the Statute Books which ensured to this country a long period of prosperity.

New Zealand led the way in progressive legislation. Let us regain our ideal of an educated and enlightened democracy living under conditions worthy of the people of God's Own Country.

The New Zealand Labour Party's plan includes a scheme for stabilised prices for primary producers. It includes the fostering and building up of secondary industries now in existence, and the establishment of further industries suitable to the country. It includes the assurance of adequate wages for all classes of workers to provide a reasonable standard of life and the enjoyment of the advantages of the age in which we live.

I think I need hardly say that I think it entirely fitting that the first woman elected to the New Zealand Parliament should be a member of the Labour Party, because I have shown that the Labour Party stands for justice for women, equality between the sexes, and also for most, if not all, of the humanitarian ideals of women.

The women of New Zealand generally believe in enlightened humanitarianism and commonsense in government, and I confidently depend upon their co-operation with the Labour Party's efforts to restore peace and prosperity to our much loved land.

Labour's Purpose

The purpose of the Labour Party is to educate the public in the principles of Co-operation and Socialism, and to elect competent men and women to Parliament and Local Governing Bodies who will pass and administer laws that will ensure the scientific development of the natural resources of New Zealand, and the just distribution of the products among those who render useful service.

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