

J. Bessant

NOTE

This is the eighth of a series of pamphlets to be published by the Research Group of the Left Book Club of Victoria.

Victor Gollancz wrote in the "Left News" of February, 1939:—

"Of all the gains that, outside the economic sphere, men have won, perhaps the greatest is the free, enquiring, independent and sceptical mind. To have access to all the facts: to examine them with ruthless honesty: to form a judgment uncoloured by any desire except that of reaching the truth, and to proclaim the result fearlessly to the world—that is the great heritage, at present very partial and very imperfect, into which men have entered."

The members of the Research Group share this belief. Their object is to learn the facts of matters of immediate importance, and to make these facts as widely known as possible.

This pamphlet has been prepared by a sub-committee of the Council for Women in War Work, consisting of Miss Mollie Bayne, M.A., Dip.Ed. (Editor); Mrs. E. G. Coppel, M.A., LL.B.; Mrs. M. Drury Oeser, M.A., Ph.D. (Cantab); Mrs. C. M. Smith, and Miss Madge Wood.

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Australian Women at War

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Introduction

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As the scale of war grows larger the demand for women's work becomes more evident in each conflict, and each leaves a legacy of change in the position of women. During the Crimean War there was in England a need for women shop assistants, and they remained established in that occupation. During the war of 1914-1918 there was an enormous accession of women in clerical and commercial occupations in which many of them remained after the war. But the tendency of this war, as of the others, is to open to women less skilled, less remunerative and less responsible jobs than those of men. We hear much of total war, but in this country the whole direction of the war effort is in the hands of half of the citizens. Women are sometimes permitted to offer advice, but even in matters which so vitally concern them as the rationing of food and clothing not one woman in the country has been entrusted with a position of real authority and responsibility.

In war-time women are eagerly welcomed as workers, but only as workers of inferior status. This is both undemocratic and inefficient, since the country needs the people who can do the jobs best, regardless of their sex. Moreover, unless women concern themselves with this matter now, there is every reason to expect that after this war women workers will continue to form an inferior caste in the community. There are many young women of today who will never marry, because the men they would have married have been, or will be, killed in action. Life is not easy for the woman who must walk alone: need it be made harder by poverty and the humiliation that a semi-dependent status breeds?

But the majority of women will continue to marry and bring up families; those who suppose otherwise have very little understanding of women. In the past, the working-class and lower middle-class mother has probably been the most cruelly overworked, worried and underpaid member of the community. If her husband was a wage-earner he received a "family wage" which disregarded the actual extent of his family and presupposed a very small one.

War-time payment of men in the Services is on a more rational basis: it distinguishes between married men and single men, and gives allowances for the actual and not a fictitious number of dependents. This could be done in peace-time, by means of payment of dependent's allowances: then an addition to the family need not be clouded by fears of inability to feed another mouth, nor need husband and wife be distressed by the fact that the income will not provide the mother with any money

of her own. Mothers should not be so cruelly overworked as in the past, and their lot can be greatly ameliorated by the extension of social services. Women must insist on more and better medical and dental services for themselves and their children: on plentiful and cheap supplies of pure food and milk; on decent housing; on nursery-schools where they may leave their young children for a few hours each day while they take rest, or recreation, or keep alive interests which they will need when the children are no longer dependent on them and no longer fill their whole lives.

At present the betterment of women's conditions is held back by disunion between married and unmarried women, and even between girls who are engaged to be married and those who are not. Engaged girls cannot be brought to interest themselves in the betterment of pay or working conditions for other girls, because they do not expect to remain workers. Married women tend to resent single women who earn good pay: they feel that they work just as hard and receive little pay or praise in reward. And, to the single working woman, lacking a home and the satisfaction that comes from her own family unit, her married sister seems hard and callous in envying her her one advantage—financial independence. Perhaps the war may bring more understanding between women by the violent changes of habits it causes, exposing formerly "sheltered" women to the conditions of the wage-earner, and leaving married women with no husbands to fend for them. The well-being of each woman should be the concern of all women, and the betterment of any one section will tend to improve the status and conditions of all.

"Australian Women At War" attempts to promote victory by its plea for a more complete women's war effort, and harmony among men and women by the removal of the injustices which, while they are permitted to continue, are as degrading to men as to women.

KATHLEEN FITZPATRICK,
President, Council for Women in War Work.

1. WOMEN'S STAKE IN WINNING THE WAR.

"This is a war for democracy, for human freedom, for the happiness that can be achieved through co-operation and must be lost if egotistical tyranny tramples on the many in the interests of a handful of witch-doctors, who deny to the mind the right to think its own thoughts. Women, whether they work in the home or at the bench, cannot help symbolising the great issue at stake—Civilisation against force: life against death for the human spirit. They are, of course, inferior where the weight of brawn and muscle, the drive of brutality, is the one qualification for the useful slave. In a regime of force, they go to the wall: and every human value goes with them. For them, obviously, democracy is the line of life. Under it they are free to grow in equality of contribution to the common cause: under it they make no claim to any special rights; only to that opportunity of service and fellowship which makes them partners with men."⁽¹⁾ Thus one writer ends her book on "Women at Work" in England, and it forms a very fitting introduction to "Australian Women at War." Every day women's work gains in importance and responsibility, above all in this country where there are so few of us. Nearly half the population, more than half in Victoria and South Australia, are women and it is to us a burning necessity for that half to take up the burden of citizenship not by becoming discontented with the narrow walls of home or workroom but by bringing into them the questions—Am I doing all I can? Am I thinking as well as toiling? Am I understanding or only driven? Do I realise that the problems of wartime are linked with those of the days before the war and as closely with those to come? Am I ready to help whatever, in these hard days, has seeds of future progress, or am I irresponsible?

This pamphlet attempts to summarise the available information on women's work with the object of clearing the ground for the formulation of the best policy for welfare of women and children and the utmost prosecution of the war. It is about women in war work, whether directly in war jobs or in essential civilian jobs which are normally done by men.

There are women in the community with all kinds of varying responsibilities—to husbands, children, parents, sisters and brothers—and women with none. Among them are many who cannot meet their expenses or those of their dependents without doing paid work—just as there are in peace time, and especially in "depression" time; but more than ever now when so many suffer a severe cut in income through male members of the family joining the forces. In addition, many women who are home makers feel they could and should redouble their normal efforts and do a war job as well.

(1) Women at Work—Brief Introduction to Trade Unionism for Women. Mary Hamilton. (London, 1941).

deal to help the children of women war workers, so the need for speed was not so urgent as it was in Victoria and South Australia.

The problem of the after-school and holiday care of the school going child and of the children in rural areas is still a serious one and the need for carefully organised young people's clubs and play centres on the war-time British model seems imperative, though so far as the cities are concerned, an extension of existing Opportunity Club facilities would be of considerable value.

This new Commonwealth scheme gives great encouragement to those working and hoping for a comprehensive plan for child care.

9.—WOMEN IN POST-WAR AUSTRALIA.

With no woman member of the Commonwealth Parliament, one woman only on all the scores of Boards and Commissions appointed by the Commonwealth Government, with the great majority of women workers being paid about half what men receive, Australia, even in war-time, shows no such achievements as women have won in England, U.S.A. and U.S.S.R. Are they less capable? Or is the community mediaeval-minded in the matter of a "woman's place"?

Women are showing capability wherever they can seize the opportunity; the community, for the most part, has shown itself proud of their achievements. What of the peace years, when they come? Looked at from the point of view of the welfare of the community and the individuals who compose it, everyone, lame or maimed or blind or of low grade mentality, should and could be fitted into some type of work calling out the few or the many talents possessed. It might not "pay" an individual employer, though Henry Ford insists that it does, but it would pay back many times in human welfare. So also from the point of view of the community there should be none idle with their talents, however slight, unused, while there are hungry to be fed, and food to prepare for them—ragged to be clothed, and materials to be grown and made—badly housed to be made comfortable, while housing materials and skilled workers are to be procured. A community which takes this problem in hand and shakes off traditional ways cannot afford to allow idle time and talents in men or women, cannot afford a submerged half of females, a subject race within its borders.

So it is that when we discuss the future of women in Australia we cannot separate it from the general question of how things are going to be done after the war. If we fall back into the unplanned scheme of things in which only "profitable" businesses are undertaken and social services languish and slums flourish, women will fall back too. If we take our destinies in hand and use the money and facilities and abilities and social controls initiated in war in the causes of peace women must play a full and understanding part—a citizen's part. It

will not be easy; women themselves, trained by a lifetime's deference to men's authority, too often turn idiotically for ideas, opinions, and guidance to the nearest male. "I'll ask my husband" may show a pleasantly appreciative spirit to some male minds but it may cloak the atrophy of real capacity for thought and decision, a capacity which, unused, represents a dead loss to the State.

Experience elsewhere demonstrates that women will progress under an extension of democracy and stagnate under fascist forms. How far do things already in existence suggest greater or less equality for women here? We should look again at the groups discussed earlier, women in the services, in the land army, in industry—What suggestions are already being made about their future?

In regard to the services the key point is the provision to be made for the women compared with that for the men (a) if they are injured or become ill or incapacitated in the course of their employment in the services; (b) when they are discharged at the close of the war. Here the present ⁽¹⁾ Government seems likely to follow a less unequal system than conditions within the services might have led an observer to suggest. The provisions of the Repatriation Act are now to apply to women members of the forces and they are to receive deferred pay. Admittedly their rates are lower because these rights are on a pay-received basis and women's pay is lower, but it is at least a recognition of the fact that many women also are giving of their best in war service and will be correspondingly at a disadvantage in the peace time world. Educational facilities available to service men apply also to service women and will give some assistance towards their rehabilitation in civilian life.

No declaration has been made in regard to the future of the Land Army, as has been made in England where the organization will continue after the war, and no indication has been given of the economic future of the women.

Workers in industry have had a wedge driven into the old inferiority by the women dilutees receiving pay equal to that of the men, by the various agreements for equal pay in other industries, and by the liberal attitude of the W.E.B., but they have little liberalism to look forward to if their destiny becomes a matter for the Arbitration Court. As it stands at present it appears that "dilutees" will be driven out, that the W.E.B. will lapse, that as "cheap labour" in Arbitration Court industries women may retain their positions, even, if times are very bad, be taken on in greater numbers, and support their unemployed brothers or fathers or husbands, as many did in the great depression.

We have already suggested that the problem of the dilutee in industry will grow more pressing. It is not however, one in

(1) March, 1943.

which men and women need be divided as the equality in the dilution pay rates and conditions puts them in the picture side by side.

In regard to the W.E.B. there are several possibilities. The extension of the Commonwealth power might be used to extend the function of the W.E.B. beyond the war period. The Government might allow all women workers to go before the Arbitration Court and liberalise the Court itself by the addition of some modern-minded judges. The Unions may insist on the elimination of "cheap labour" by allowing no distinction before the Court between male and female labour.

The claim has several times been repeated by some union representatives and by employers' representatives that women are only in these new and more skilled forms of work for the duration of the war. There have also been the various efforts to translate this desire into some form of compulsion. Against this lovers of justice and all who are truly interested in a fair opportunity for talent should be vigilantly on guard. During the course of the discussion of the Code of Working Conditions for Women Workers held before the W.E.B. in Sydney, Mr. K. H. Boykett, representative of the Victorian and South Australian Chambers of Manufactures, and Mr. A. R. Wallis, member of the Board and secretary of the Amalgamated Clothing and Allied Trades Union, had an exchange of views on the subject. Mr. Wallis objected to Mr. Boykett's contention "that it is one of the objects of the formation of this Board to help to ensure that they shall go out when the war ceases." Later:

Mr. Wallis: "In my opinion women have as much right to work as men under equal conditions. I do not want anyone to think that I am on a Board whose purpose is to get women out of industry as soon as the war is over."

Mr. Boykett: "I understood that women coming into the industry as a result of the war should go out with the termination of it."

Mr. Wallis: "I do not think the Board has ever said that. The Board has said that it is going to resist the creation of a situation where women can work for half the wages of a man and thus deprive the man of his work. Otherwise why should they not have the right to work equal to men?"

Opposition to this equality in choice of work chiefly comes from those who agitate themselves about the birthrate and Australia's "great empty spaces." Geographers have long pointed out that the aridity of enormous stretches of Australia will keep them empty for all time; others have raised their voices to point out that the laws of population are not understood and no-one really knows the causes of low birthrate. To a complete outsider it would surely appear like the philanthropy and ethics of a madhouse to hear men and women more concerned about a low birthrate than the low living standards and health standards, the insecurity and frustration of those who

are already born, and to hear them inveighing against married women in outside employment without a notion of whether or not this really militates against the birthrate. In a fairly comprehensive list of the statistics of 29 countries the four with the highest birthrate are also those with the highest death-rate—both crude death rates and infantile—and they are in countries where there appears to be almost nothing in common about the position of women—Rumania, U.S.S.R., Egypt and Ceylon. Those countries near to Australia's rate are Denmark, New Zealand, U.S.A., Scotland and Czechoslovakia. The position of women is perhaps more alike in these five countries, but there is far from being full economic equality. In U.S.S.R., where for over 25 years every encouragement has been given to women to take the fullest part in all economic, political and social life the birthrate is high.⁽¹⁾ Further, the average life of women rose from 33.9 years (average 1907-10) to 46.8 years (1926-27).⁽²⁾ Though married women may and do enter or remain in any trade or profession the seven-hour working day⁽³⁾ greatly increased the possibilities of home life while the enormous increase in facilities such as communal dining rooms, laundries, repair services, and the child care centres, creches, nursery schools, kindergartens, and playgrounds, free medical services, State-wide provision of holiday rest-houses, etc., lightened the burden of responsibility on the home-makers. A statistical account of the way in which 841 men and women spent each 24 hours during an average week showed that the women devoted more than twice as much time as the men to domestic work, travel and shopping and had correspondingly less time for "rest and leisure, self-education, and sleep."⁽⁴⁾ This still shows women carrying a heavier burden than men, it does not show the decay of family life. "Certainly the Russian mother and father deeply love their children. This is everywhere apparent. In the parks, on the trams, in the homes, in the creches, in hospitals it may be observed." "Family relationships have been modified and will continue to be modified. But the family remains, and will remain."⁽⁵⁾ Many women still choose to remain in their homes; commonsense and the collation of figures seems to suggest that many of these are there when their children are young as well as for the time off before and after child-birth. Others no doubt prefer it as a way of life; no-one is forced to choose either way.

(1) It has fallen slightly, much less than the death rate which had fallen to less than half over the period.

(2) Figures for men for the same period were from 31.9 to 41.9 years.

(3) Five days at work and one free, with the same free day for all members of a family. In some industries, e.g. glass working and mining, it had been reduced to six hours.

(4) For this and other references here see "Factory, Family and Woman in U.S.S.R." Ch. XIII, "The Family." Fairchild and Kingsbury.

(5) "Factory, Family, and Woman in U.S.S.R." Ch. XIII.

In short, the one example we have of complete freedom, with all the experimentation and mistakes and trials of that quarter of a century, is not calculated to depress those who hope that freedom for women will mean much better, not worse, opportunities for children and a more invigorating and happy home life.

Each people must work out its own pattern from the chaos of our time. Our hope is that Australian women will not be the neutral background of the design, but bold and imaginative designers, equal partners, courageous and happy in work, leisure, and home.

JOIN

The Council for Women in War Work

The Aims of the Council are:-

- (1) The fullest participation of women in war work in Australia.
- (2) To disseminate knowledge of women's war work.
- (3) To work for satisfactory conditions for women in the Services.
- (4) To encourage the provision of facilities for the care of the children of war workers and the provision of canteens, community feeding centres and school meals.
- (5) To support Trades Unions in their efforts to improve conditions for women in war industries.
- (6) To assist in the co-ordination of organizations concerned in women's war work.
- (7) To support the principle of equal pay and equality of opportunity for men and women and all measures progressing towards this end.
- (8) To work, during and after the war, for the equitable treatment of women in the post-war world.

The Council is non-party and undenominational and membership consists of individual members (subscription 5/- p.a.), and affiliated societies (subscription 10/- p.a.).

Write to:

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