

Women's Co-operative Guild.

A Minimum for the Family.

PRELIMINARY REPORT OF COMMITTEE OF ENQUIRY.

The resolution on Widows' Pensions passed at the Congress of 1919 urged that "their claims should be considered in conjunction with the equal needs of other mothers and children" and that "in dealing with this question the respective merits of Widows' Pensions Endowment of Motherhood and State Bonus for all should be considered."

We have, therefore, had under consideration the merits of these three proposals, and are preparing for publication a detailed report which we hope will be available shortly. We wish here to summarise briefly the lines of our enquiry and the conclusions at which we have arrived, with a view to helping Congress in its consideration of the policy to be adopted by the Guild.

We have throughout considered the problem primarily from the point of view of the woman and the mother, though the effects of the different proposals upon the children and upon the position of the workers in general have necessarily also been taken into account.

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We began our enquiry by a consideration of the evils to be remedied. The present complete dependence of the family upon the earnings of the father leads, in our view, to a position which is bad both for the mother, the children and the workers generally. The mother tends to lose her rightful status in the home, and with it her freedom and individuality and too often her health; the children have to suffer individually for each addition to the family; while the family itself is necessarily a drag upon every effort towards a better standard of living for the workers generally. Again, if the support of the father is withdrawn through illness, death or desertion, the utmost distress is bound to result.

We next considered the question of what the position of the mother should be, both socially and economically. We came to the conclusion that it was essential for her to have a certain income of her own to ensure the independence which would give her the status of free and equal companion to her husband, and that it was essential also that the family income should bear a definite relation to the numbers dependent upon it. We felt that an arrangement to secure by law a certain portion of the father's wage to the mother and children would not be satisfactory, because it would be difficult to enforce, and because his wages do not increase with the number of his children. It is obvious that the mother ought not to have to seek independence by her own earnings, nor to supplement her husband's wages in this way as the family increases. The only alternative, therefore, appeared to us to be that mothers and children should be secured a minimum income through the State.

This brought us to the consideration of the three schemes which have been put forward—Widows' Pensions, Endowment of

Motherhood, and State Bonus. After careful examination of the different proposals made we came to the following conclusions:—

- (1) That on the whole the greatest hardships and most urgent needs are those of widows (both with and without children), divorced, separated and deserted wives, and unmarried mothers, and that pensions to include all these should be provided as an immediate measure, and should be given without inspection or the application of any special test in the home.
- (2) That since such a scheme will apply to a class only it can do nothing to solve the problem of the economic position of women generally, and will involve considerable difficulties in administration. It should therefore be regarded as a temporary measure to be followed by a comprehensive scheme to meet the needs of all women and children.
- (3) That while the proposals for Endowment of Motherhood give a recognition to motherhood as such which we value, they do not meet the needs of the childless wife or widow, or of the wife with grown-up children. The enormous taxation involved, moreover, in our opinion makes the scheme impracticable.
- (4) That the State Bonus scheme is both the most universal and most practical. It gives the economic independence to every woman necessary to secure her rightful status in the home, though it does not give any distinctive recognition to the mother. It establishes a principle of a family income based on needs, and by making provision for every child enables the mother to stay at home to look after her growing family, and removes the argument that because they have children to keep men ought to receive higher wages than women in industry.

It is moreover simple as regards administration because it is given to everyone without distinction or qualification. It does not involve taxation as the money is raised by pooling a fifth of all incomes, and it is capable of expansion till a complete and equitable redistribution of wealth has been secured.

To sum up, we recommend that Widows' Pensions on the lines indicated should be supported as an immediate measure, but should be followed by the State Bonus as soon as practicable, and that the energies of the Guild should be concentrated on promoting the State Bonus scheme.

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