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# A History of the Federation of Women Civil Servants

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Pamphlet

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## A History of the Federation of Women Civil Servants.

In writing a history of the Federation of Women Civil Servants, it is necessary to examine the causes which led to the formation of the Associations which ultimately federated into the existing body.

To do this, we must go back to 1901, at which time all the women who had entered the Service by open competition were employed in the Post Office. Entry to the Clerical Grades was by the examination for Girl Clerks or for Women Clerks, examinations similar to that for the Second Division Clerkship for men. Promotion from these Grades was to First Class Clerks, Principal Woman Clerk, Staff Officer, Assistant Superintendent, and Superintendent.

The Women Clerks' minimum had just been reduced from £65 to £55, and it was to remedy this grievance that the first Association was set up.

It is to the energy and vision of Miss M. L. Cale, now an accountant in the Ministry of Labour, that we owe the inception of what must have been one of the first Staff Organisations in the Service for officers above the Manipulative Grades. She circularised all the officers affected, and rented a small room in the City in which she sat and waited after hours for those clerks who were daring enough to venture to agitate for an improvement in their conditions.

At this time the Duke of Norfolk was P.M.G., and, as one would expect, he was Conservative enough to object to any kind of organisation amongst Civil Servants. The intrepid pioneers at the Postal Order Branch of the G.P.O. were not daunted, however, by official disapproval, and they held their first general meeting at the Club Union Buildings, Clerkenwell Road, E.C., on March 21st, 1902, with Miss Gertrude Tuckwell in the chair. An interesting note in the minutes of this meeting is "Post Office vote certain to be reduced because the country looks to the G.P.O. to bear great part of expenses of War." How history repeats itself!

Although progress was made in the other Headquarters Branches of the Post Office matters were not proceeding so smoothly in the Savings Bank Department where the largest number of women clerks were employed. Here the authorities frowned, and did more than frown on any kind of staff organisation. All those who had

joined the new Association were instructed to resign from it and the names of the Savings Bank members are noted in the membership list "Withdrawn to form Branch Association, March, 1902."

This Branch Association was formed with the permission of the authorities, but when the intrepid few had membership cards printed and asked for a subscription of 1s. a year they were informed that no subscriptions could be collected, and the present writer well remembers ruefully returning the shillings to those clerks in her section whom she had persuaded to join. It must be admitted, however, that we were asking for trouble, for we deliberately banked our first subscriptions as a Society Account in the Savings Bank, and spent a thrilling three days waiting to be sent for as soon as the title of the new account had been reported to the authorities, as we knew it would be.

Outside assistance was much to the fore in these early days. We constantly find Miss Tuckwell in the chair at our annual meetings, and Miss Bondfield, Mr. H. J. Tennant, M.P., Sir Charles McLaren, and Mr. Philip Snowden, are among those to whom we owe a debt of gratitude for help and encouragement.

The trouble in the Savings Bank was soon over, and the atmosphere changed with the appointment of other Postmasters-General, and this change of attitude led to an amusing incident when Sir Herbert Samuel was Postmaster-General. The Association had held an annual At Home, to which the heads of departments and higher staff generally were invited. Our invitations were always declined with thanks owing to "previous engagements." On this occasion, we received the usual number of regrets except from the P.M.G., who accepted for himself and his wife! When this information was circulated it was amazing to see the number of higher staff whose "previous engagements" had fallen through; but it must be remembered that it was much rarer then to meet a Cabinet Minister than it is to-day.

At the second A.G.M., we find our first mention of Equal Pay in the following resolution:

"That, in the opinion of the meeting, the present scale of salary of women clerks in the G.P.O., £55-£110, is inadequate in view of the higher cost of living, the increased strain and complexity of their official work and the salaries paid to men clerks for doing the same class of duties."

Apparently, this had little effect because we find again five years later an almost identical resolution: "That a memorial be sent to the P.M.G. on the subject of Equal Pay for Equal Work and equality of opportunity in the Post Office." On this occasion Sir Charles McLaren gave an address on the subject of his Bill "to secure equal pay for equal work, and the opening of certain public departments to women." And there are some people who still tell us that we are too impatient and that "the reorganisation of society does not in practice progress by violent lurches"!

By this time the original object of the Association had been attained, and the old minimum of £65 restored, but it is worthy of note that not one single one of the pioneers benefited by the

increase when it came, as by the time it was granted they had all reached the new minimum.

The Association steadily grew in strength and numbers and a number of First Class Women Clerks became members. The business done was mainly concerned with pressing for higher appointments and wider opportunities, and in 1909 it was found necessary to publish a quarterly news sheet entitled "Association Notes." About this time, we find in the minutes resolutions demanding that clerks shall be permitted to leave the building during the luncheon hour, and that temporary clerks shall not be employed except during annual leave, this latter resolution apparently referring to the Dublin office.

In 1911 the Royal Commission on Women and the Civil Service was appointed, and the Association prepared very detailed evidence to be placed before it. Fortunately the Holt Committee in 1906 had obtained evidence on the employment of women which was entirely favourable to our demand for Equal Pay. Mr. (now Sir) Alexander King, Secretary to the Post Office, said that the work handed over to the Women Clerks from the Second Division Clerks was performed equally well by the women as by the men. He also stated that the Department employed women in preference to men because they did the work quite as well and were cheaper.

It was probably owing to these excellent testimonials, coupled with the continuous pressure from within the Association, that led to the introduction of women in other departments.

In 1912 the Women Clerks in the Board of Education found that they were not getting the same opportunities as their colleagues with an Association behind them, and they decided to form an Association in their own Department. Later on in the same year many women clerks were transferred to the Insurance Commission, both in a clerical capacity and as Inspectors. This scattering of members was unsatisfactory from an Association point of view, and at an annual general meeting on May 20th, 1913, a resolution was passed by the Association of Post Office Women Clerks supporting a proposal to form a Federation of Women Clerks in the Civil Service, and agreeing to become one of the constituent bodies. By this time both the National Health Insurance Commission and the Board of Trade had started Associations, so that there were already four organisations of women clerks waiting to affiliate.

There was plenty of work for the new organisation once it was fairly started. The report of the Royal Commission had been published, and discussions took place with a view to joint action by the Women Clerks and the Second Division Clerks to press for certain of the recommendations contained therein. The extension of the employment of women owing to war-time exigencies occupied much time, and propaganda of all kinds pressing for wider opportunities for Women Civil Servants was consistently carried on.

On January 27th, 1916, a resolution was passed: "That the scope of the Federation be extended to include Associations of Women Civil Servants other than Clerks and individual Civil Servants for whom no grade Association is in existence."

In March of this year, the women employed in the office of the

Public Trustee formed an Association and affiliated, and at the same time action was discussed on the methods of fighting a proposal for an eight-hour day. Six months later the proposal for a Clerical Staffs' Alliance of both sexes was discussed, and in December, 1916, the Federation began its fight for War bonus at the same rate for men and women. A memorial was sent to the Prime Minister on dilution, the Federation urging that a certain number of experienced women should be transferred to new departments which were then recruiting untrained staffs.

By now the Clerical Alliance was firmly established, and the Federation was one of its most important constituent bodies. The Alliance had accepted a policy of Equal Pay and Equal Opportunity, but did not approve of the suggestion for a mixed examination. In view of statements that have been made as to the Federation policy towards Writing Assistants, it is interesting to note that when the Writing Assistants applied for affiliation to the Alliance, the matter was referred to the Federation, and a reply was sent stating that the Federation would not oppose their entry into the Alliance. A subsequent communication from the Alliance stated, however, that they had been refused on the grounds that they were purely a Post Office body, but the position would be reconsidered if the class was extended to other departments.

At this time a quarterly conference was held with the Association of Women Clerks and Secretaries, for which the Federation did much recruiting amongst the Temporary Clerks working under their members.

A discussion took place as to the Federation policy on the question of the ultimate establishment of Temporary Clerks, and it was agreed that the Federation would not oppose the retention of Temporary Clerks provided that satisfactory tests were imposed.

Towards the end of 1917, a pay claim was prepared for submission to the Arbitration Board, asking for the same scale as Second Division Clerks. A long delay took place, and finally organised lobbying was resorted to, both on this point and also to complain of the lack of prospects for permanent Women Civil Servants.

The Equal Pay question was much to the fore at this time, and protests against the unequal bonus and the differentiation in pay were continually recorded, and action both inside and outside the Service was taken in a variety of ways to push the equality claim. A mass meeting was held at the large Queen's Hall on November 5th, 1918, to press for Equal Pay and Bonus and Equality of Opportunity.

Evidence on behalf of Women Civil Servants was given both to the War Cabinet Committee on Women in Industry and the Gladstone Committee on the Staffing of Government Departments, and subsequently deputations were received by the Treasury protesting against the reactionary nature of the recommendations of the Gladstone Committee as regards equality and discussing the setting up of the Treasury Pool. A conference of Women Civil Servants was held in June of this year, and it was proposed by the Federation that this Committee should be retained as an advisory Committee for women on the National Whitley Council, the for-

mation of which was then under discussion. A further salary claim was then proposed, and steps were taken to prepare one for the approval of the Alliance. The Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act was considered, and every effort was made to have an alteration made in sub-section (a) of Clause I which left the regulations as to entry of women to the Service to be decided by Order in Council. A deputation to Mr. Bonar Law and the Lord Chancellor, on which the Federation was represented, was arranged in support of an amendment of Lord Haldane's to delete Clause 1.

The Whitley Council was now sitting and the Federation was active in representing the women's point of view. A resolution was sent to the National Whitley Council: "That in the view of the Federation of Women Civil Servants it will be impossible to consider profitably the regrading of the clerical work of the Service until the question of the sex of the worker is eliminated," and a further resolution as to the abolition of separate channels of recruitment for men and women was also forwarded.

It was in the spring of 1920 that the Federation Council decided to withdraw from the Civil Service Alliance, and the requisite six months' notice was given. The chief reason for withdrawal was the almost unanimous decision of the Alliance Council to accept the Reorganisation Report without any protest even against its unequal standards of recruitment and pay between men and women. When the report was presented to the Council of the Alliance, a resolution accepting it was proposed and seconded. The inclination of the Federation representatives was towards rejection, but it was realised that the report contained very substantial advantages for a large number of Civil Servants, and an amendment was accordingly proposed that the report should be accepted in so far as its recommendations as regards men, but that the recommendations as regards women should be referred back for reconsideration. To the intense disappointment of the women, this amendment was almost unanimously turned down, and the report was accepted despite the opposition of the women solely affected.

A further disappointment was in store in connection with the Assimilation agreement, the terms of which were so infinitely less advantageous for women than for men that the Federation representative refused to sign them. But again they were accepted by the Alliance despite our protest, and it is not surprising that members began to question the wisdom of belonging to an organisation which made no attempt even to express the opinions of a relatively large minority body such as ours, and one which consisted entirely of Civil Servants who were being treated in every way as a class apart.

As the Alliance had obtained an additional seat on the National Whitley Council by virtue of the affiliation of the Federation, it was agreed that application should be made for direct representation. At this time other organisations with a much smaller membership had obtained seats, and the Federation represented all the organised bodies of women Civil Servants above the manipulative grades.

To our great astonishment, we were refused a seat, and although

we have since applied again, we are still excluded without any reason ever having been given.

As a result of the disappointment at the inequalities of the Reorganisation Report, the Federation undertook an extensive campaign of public propaganda. In November, 1920, the large Central Hall was packed to protest against the recruitment of women to Treasury classes by selection alone. Much lobbying was done, with the result that on August 5th, 1921, the House of Commons upset the reactionary proposals of the National Whitley Council as to differentiation of recruitment. The result has been seen in the recent examination for Assistant Inspectors of Taxes, Administrative posts and Clerical posts.

The grading of the women in the Service was fought every inch of the way, but with small success, by the Federation representatives. The wording of paragraph 67 of the Reorganisation Report: "That women clerks not transferred to the Training Grade of the Executive will be appointed to the Clerical Class," which was originally accepted as providing an opening for the possible absorption of a larger number of Second Class women clerks to the Executive Grade than would be possible were the position more clearly defined, was actually used to degrade the promoted First Class clerks to the Lower Clerical Grade. The result of this was that, not only the women who in 1906 were reported to be satisfactorily performing the work of Second Division clerks, but also their supervising officers were thrown back into the basic grade, many of them after waiting twenty-five years for their first promotion.

Only twenty-two of the First and Second Class women clerks were assimilated to the Executive Grade as against over 3,000 men, most of whom were Second Division Clerks.

Realising that this economy had only been made possible by the fact that women were working in segregated branches, the Federation pressed for the appointment of a Committee to examine the application of a common seniority list for the Civil Service. This Committee was appointed in June, 1922, and a report was published in 1924.

A further success was obtained by the Federation as a result of an agitation for the appointment of Women Establishment Officers in all those departments employing large numbers of women, such appointments having now been made in most of the important departments where women are working, with the exception of the Ministry of Health.

It was realised that as a result of war-time experiment and the need for economy, many departments previously staffed by men would open their doors to permanent women. While rejecting the claim that all higher posts should be reserved for the permanent woman, it was felt that it would be equally unjust were temporary women with a few years' experience of war-time work to have all those opportunities in the newer departments for which we had been asking since 1913. The Treasury was approached on the subject and the competitive selection for temporary and permanent officers to compete for higher posts in the Civil Service was the outcome. Although there has been a certain amount of grumbling

from both sides, it is difficult to conceive of any scheme which would have given as much satisfaction all round.

While pressing for those reforms which would solely affect the women in the Service, the Federation has not lost sight of matters affecting Civil Servants as a whole. The suggested abolition of the seven-hour day, and the abolition of the Arbitration Board were strenuously fought by them. Being perhaps more closely in touch with members of all parties of the House of Commons than any other Civil Service organisation, the machinery for useful propaganda has always been available. The Federation has taken its full share in founding and supporting the Civil Service Sports Council and the Institute of Public Administration.

At the present time eleven Associations are affiliated to the Federation, including the recently-constituted Association of Higher Women Officers. The main object of the Federation is "To protect and promote the common interests of women in the Civil Service," and to secure equality of opportunity and remuneration.

The Federation is non-party, but considers that Civil Service conditions are the responsibility of the taxpayer, and believes in public co-operation and support in the removal of disabilities. It considers that the direction of Service organisations should be in the hands of Civil Servants themselves, who are more likely to consider problems from the point of view of the whole Service rather than from the sectional point of view.