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The Association of Women Clerks and Secretaries offered a prize of £3 3s. in connection with the Rally on 1st December, 1917, to the member sending in the best essay on "Why Women Clerks Should Organise." The prize was awarded to Miss Edith Crohn, whose essay is printed below.

## WHY WOMEN CLERKS SHOULD ORGANISE.

Not until comparatively recent times have women entered the labour market to any considerable extent, and it is perhaps for that reason that they are only to-day gradually learning what organisation can give them.

Men, on the other hand, learned their lesson earlier. They saw that the only way open to them of safeguarding their interests under our modern wage-earning system was by building up strong organisations for the members of the different professions and trades. These organisations are to-day so powerful that their influence is immediately felt when any encroachment is made on what are considered the rights of their members, or when a readjustment regarding wages is considered necessary.

Turning to the position of wage-earning women in the country at the present time, we are faced with the fact that, while women in industry are slowly but steadily realising how much is to be gained by organisation and co-operation, women in the clerical world have, as a whole, failed entirely to recognise its significance. The position of the educated woman worker is so complex and presents so many difficulties that, when we see how little effort has been made by the workers themselves to solve these problems, we are almost inclined to agree with the somewhat pessimistic statement once made by a writer that "where the need for united effort is greatest, the organising power to associate is usually lacking."

Trade Unionism has been described by Mr. and Mrs. Sidney Webb as "a continuous association of wage-earners for the purpose of maintaining or improving the conditions of their employment," and it is for this reason, that they may maintain or improve the conditions under which they work, that women clerks are urged to organise. Union among those engaged in the same form of labour inspires mutual trust, promotes the welfare and security of workers and safeguards their interests to an extent that is otherwise impossible. Organisation alone can bring scattered workers together and provide facilities for giving advice and assistance to those who need it; it can work to raise the whole standard of efficiency; it can encourage among members social activities which cannot otherwise be had, and by its

influence it can build up that *esprit de corps* which should do much towards placing the profession on a higher basis. Perhaps the greatest asset of organisation lies, however, in its power to strengthen the position of the weak by its appeal to the support of stronger members, and it is chiefly when we consider the complex position of women wage-earners in the clerical world that we realise how great is the need of this power.

The position of women wage-earners is, briefly, that, while a certain number of workers have others dependent on them and some are partially provided for, the majority may be roughly divided into two classes, those who are entirely dependent on their earnings and those who rely on their parents for the necessities of life and regard their earnings as pocket money. The first must have a living wage, the second are satisfied with considerably less. The war is adding largely to both these classes. Board of Trade statistics show that the increase in the number of women engaged in clerical work (grouped under the headings Government establishments, finance and banking, commerce and Civil Service) between July, 1914, and April, 1917, was 644,000; since then the number has doubtless increased. Owing to the loss of life in the war, the prospects of marriage for many women are small; a considerable number, therefore, will always be dependent on their earnings, while others will always be, to a greater or less degree, "pocket money" earners, and the former must necessarily suffer unless they have the co-operation of the latter, who have greater power, since they are more independent.

Through the present shortage of male labour, the supply of women clerical workers, in spite of the extraordinary addition to their numbers, has not been equal to the demand, with the result that there has been a marked increase in the salaries offered. This increase, it should be noted, is due to the shortage of labour, and not to the rise in prices, which will continue for long after the war. What, we may well ask ourselves, will be the result when peace returns and the supply of clerical workers greatly exceeds the demand, as it certainly will? Are salaries to fall immediately because, on the one hand the "pocket money" earners will not hesitate to accept a low wage, and on the other hand their less fortunate sisters will not be in a position to stand out for a higher wage, knowing that the posts can be filled so quickly by others at a low wage? Employers readily believe that "the girls only want a little pocket money," and they can scarcely be blamed for that belief when so many girls are apparently content with a "pocket money" wage.

Women workers themselves must decide whether a higher scale of wages shall prevail, or whether they shall slide back to an even more unsatisfactory rate than that which existed before the war. Individually women will lack the power firmly to establish their position, only united and organised, with strong support at the back of them, can they hope to do so. Never again will

women have the opportunity which is now offered them of showing that, as useful members of the community, they claim an adequate return for their work. Let them see to it that they do not lose this opportunity through lack of foresight and preparedness.

Closely interwoven with the salary problem is the question of women engaged in temporary employment. There have been over 626,000 direct replacements of men by women in clerical work, while thousands of women clerks are engaged in what is essentially "war work," and therefore of a temporary nature. It is obvious that the transition period from war to peace will present many difficulties. In the autumn of 1914 we were suddenly called upon to face new conditions, and we shall not soon forget those first few bewildering months, when the girl clerk was, in so many cases, hastily dismissed in order to "cut down expenses," and, thrown entirely on her own resources, would have fared badly had it not been for the help given her by women's societies. When peace returns, we shall be faced with the problem of how to absorb into the labour world thousands of women who will have to seek fresh work. For some of these immediate employment will be more necessary than for others; some will be ready to take any work, however inadequately paid, for fear of having nothing to do; many are more or less untrained, but are at present receiving comparatively high wages.

The conditions under which employment will be found for these workers affects not only those now engaged on temporary work, but the future of every person in the clerical world, both male and female, as well as those who will enter the labour market in the years to come. If good salaries prevail, then men and women will be able to work on a satisfactory basis in the future, but if women's salaries fall, men's will fall too, and the effect may easily become serious, especially as women have, since the war, entered so many new fields of labour, and have been admitted to higher and more responsible posts than in the past. There should be no reason for concern among clerks serving in the Army that on their return they will find the whole standard of wages lowered for men and women because the latter have, through want of foresight, failed to realise how much depends on their actions.

Looking into the future, we are faced with an almost overwhelming feeling of our incapacity to solve the problems which await us, and of the responsibility which rests on us. Can we do nothing, we ask ourselves, to meet these difficulties? It is clear that there is one way, and one way only, by which we can prepare for the future. The great body of permanent and temporary women clerical workers should organise themselves as speedily as possible, and more thoroughly than they have done in the past, to make their plans, discuss schemes for their mutual benefit and collect the necessary data for carrying these out. A really strong representative body of women could do much

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towards preparing for the inevitable dislocation after the war, and would have a powerful influence when presenting its views. What is urgently wanted is an expression of opinion from the majority regarding the question of salaries, of equal pay for equal work, of hours of labour and of the numerous other matters which affect women so vitally. These questions are naturally different in the case of men and women workers, and to meet women's special needs they must be discussed, in the first place, by women; but without the good will of the workers themselves practically nothing can be done, and their co-operation is urgently needed before it is too late.

However much they may approve of the aims of a society, there is always a tendency among people to hesitate when they are asked to join. "I am satisfied with my post, and have no time to come to lectures," or "I am only one among so many. What difference can it make whether I belong or not?" are perhaps the excuses put forward by clerical workers. It should be borne in mind, however, that in every organisation one of the essential factors lies in numbers. Unless it is known that the organisation represents the rank and file among the workers, there is the gravest danger that the most carefully planned scheme for their benefit will fail solely because those who must give it their sanction will hardly listen to a plan which has emanated from a society supported only by a minority of those for whom it is intended.

The woman worker must, even though she may be satisfied with her post and not have time to come to meetings, support her society for the sake of those who are not satisfied with their conditions and are able to come to meetings. Those who have no need at the moment of the advantages which the society offers have at least the knowledge that it exists directly for their benefit and that they can assist in furthering its activities. When the thought occurs that one person more or less can make no difference, it must be borne in mind that a strong, self-supporting organisation can only be built up by the efforts of the individual, and that the active sympathy and support of members is of the first importance. Changes and reforms, great or small, are only effected with the approval of public opinion, and it is the individual, strengthened and guided by association with others of similar interests, who helps to form public opinion among those with whom she comes into contact. The woman clerical worker should remember then that just as she, to some extent, represents public opinion, so she can help to influence public opinion. If she imagines that she is capable of standing alone and doubts the benefit of organisation, let her recall the story of the bundle of sticks; each stick taken separately could easily be snapped in two, but bound firmly together they could not be broken. In the words of the well-known saying, "Union is Strength."

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