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WHAT'S WRONG WITH DOMESTIC SERVICE ?

WE WANT TO KNOW
WHAT YOU THINK

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DO you realise that residential domestic work is the most unpopular of all paid occupations for women? It is important work and necessary work; but even when there are many women unemployed, the demand for domestic workers is greater than the supply. Why, then, is it that women and girls are so reluctant to take up this work? Can its conditions be so changed as to make it the most popular as well as the largest of all women's employments? We ask our readers to help us in this task; first, by finding what is wrong, and then by helping to put it right.

We ask especially for the co-operation of domestic workers themselves. There are a great many of them; the actual figures given in the last census for England and Wales alone were over a million of all ages, and those over 20 were nearly 800,000. There are more "indoor domestic servants" as the Census calls them, than there are miners and nearly twice as many women in service as there are in the textile industry, which is next in numbers. No one else can solve their problems as well as they themselves can do it, so we ask them to realise the importance of their work and to realise also their power to do what may be necessary to improve its conditions. To-day, all of them over 21 may be voters and if they use their votes in an organised way they can have a great influence in Parliament. In some wealthy constituencies, such as Westminster and Kensington, they make from a quarter to a third of the women voters. Why should not the M.P.'s elected in these areas

represent them as effectively as the miners are represented by theirs?

There are also many women who used to be domestic workers and these are the mothers of such workers to-day. Their opinions have great value for they are out of the battle themselves and can give us the wisdom of their experience and results of their observations. There are also the women who have chosen other work which **seems** more arduous and worse paid. We would especially ask them to tell us why they prefer it.

Finally, there are the employers themselves. As in every employment some are good and some are bad, and even the best suffer for the faults of the worst! Many of them discuss the "servant problem." We want them to do their share in solving it. From all of these we ask assistance by the simple and easy method of answering the questions on the last two pages and sending them to the address given. We shall be glad if organisations and their branches will do the same and after discussion, give their conclusions.

You may want to know more of what we are and what we propose to do. The Standing Joint Committee of Industrial Women's Organisations consists of women representatives of the Political Labour, Trade Union and Co-operative Movements. It includes Labour Women M.P.'s, J.P.'s, Councillors and many others prominent in our national life. It acts as an Advisory Committee to the Labour Party, and in June, 1930, placed a special report

on First Steps Towards a Domestic Workers' Charter before the National Conference of Labour Women. This set forth the present position of the occupation and recommended that in order to draw up a Charter, inquiries should be widely made to find out especially the views of domestic workers themselves.*

On the basis of the information gathered, the Committee would put forward a proposed Charter for discussion at the National Conference of Labour Women, which will be held in the Spring of 1931. This was agreed to and the Committee are now issuing this pamphlet and asking all who read it to answer the questions at the end and to get more copies and spread them amongst their friends.

Well, what **is** wrong with domestic service? Is it the living-in system and the consequent lack of freedom and privacy? Is it that hours are too long and that times off are badly arranged for social intercourse with other workers? Is it the wearing of uniform and its cost? Is it because the wages are insufficient? Is it the relation of "mistress" and "maid" so different from and so much more personal than that between "employer" and "employed" in other occupations? Is it the costliness of registry offices and the uncertainty about a new job, each one so difficult to judge of beforehand? Is it the discomfort of bad living quarters where often a room must be shared with a stranger, where more than one servant is kept or the loneliness where there is only one? Is it the difficulty of getting

a training which may handicap a worker from the beginning and prevent her ever getting a "good place"? Is it the separation from home and friends? Is it the lack of security due to the fact that the domestic worker is not insured against unemployment? Is it the system of giving personal references which are confidential and may be unjust? Is it the lack of Trade Union organisation which means that she faces the world alone? Is it the sense of social status different from those she serves whose education and value to the community may nevertheless be less than her own? Or is there some other reason quite different from all of these? Please tell us what you think.

In the following paragraphs we propose to discuss some of these points and we invite criticism of our views.

The domestic servant comes under National Health Insurance and Contributory Pensions, but not under Unemployment Insurance. If she is employed at similar work in an hotel or any other place **run for profit** she is insured and is therefore able to get benefit when out of work. She cannot, without loss of her past payments, change from any other employment to that of the uninsurable trade. In the Labour Unemployment Insurance Act of 1930, an improvement was made by keeping previous insurance alive for a period of two years in an uninsurable trade, but not for more. The fear of losing the advantages of this Insurance undoubtedly makes unemployed workers in insurable occupations unready to give domestic service a

* Report and Discussion are published in the Report of the National Conference of Labour Women, price 6d. (post free 7½d.) from the Labour Party, Transport House, Smith Square, London, S.W.1.

trial and at the same time makes it specially unjust when they are offered such posts and if they refuse them, find their benefit stopped. Further, a domestic servant receives the greater part of her remuneration in the form of board and lodging and therefore has little cash from which to provide for a period of unemployment. Is it right that this large body of women workers should be shut out from Unemployment Insurance? When agricultural workers are included, as they expect soon to be, these women workers will be the only large body left out.

The methods of filling places to-day are varied and sometimes costly. There are the Registry Offices where fees on both sides are sometimes very large indeed and newspaper advertisements, which may cost a great deal for the out-of-work girl in postage and fares, though she does not usually advertise for herself. Then there are all sorts of institutions and charities, public and private, which place the girls in their charge. In all these the references asked for are those of the employee and not of the employer, for whom there is no standard of wages and conditions set out. The experienced worker who is still quite young may make a high demand for her services; for the beginner or the older woman the position is different. In a large town or at a large Registry Office there is usually a rough standard of wages, outings and a few other items, but even then the conditions may vary infinitely.

There is another agency and this has no fees. It is the Employment Exchange, which has been very successful in some areas in this work. For hotel workers, who are insurable, it has always collected vacancies and it has, for several years, been dealing with ordinary domestic service to a small extent. With suitable premises for interviewing and

an experienced staff it could develop this work well and if servants were insured it would be a necessary part of the organisation. There are other reasons why it should be a good method with which we deal later.

Some people think that domestic work is easy and requires neither skill nor training. That is quite untrue. The domestic worker is a home-maker, and both a good general education and special training are as valuable for her as for any wife or mother. Alas! many mistresses have less of both than the "maids" to whom they give orders. When that happens with a foreman—or a manager—in a factory, it means trouble, and probably that is also one reason why there is a "servant problem." To-day, women do not care to work for those who are ignorant enough to think housework is menial and beneath them. Moreover many houses are badly arranged—being labour-making instead of labour-saving.

But what training is required and how should it be obtained? In the schools girls learn something of household science. Is this sufficient to start them out as domestic workers, whether as generals, housemaids, kitchen-maids, or cooks? Soon the school age will be raised to 15. Can the training be sufficiently specialised before that age and is 15 old enough to go away from home? Are training classes, such, for example, as those of the Central Committee on Women's Training and Employment for older workers better? In these unemployed girls and women, most of whom have been in other trades can get a special domestic training for 13 weeks and receive a maintenance allowance during that period. At residential centres they have an eight weeks' training. These workers, selected through the Exchange, are also placed by the Exchange after their training.

There is a third method and that is the usual one to-day. It is the hit or miss way of learning your job while you are doing it—that is, of getting your training while in your first place. It often means that a young worker never gets a fair chance if she gets a poor start and that she starts with a very poor wage. Who has not grieved over the helplessness, the anxiety and the dread of doing the wrong thing, of the little maid who only yesterday was a schoolgirl and now is a full general in a lonely back kitchen? But some people hold that only actual experience is any good.

What do you think is the best way? Have you any other suggestions to offer?

Hours are entirely unregulated. They may be anything. Some employers say they give time off every afternoon, but is that of much use to the worker? How many get complete time off, no bells or messages or other disturbances? Early morning tea and late dinner make a long day. Where there are little children the difficulties are great. How can we best put domestic workers on the same basis as others and carry out a 48-hour week and an 8-hour day? That is a good thing to aim at and we must see how it can be accomplished.

In other occupations, the work finishes at the close of the shift and most workers have free evenings. This is difficult, but is it impossible for domestic workers? What times off and holidays should they have?

The yearly holiday is now general with pay, though not universal. But how are the wages then reckoned? Are they cash wages only or an allowance also for board and lodging, which are just as much part of wages as the money is.

It is fair to say that generally the servant's room is the worst in the

house. Attic or basement bedrooms are frequent. Furniture is too often the "throw-outs" from other rooms. Further, the sitting room accommodation is usually the kitchen, and there may be little comfort there. What should be the standard of accommodation? Should people who cannot provide it have resident servants?

The servant away from home has a special claim for facilities for recreation. The district, even in the same town, where there are most servants, may be a long way from the area which is home, while many may be a day's journey from their own people. Where are they to go when they have time off, especially in the evening or on Sundays? Religious organisations and girls' clubs may have made some provision but there is need for much more. Club rooms and sports grounds are wanted badly. Lonely girls from far-off mining villages, e.g., may have much to suffer in a new town life without friends or healthy recreation.

Wages in domestic service are very varied. They vary from beginners at the rate of 4s. 6d. to 7s. 6d. in the provinces to skilled cooks at £2, together with board and lodging. The value of board and lodging may differ almost as much. If this is reckoned at 15s. to £1, the wages of the hardest-worked servants, the generals, are about the same as adult women under Trade Board industries, i.e., in formerly sweated trades. Equally varied are the wages of non-resident daily servants.

Wages in each district differ a little from those in another, being influenced by the number of women employed in other trades, the demand and so on. It is said that the large number of girls coming to the big towns from distressed areas where there is severe unemployment is reducing the domestic workers' wages in those towns. Highly-skilled workers, especially

cooks, are well paid; parlour maids get good wages and many cook-generals; but the least skilled are in an unfavourable position and yet are often the hardest worked. There is no steady relation between the work and the wage. Many have tried to get a standard fixed below which no one shall be paid. This would have to be on a scale of wages, age, and class of work, and we are anxious to get suggestions for such a model list.

Now we have reached the crux of the whole subject. If we could set a standard of wages, conditions and training, how could we get that standard enforced?

The answer is that in this occupation, as in every other, we cannot achieve anything unless the workers will join together in an organised body to secure what is fair and right.

We must get domestic workers to organise in a trade union to gain good conditions for them all. We want mistresses to do the same, because we believe that it is only by **collective bargaining**, that is by agreement made between both sides (employers and employed) that we can succeed.

To-day the domestic workers are unorganised, and scattered about as they are, it is difficult to bring them together. How can they gain anything until they meet in their groups or branches and talk it out and plan what should and shall be? We need a union or organisation in existing trade unions willing to develop special sections for domestic workers. There are several unions which can do this.

DOMESTIC WORKERS' CHARTER.

*Joint Industrial Councils have been set up in many trades since the War under a scheme proposed by a Committee over which Mr. J. H. Whitley presided, and so are popularly known as "Whitley Councils."

Legislation is also needed if domestic workers are to come into Unemployment Insurance. Further administrative action by the Ministry of Labour and Board of Education is required to develop training and placing through employment exchanges. Thus political and trade union organisation are both needed.

But there is a further step which we think should be taken. Many industries have Joint Councils* in which representatives of employers and employed meet to draw up agreements as to conditions in the industry. These have not the force of law but they become the practice of the workers and employers concerned. Would it not be a good thing to have such Councils for domestic workers and employers in every district and a national one as well, just as in other trades? They would plan the conditions, wages and training for their areas. When the Exchanges received notice of a vacancy, it would be registered as Joint Council conditions or otherwise. Organised domestic workers would only take jobs if Council conditions were given and so employers would quickly find that it was worth while to give them.

Such Councils would be little use unless the workers were organised, both to draw up fair conditions and to keep them.

A scheme such as this, promoted by organised workers could be carried out only with the co-operation and support of the Minister of Labour, i.e., of the Government.

Thus we see that domestic workers must organise in Trade Unions and Politically in order to enforce a

Please answer these Questions.

We shall be glad to receive replies, short or long, to any or all of these questions. Where there is not sufficient space, please write replies on a separate paper and give the number of each question, then the reply, and writing on one side of the paper only.

Send replies by Feb. 1st (before if possible), to Dr. Marion Phillips, M.P., Labour Party, Transport House, Smith Square, London, S.W.1.

1. Name and Address.....

(These will not be published without your permission).

2. If an organisation, the name and address of Secretary should be given above and of organisation here.

3. If an individual, please state whether you are an employer of domestic workers, a present domestic worker, a former domestic worker, mother or other relation of a domestic worker.

4. What do you think the chief reasons for the unpopularity of domestic service?

5. Do you think that domestic servants in private employment should be insured against Unemployment?

6. Which do you think the best method of training: (1) before leaving school; (2) at classes after leaving school; or (3) by experience in a situation?

7. Are you in favour of using Employment Exchanges as the method of filling vacancies?

8. What do you think should be the maximum working day, and how should the hours be arranged and what time off?
9. What holidays should be given?
10. What bedroom accommodation should a domestic worker have?
11. Is wearing or cost of uniform a barrier to entering domestic work?
12. Do you think there is sufficient provision for recreation, especially for girls living a long way from home? Can you give any suggestions?
13. What is your opinion about the wages now paid? Do you think there might be a minimum scale drawn up according to age, experience, hours and duties?
14. Do you think daily service is more popular than residential? If so, what should be the hours worked, the hourly rate of pay, and how should the service be organised?
15. Do you think the custom of giving confidential references as to character, &c., works well?
16. Would you be in favour of Joint Councils on the lines we have described?
17. How best can we organise domestic workers in Trade Unions?