



THE HOUSEWIFE AND WORLD SUPPLIES

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THE HOUSEWIFE AND WORLD SUPPLIES

A Report prepared by the Standing Joint Committee of Industrial Women's Organisations and accepted unanimously together with the Resolution following it by the National Conference of Labour Women held in London, May 13 and 14, 1924.

THE Great War made us think and feel vividly the horrors and loss caused by actual warfare, and turned the thoughts of women towards pacifist ideas in order that we might make impossible a repetition of the bitter experiences of those four years. But international policy does not mean only warfare, armaments, and diplomatic relations with other Powers. We have been too apt to think of “foreign affairs” in these terms as something outside our ordinary lives; now it is not with foreign affairs but with an international co-operation in which we shall share, that we must occupy ourselves.

For on the relations between the peoples and their collaboration in production of wealth and its distribution depends our life; the price of bread, of meat, tea, sugar, oil, clothing, furniture, and all the other commodities which we need day by day are international affairs. Let any woman sitting at the family dinner cast her eyes about the room and at the food on the table, and think where each of the things she sees has come from. The table wood is probably Swedish pine, the cloth, Irish flax, the sugar is Cuban, the tea is Indian, the butter is Danish, the cheese is Canadian, the beef is from Argentina, the potatoes from Holland or Poland, the bananas from Jamaica, the tinned milk from U.S.A., the glasses from Czecho-Slovakia, the children's wool and cotton dresses made from wool and cotton grown in Australia and U.S.A., the margarine is manufactured of pine nuts from Nigeria—and so on, indefinitely.

Need for Exchange of Goods

More than that, the production of wealth in our own country, by means of which we secure the money necessary to buy these goods, itself depends upon international conditions. In no country in the world is this so much a matter of daily concern as in an industrial manufacturing community like our own. For we depend upon other countries for the greater part of the raw material required for our manufactures, and we are equally dependent upon them for the supplies of food and other necessities; therefore both as producers and consumers not only “world peace” but “world co-operation” is and should be the basic principle of our national policy on international affairs.

How World Prices Affect Us

Putting aside for the moment the manipulations of trusts and speculators, the basic price of the goods we require is settled not by the cost of production in one country, but by the cost of production in all countries; e.g., the price of wheat, on which depends the price of bread, is not based on the cost of the wheat grown in this country, but on its cost in the great wheat producing countries of the United States, Argentina, Russia, &c.

The war which prevented cultivation over great areas and made transport from other places precarious and expensive, reduced the supply and raised the price even to the farmer and peasant who produced it. War acts as a destroyer, but "military peace" alone is insufficient to make us secure of permanent, plentiful, and cheap supplies. Only deliberate international co-operation in developing and distributing the world's wealth can do this. Just as the co-operative movement both in production and distribution within one country can raise the standard of living by securing supplies and lowering prices, so can a development of co-operation between all countries lead us more effectively to the same end.

The Meaning of Peace and Forces Against It

The housewives of this country must work together, not only for the negative policy of "no more war," but for a constructive policy for an international understanding and co-operation of all the nations.

What are the obstacles to this policy? Why is it that during the years of peace there are still high prices and shortage of supplies?

The first stumbling block is due to the general basis of foreign policy in the different countries of the world, which is planned on lines of international competition instead of international co-operation. The political relations between the countries, sometimes through alliances, sometimes through hostility, are continually operating so as to make difficult the exchange of goods between them. The outstanding example of the latter cause is that of Russia, which has been shut out so long from trade with Western Europe.

The formation of alliances dictated by political and military reasons, which have often been in opposition to the real economic needs of the people have not only often been the cause of wars but have helped to impoverish the people even in times of peace.

The second great difficulty are the operations of small groups of individuals who have been able to get control of large portions of world supplies, or to finance those who have such control, and thereby control world prices with the sole object of increasing their own profits. The power of these trusts, combines, and financial groups has often been greater than that of Governments which they have used for their own purposes, thus making millions of workers and millions of housewives in remote parts of the world the victims and slaves of their rapacity. These groups are international in their operations, and therefore cannot be controlled by the people of any one country. In order to deal with them effectively there must be international organisation controlled by the people themselves. For if the people

do not control their own Governments these international groups will control them themselves.

Here are a few examples of the commodities which are being thus controlled by small groups of profit-makers—frozen and chilled meat, sugar, oil, tea, rubber. This form of international profiteering is a natural development of the capitalistic system itself. Just as private enterprise within a country controls the lives of the people and even their Governments in the interests of private profit, so private enterprise takes its part in controlling world policy.

Thirdly, through the economic imperialism of the European States in connection with the less developed countries during the last hundred years, private enterprise in European countries has turned to the less developed races in Africa, Asia, and America, to increase its profits. The flow of wealth from them into European countries has to some extent raised the standard of life of the European workers, but it has been at the expense of the exploited black, brown, and yellow races. This may be effective for a time, but it creates constant conflict between the competing imperialistic powers, and it draws the exploited peoples as tools into the industrial and political and even military struggles of the profit-makers and war-makers. Africa has of late years been a chief field of this form of exploitation, and thereby a danger spot for the European peoples.

Only too well we know the results in the form of high prices and scarcity, big armaments and high taxes. The wealth of the world is developed and distributed not in accordance with the needs of the housewives in providing for their families, but in accordance with political and profit-making interest, which take no account of the people at all.

Co-operation and Control

It is not a simple task to change these elements of international industrial and political organisation. The Labour Government of to-day, in this country, has a tremendous difficulty even in accomplishing the simplest steps towards world co-operation. It will only be by continuous education amongst the peoples, both through discussion and practical example, that our ideals will become our practice. In this resolution, which is before the Conference, four special methods are set forth in broad outline. The first demands the control by the people of international machinery which shall have two objects. It shall in the first place control the course of international trade wherever such control is necessary in the interests of the people, not of any one country, but of all who co-operate together for this purpose. The ideal must be *all* countries, but such an aim can only gradually be realised. Such an international machinery may be developed through the Co-operative Movement, or through some form of international organisation carried out by Governments. We had a form of this in the operations of the Allied Governments during the War, who rationed foodstuffs and other goods and controlled their distribution. That was an improvised war system which always had many flaws because it sought to interfere as little as possible with profit-making, and it was given up at the earliest possible moment in order to release the profit-makers from all control.

What Happened to Sugar ?

The course of sugar prices in London since the war is an interesting example of how they use this freedom. The price for us is mainly regulated by the price of cane-sugar manipulated by a small group of planters, refiners, and financiers chiefly in New York.

Granulated Sugar (Tate's)			
February, 1918	..	..	.. per lb. 5d.
.. 1919	..	..	.. " 6-20d.
.. 1920	..	..	.. " 7-07d.
.. 1921	..	..	.. " 7-59d.
.. 1922	..	..	.. " 4-99d.
.. 1923	..	..	.. " 5-90d.
.. 1924	..	..	.. " 6-76d.

Since 1922 there has been "voluntary restriction in output dictated by low prices"—a regular method of trusts and combines.

Do Away With Profit-Making

We must therefore strongly emphasise the need of working for the elimination of profit-making, and that is why we lay special stress on the work which can be done by the international co-operative movement. The great tea trade of the C.W.S., *e.g.*, has a steadying effect, even under present circumstances, on tea prices. We must also work for a fair distribution of raw materials so that all countries can secure the means of satisfying their wants and developing their resources. We are accustomed to speak of the democratic control of foreign policy. We want also to realise the democratic control of international trade. Moreover, the elimination of profit-making in regard to essential world supplies is a necessary side to the establishment of socialism in each country. We cannot have successful socialisation within one country unless we can deal successfully with international capitalism as well.

Work Together

In the second place, we need to get the peoples of the different countries as closely linked together as is possible in peaceful and productive enterprises. This is not only important in making industry productive for all and in getting the flow of goods that we need from one country to another, but peaceful co-operation in such work is the soundest method of establishing peaceful and brotherly relations between the nations. Thus with the spread of the workers' co-operative movement we look to having co-operative productive societies in one country linked up with productive distributive societies in other countries. A splendid example has already been set by the C.W.S. in arranging for the import of wheat in conjunction with the Russian Co-operative Society. The bonds of a common interest in peace and production would mean a far greater barrier to war and to international monopolies than any others which could be devised. Even under capitalist schemes industrial and economic work carried on by people of different countries is important, and under democratic

Government control its value could be greatly increased. Between countries with a socialist system such schemes would rapidly develop.

No Slave Labour

Thirdly, we desire to gain the co-operation of the workers in securing a higher standard of life all round, and in levelling up and raising the conditions for all. Intolerable conditions of slave labour and sweating in any one country constantly bring the standard of life of better organised countries into danger. The raising of the standard of life has also the good effect of increasing the workers' wants and widening the market of the products of our labour. For example, if the Indian worker had better wages and shorter hours, he would no longer have to do with a hovel of a house, scarcely any clothes, and one scanty meal a day. He and his family would need then far more of the products of the manufactures of his own and other countries. Industry in both India and here would benefit, and the bitterness of competition would be changed to a rivalry in creating a high standard of civilisation.

Exchange Ideas as Well as Goods

The last clause of our resolution needs but little comment. We have only to study the exhibits of the many parts of the British Empire at the Wembley Exhibition to point its moral. There we look at the products in culture, art, and knowledge of many of the so-called backward races. How little we have succeeded in widening the scope and deepening the meaning of our culture by learning from these races what they have to teach! There we have a lesson of the beauty and splendour of life we might succeed in gaining if instead of thinking of the relations of the different countries of the world within and without the British Empire in terms of trade competition and political rivalry we sought to apply the principles of international collaboration and world unity. Knowledge, science, and art should be open to all with no barriers of race or country.

The Housewife's Task

The housewife with her market-basket gathers the produce of the world together. Her needs require the co-operation of workers in every part of the world. She ought to lead the way in interpreting Labour's international policy in terms of co-operative and socialist enterprise. The international solidarity of the workers, the call upon them to unite means nothing unless at the same time we set ourselves to work out a constructive policy of world organisation for world needs. It may come fast or slow according to our own efforts, but this at least is certain, that if we do not strive for the establishment of international co-operation for our daily needs, we shall never be successful in eliminating war and poverty from our existence. The general store is a world in little. Its products are the result of activities the whole world over. Until the workers of the world organise these in the interests of the peoples as a whole, we shall always know the alternations of riches and poverty and of war and peace.

RESOLUTION

That this National Conference of working women calls upon the housewives to work with the Labour and Co-operative Movements in developing a policy of international co-operation without which they can never be sure of securing those supplies which are needed for a decent standard of life. It points out that the housewife is dependent upon the products of other countries for nine-tenths of her supplies, including seven-eighths of foodstuffs, all the raw cotton, and most of the wool for clothes, and a great part of the wood and metal for household goods. Moreover, wages required to buy these goods are themselves largely dependent upon the conditions of international markets, both in regard to the supply of raw materials for our manufactures and the demand for our goods in exchange for those we require. The housewife must therefore declare against the destruction wrought by international warfare, and by the unjust and rapacious operations of individuals whether by means of international trusts or cosmopolitan finance, and must work for:—

- (1) The democratic control of international trade through an international machinery, which shall have power to ration raw materials and shall aim at the elimination of profits.
- (2) The development of international agreements to work together in economic and industrial concerns, either under State control or through the channels of the co-operative movement.
- (3) The levelling up of conditions of labour in the different countries, so that the demand for commodities and their production shall both increase, and there shall be no chance of one country growing rich on the slave labour of another.
- (4) The spread of knowledge of the conditions of life, the culture, scientific achievements, and ideals of the different peoples, so that there may be a genuine brotherhood of peoples based on knowledge, sympathy, and work carried out in common.

Further, that this Conference believes that a decent standard of life for the workers can never be obtained under a Capitalist System of Society, and urges upon the women of the Labour Party the need for unceasing propaganda, both nationally and internationally, for the co-ordination of world supplies and needs on Socialist lines.