

commodities, the Government making up the deficit, should the profit fall below a certain fixed standard, and recouping itself from other sources. Our women showered protests and budgets on Runciman. Mrs. Farrell declared that every week she was more in debt to the shopkeepers, Mrs. Parsons that she and her children were short of food. Sugar, which used to cost her 1½d. per lb., was now 3½d., beans which had been 2½d. were 4d. One of the big multiple shop companies was allowing women who bought margarine to get their sugar for 2½d. per lb.; but if they bought butter they must pay 3½d. "Why should they force poor people to give margarine to their children; miserable stuff which would not nourish them?" she asked, indignant, protesting that her children were delicate children; they needed good feeding!

Mrs. Drake produced the weekly budget of a mother who had eleven children to cater for. Before the War she had purchased weekly 8 lbs. of sugar and 2½ lbs. of margarine in lieu of butter. She was now obliged to content her family with but 3½ lbs. of sugar and 1½ lbs. of margarine. "Many people are considering raids on the warehouses," she bluntly concluded, and Runciman winced perceptibly.

Melvina Walker, her hat awry, her hands, in their old black gloves, folded genteelly, eyed him with the mocking nonchalance of one who has been a lady's-maid, and knows the foibles and peccadilloes of the highly placed. With the practised aplomb of a street corner orator, she expatiated on the cost of her every-Sunday knuckle bone of imported mutton, which had risen since the War from 4½d. to 8½d. per lb. It was useless to talk of a scarcity of sugar or of flour, she insisted sharply. "There are tons and tons of them stacked in the docks! Our men go in and see them, and they know!"

Again Runciman and his companions looked uncomfortable.

"Something must be done for us, or we shall have to take the food!" she blazed at him, striking the table.

Mrs. Payne turned on him her gaze of sorrowing humility, pleading with him that if he could see the people with their pinched faces coming to our door at Old Ford, he must feel with her the necessity of our case.

He answered with expressions of sympathy for our demands and our arguments; yet happily, he congratulated himself, the food had not yet reached "panic prices."

"Not at your salary, Mr. Runciman!" Melvina Walker snapped at him, fierce as a tigress; "but to people with 25s. a week, and four or five children to bring up, they *are* panic prices!"

"It is not a question of salary," he retorted. She insisted: "It *is* a question of salary!"

The Government could not nationalise every shop; but it was doing, and would do, all it could, he urged, striving to be encouraging and conciliatory, assuring me that I would do the Board of Trade a service by notifying every case of sweating which came to my knowledge, protesting his own determination to provide redress.

## CHAPTER VI

QUEEN MARY'S WORKROOMS—WITH JOHN BURNS AND THE CABINET COMMITTEE—MARY MACARTHUR

ON August 10th Queen Mary's Needlework Guild, to "organise a collection of garments" for war sufferers, was announced; a great unpaid volunteer garment-making was anticipated. The officials of the Women's Trade Union League and others raised a protest, on behalf of the masses of workless women ordinarily employed in the garment working trades. The protest was not ignored. Ten days later "The Queen's Work for Women Fund" was set up to provide employment for women thrown out of employment by the War. The Fund was to be administered by a Central Committee for the Employment of Women, controlled by the very officials of the Women's Trade Union League who had criticised the needlework scheme. Mary Macarthur was made the Hon. Secretary, Susan Lawrence, Margaret Bondfield, Dr. Marion Phillips of the Women's Labour League, and Mrs. Gasson of the Co-operative Union were members of the Committee. Their appointment received a wide and cordial welcome, in which I heartily joined. We hoped that these women would take the lead in protecting the status of women's labour. The first four had proved useless, if not hostile, to the Women's Suffrage cause; but it was believed they were staunch on the industrial side. Mary Macarthur had a great reputation as a pioneer organiser of trade unionism for women, and as a propagandist against sweating. Alas, the Committee speedily covered itself with ignominy by setting up the sweated wage of 10s. per week for adult women, to be paid in the workrooms established under its auspices. Local committees receiving grants from the fund might pay adult women less than 10s. a week—and in many cases did—but in no case would the committee sanction more. The wage was to be nominally 3d. an hour, but the hours must be limited, to prevent more than 10s. weekly being earned. Girls between 16 and 18 years were to get 2d. per hour, making a wage of 5s. a week, or 1s. per six hour day. These miserable rates were on no account to be exceeded, but they might be reduced at will. A circular of the Central Committee issued in November, stated "in some cases it may be desirable to keep the weekly wage below 10s." Clearly no risk must be run of producing a scarcity of women willing to work at a sweated wage for the ordinary employer. Many of the Queen Mary Workrooms paid as little as 6s. a week. A woman came to me from the



Hackney rooms bringing proof that she had only had 3s. during the week.

"Queen Mary's Sweat-shops!" was the slogan I coined to attack their parsimonious standard, the influence of which was to depress even the existing most beggarly economic status of the woman wage earner. Our members took up the phrase with avidity, and cried it in the ears alike of conventionally-minded patriots, and East End clothiers seeking cheap labour. How unnecessarily low was the standard fixed for the unemployed woman war worker by those who affected to be the unique custodians of her interests, may be gathered from the fact that 3d. per hour was below the minimum rate fixed by the Clothing Trade Board. Moreover, the Distress Committees operating under the Unemployed Workman Act were at the time actually paying to unemployed women in their workrooms 10s. a week, plus an allowance for each dependent child, and providing a free dinner valued at 6d. a day and the fares to and from the Workroom. A woman with five children would draw from the Distress Committee 16s. 6d. a week, fares and free dinners. In the Queen Mary Workrooms she would get a bare 10s. and have to find her own fares, and pay 3d. a day for her dinner and a penny or twopence for tea. Unhappily the Distress Committee work was largely a dead letter, so far as women were concerned.<sup>1</sup>

Even before war prices had raised the cost of living, the Distress Committee scale had been denounced by the Labour movement as parsimonious. The Labour War Emergency Committee was demanding that war relief should be at the rate of 12s. 6d. for one adult, 17s. 6d. for two, 20s. for two adults and a child, with 2s. 6d. for each additional child and 3s. 6d. extra in London. As members of the Labour War Emergency Committee, Mary Macarthur, Susan Lawrence and the others had joined in adopting this scale; then had thrown over their Labour colleagues by establishing the 10s. maximum for the Queen Mary workrooms. In my opinion it was a gross betrayal; in theirs it was "practical politics," I presume.

From their inauguration until February 1915, when war work had largely liquidated unemployment and relief work came to an end, only some 9,000<sup>2</sup> women passed through the Queen's workrooms. Yet they had set the common standard for women's war relief wages organised under other auspices, and they undoubtedly contributed towards riveting sweated wages on the women who were flocking into all branches of industry to replace men. This was the desire and intention of the employing interests, which blindly regarded cheap labour as the greatest of industrial boons. Again and again the ladies of the Trade Union

<sup>1</sup> Many women were refused relief work on the ground that their fathers or husbands should support them, although they were themselves unemployed and destitute. Out of 145 women who registered with the Distress Committee in Poplar within a period ending Nov. 7th, 1914, only 5 were recommended for work, and only one actually obtained it. In West Ham amongst 880 women who were registered only 17 got work.

<sup>2</sup> According to the *Encyclopædia Britannica*.

League, who were managing Trade Unionism for women, heedlessly sold the pass to the employing interests. Only women who were in regular employment before the War might be employed in Queen Mary's Rooms, yet a common excuse officially offered for the miserable payment was that the women were being "trained." Such experience as they got was mainly in garment making, in most cases not of a sort which would fit them for factory work. They were largely employed in repairing and converting old garments which had been given by charitable persons for distribution to the poor. Many of the workrooms were managed by amateurs with knowledge entirely restricted to home dressmaking.

It was promised that the ill-paid workers would in no case compete with women engaged in the ordinary labour market. The workrooms opened by the Lord Mayor's Committee in Manchester were refused a grant because the dolls and toys made there were offered for sale. Yet this pledge proved unreliable. The *Scotsman* announced that Colonel Cranston had ordered the shirts for his regiment from the Queen Mary Workrooms in Edinburgh; the *Morning Post*, that commercial orders for 1,000 dressmakers and others had been placed with Miss Macarthur's own Central Committee. Sir William Chance indignantly complained that the Central Committee had offered to supply socks at 2s. 9d. per dozen to a certain West Country industry, the proprietors of which had replied that they would not countenance such disgraceful sweating.

The New Constitutional Society for Women's Suffrage was refused a grant for its workroom because it paid more than 10s. a week, although the workers there were unemployed professional women who had been accustomed to substantial earnings. The organisers of the Queen Mary Workrooms in Southampton gave work to women in response to need, irrespective of red tape. After a fortnight the fact became known to the Central Committee that work had been given to women who had not been wage earners before the War, but who were now in urgent need, because their husbands were unemployed. Orders were given to turn these women away as ineligible. At bottom this ruling, whoever may have been responsible for it, sprang from the fear of providing a respite for men whom economic compulsion was driving into the Army.

The Trade Union ladies on the Central Committee for Women's Employment were among the notable early examples of the political truce which caused Trade Union officials to place what was regarded as National Unity before the wage standards of their members. They bent themselves to the task of supplying employers with labour—at almost any price. In this case the failing doubtless sprang from fallacious reasoning, based on the irrelevant premise that half a loaf is better than no bread.

The Cabinet Committee arranged for John Burns to receive us on September 16th. In the centre of a long row of officials he greeted us