

THE NEED FOR INCREASED PRODUCTION.

We publish herewith four articles, dealing with the various aspects of the need for increased production, to which we wish to call our readers' special attention.

WOMEN AND NATIONAL PRODUCTION.

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The illustrated memorandum on the Work of Women during the War, issued by the War Office in August, 1916, states roundly that:—

"Employers who have met the new conditions with patience and foresight readily admit that the results achieved by the temporary employment of women far exceed their original estimates, and even so are capable of much further extension. . . . Women have shown themselves capable of successfully replacing the stronger sex in practically every calling."

The same memorandum proceeds to enumerate 1,579 processes in industry, confined before the war to men workers, in which the experiment of employing women had been tried with success, and the photographs with which the book is copiously illustrated show women engaged in some of the heaviest of these processes, such as ploughing, stoking, and heavy work in tan yards, ship yards, railways, workshops, &c. No doubt some allowance must be made for the circumstances under which this particular brochure was produced. Its object was to secure the maximum number of recruits for the army and navy with the minimum injury to industry at home, and the attractions of women's labour are therefore set forth after the manner of the publicity agent rather than of the scientific observer. No sensible woman even at the time took too literally "the women are splendid" kind of tribute. It was merely common form for the moment, just as adulation of everything in the army was common form.

But we have settled down since, and several elaborate enquiries into women's war work, including the reports of two Government committees, have enabled us to gauge fairly accurately the measure of the success that was achieved.

The most general impression the outsider gains from these reports is the danger of generalising from one trade to another, and the necessity of considering the relative value of men's and women's output, both in quantity and quality, separately with regard to each trade and each process within a trade. Broadly speaking, it is clear that in heavy manual work, though women can do it adequately at a pinch, their inferiority to men is so marked as to make it improbable that under normal conditions they will ever be serious competitors while the work remains what it is. Nevertheless even here, if employers were given a free hand, the introduction of sub-division and mechanical assistance might so transform the processes as to bring them well within their capacity. Clearly, however, it is in the semi-skilled repetition processes that the great field for the extension of women's employment lies, if only they are allowed to enter on it. Here the witness is almost unanimous, "On piece work a woman will always beat a man"; "on mass production she will come first almost every time"; "a woman is ideal for repetition work."

The war came to an end, and with it this great experiment in woman as a producer; the first which man as controller of industry had ever permitted himself.

Even while it lasted it was more hampered by prejudice than considerations for the susceptibilities of male labour would allow those in authority to reveal freely. Attempts by enterprising managers to extend the experiment beyond the strict barriers of the bargains which the trades unions had struck with the Government had repeatedly to be abandoned in haste at the threat of a stoppage. Now that the war is over, the Government, in accordance with the terms of their bargain, have shut down the gates, and by the Pre-War Practices Act have required employers to dismiss all women and other unprivileged persons from any occupation where it can be shown that their employment is contrary to "any rule, practice, or custom obtaining before the war," and departed from during and because of the war. The Pre-War Practices Act was excused and accepted by everyone concerned, including women, as the fulfilment of a pledge given under the pressure of an unparalleled necessity. The circumstances have obliged us to shut our eyes to the amazingly archaic

character of such an attempt to render static the conditions of industry prevailing at a particular date. To realise what it means to women and to the country, or rather what it will mean if the conditions it enforces for a time are made permanent, one has only to recollect what the status of women in industry was in fact before the war. Shut out by the "rules, practices, and customs" not only of trades unions but of men's minds from nearly all the great stable industries of the country, women found themselves pent up in a number of trades traditionally their own and mainly concerned with the preparation of food and clothing, the most highly skilled processes even in these being reserved for men, or they performed subsidiary, unskilled processes in connection with men's trades. The more capable women who revolted against unskilled work naturally crowded into the few needle trades that gave scope for their faculties, with the result that the wages in these were forced down by competition even below the level of unskilled factory trades. The women became pocket-money wage earners partly dependent on their fathers, and we all as consumers were able to indulge ourselves in blouses, etc., with a fabulous amount of tucks and insertions at ridiculously low prices, this trade and the others concerned with the production of millinery, confectionery, cigarettes, etc., being practically parasites on the great stable transport and productive industries. No one can consider this result either good for women or good for the country. Is it to be perpetuated, now that the country is crying out for more production and cheaper production of necessities both for home consumption and for export?

A single instance will illustrate the kind of inconvenience that results from this system of putting fetters on the productive capacities of one-half the community.

The acute housing shortage which is causing so much misery at present is due chiefly to the scarcity of materials and labour, especially of bricks and bricklayers. In order to help municipalities to overcome this difficulty they have been empowered to prohibit the erection of any new buildings that might interfere with the production of houses. Under this authority a housing committee in a Northern town recently issued prohibition orders against the building of two clothing factories, one destined to employ 500 and the other 200 women in manufacturing ready-made suits, waterproofs, etc., largely for export, upon the ground that these buildings would use up bricks and bricklayers. A woman member of the committee made the suggestion that some of the 700 women who would thus be deprived of a livelihood might be instructed in bricklaying or in making concrete slabs, casement fittings, etc. The suggestion was, of course, made in irony, as everyone knows that women are altogether excluded from every branch of the building trade, as well as from all but very subsidiary functions in the various wood-working trades. Yet who shall say in the face of wartime experience that these trades are beyond their capacity?

If the returned soldier to whom "a happier England" was promised has in fact to herd with his family in a single room and to pay out his whole gratuity for a bit of shoddy furniture which he could have picked up for a few shillings before the war, are not his own civilian prejudices in part to blame?

No one who knows what the entry of women into a man's trade has often meant in the past can be surprised at the anxiety of the trades unionist to safeguard his hardly-won standard of life against under-cutting. The problem of how to secure competition between men and women which shall be at once free and fair is one of serious difficulty, which cannot be solved by the parrot-like repetition of that question begging phrase "Equal pay for equal work." But the maintenance of a high standard of life depends just as much upon productivity as upon high nominal wages. In the interest of the community no less than of women the "right to labour" and to a free choice of occupation cannot remain permanently the privilege of a male caste.