'MAKING DIAMONDS FROM DUST': A WORKING CLASS HISTORY OF BRITISH LABOUR PARTY WOMEN 1906-1956.

BY

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ABSTRACT

This thesis argues that the inclusion of lower-class women in a new political party in Britain, the Women's Labour League launched in 1906, not only promoted action on women's neglected rights, but helped to bring about a more democratic and just society. Women advanced from the margins of the political world, gradually, it is true, but soon exercised agency in training numbers of women to act as a pressure group on the Labour Party and on the government in office. Socialist ideas which had been promulgated since the early nineteenth century, together with feminist notions of asserting the interests of women as a sex encouraged them to observe, understand and attempt to alleviate their subordination in capitalist industrial Britain.

Women disproved their assumed passivity and sought to impel social change. Encouraged by competent leaders they pressed for women's franchise to legitimise their status, and to ensure their qualification to plead the cause of others. Their politicisation familiarised them with the functions of the state, and with the inequalities revealed in its administration of the law, education, employment and welfare. As Labour Party members these women were aware that the state of the economy limits reform. Nevertheless, they insisted that the personal was political in child (and mother) care, in education and in employment where the sexual division of labour disadvantaged women workers.

With socialist men they acted collectively and co-operatively to counter class antagonism, and used democratic methods to achieve consensus. They also combined with other women's organisations to battle against the twin evils of capitalism — poverty and war.

Autonomous leaders taught socialist ideas, directed the Women's Sections of a national political party, and energetically lobbied government to institute social reform. Though they were denied real equality of opportunity with the men's party, their effectiveness as a successful, and vigorous pressure group during these years is beyond question.

I hereby declare that this thesis is my own original work.

Signed .....: .....7:11:91.....

I give my permission for this thesis to be made available for photocopying and loan, if accepted for the award of the degree.

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In the north of England I discussed the administration of the Labour Party Women's Organisation with Mrs Betty Meeson, Chair of the 50th LPWO conference in 1973. Mr Peter Killeen, a north-west region Labour Party organiser arranged this meeting, as Mrs Meeson was a valued Labour Party activist. In retirement she lived near the Working Class Movement's Library, whose staff were especially helpful and interested, as were the archivists and librarians of the north-eastern Record Offices in Durham and Newcastle.

In Adelaide I have appreciated the supportive attitude of the History Department and the Research Centre for Women's Studies, whose secretaries were unfailingly receptive and agreeable. Dr Sandra Taylor suggested that I approach the Geography Department for a map of places where conferences were held and I gratefully acknowledge the skill of Chris Crothers in producing Map 1.

This thesis owes much to the firm guidance and encouragement of my supervisors, Dr Susan Magarey and Dr Robert Dare who alleviated the loneliness of the long-distance runner by their advice and ongoing support. I have benefited from the interest and suggestions of my colleagues in the Research Centre, and am appreciative of the support of new Women's Studies students for my writing of women's history.

Finally, I am grateful to Ann Riddle and Caroline Guerin whose patient expertise ensured the final formatting of my work.

Bess Morton

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ACRONYMS

AEU	Amalgamated Engineering Union.
ASRS	Associated Society of Railway Servants.
BMA	British Medical Association.
BSP	British Socialist Party.
CPGB	Communist Party of Great Britain.
FWG	Fabian Women's Group.
ILP	Independent Labour Party.
LCC	London County Council.
LPWO	Labour Party Women's Organisation.
NFWW	National Federation of Women Workers.
NHI	National Health Insurance.
NLWAC	National Labour Women's Advisory Committee.
NUDAW	National Union of Distributive and Allied Workers.
NUR	National Union of Railwaymen.
NUSEC	National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship.
NUT	National Union of Teachers.
NUGMW	National Union of General and Municipal Workers.
NUWM	National Unemployed Workers Movement.
NUWSS	National Union of Suffrage Societies.
PAC	Public Assistance Committee.
PLP	Parliamentary Labour Party.
RWG	Railway Women's Guild.
SAU	Shop Assistants Union.
SDF	Social Democratic Federation.
SJCIWO	Standing Joint Committee of Industrial Women's Organisations.
SL	Socialist League.
SSIP	Society for Socialist Inquiry and Propaganda.
TGWU	Transport and General Workers Union.
TUC	Trade Union Congress.
UAB	Unemployment Assistance Board.
WCG	Women's Cooperative Guild.
WE:WNC	War Emergency: Workers National Committee.
WFL	Women's Freedom League.
WICSLO	Women's International Council of Labour and Socialist Organisations.
WILPF	Women's International League for Peace and Freedom.
WLL	Women's Labour League.
WPPL	Women's Protective and Provident League.
WSPU	Women's Social and Political Union.
WTUL	Women's Trade Union League.

INTRODUCTION

Little has been written about the Women's Labour League (WLL), although at its most active it involved thousands of British women, and its annual conferences attracted international attendance. [1] Three books have appeared to date about the WLL. The first, published in 1977, was edited by Lucy Middleton, the third wife of James S. Middleton, first assistant secretary to Ramsay MacDonald, and later secretary to the Labour Party. (Ramsay MacDonald was one of the leaders of the new Labour Party in 1906.) This book was on sale at the 1975 conference of the Labour Party Women's Organisation. Produced as a project of International Women's Year, 1975, it was a collection of articles by Labour women leaders about issues which concerned Labour and Socialist women such as female franchise, social services, trade unions, cooperation, internationalism, and the inclusion of women in parliament and in government. The editor deals with the years from 1906 to 1964, and the book covers the same period as the study which I am undertaking here, but its purpose was to preserve and celebrate rather than to analyse. Though the title clearly describes its subject, *Women in the Labour Movement: the British Experience*, recent general histories and bibliographies of the British working class or of the British Labour Party seldom mention it. [2]

The second book, written by Christine Collette, Dee scholar at St. Hugh's College, Oxford, and published in August 1989 — too recently for references to it to have appeared in more general histories — has a more politically assertive title — *For Labour and for Women*. Collette's account is confined to the period 1906-1918, the time during which the WLL was autonomous, though it was affiliated to the Labour Party in 1908. That autonomy was significantly reduced in 1918, when the WLL was renamed as 'The Labour Party Women's Organisation' (LPWO), and this brought changes to the ways in which members worked to achieve their aims. But it did not define them out of existence, as Collette's time-frame could seem to imply. [3]

The Labour Party Women's Organisation was a national organisation which not only trained large numbers of women to lobby government bodies to institute social reform, but also disseminated propaganda about socialism as an alternative to capitalism. Their work as

a propagandist auxiliary of the main Labour Party was both appreciated and praised by successive Labour leaders. Many of the women were members of the Independent Labour Party (ILP) and they succeeded in inspiring among the rest, a sort of tireless enthusiasm for creating an effective organisation for socialist-making propaganda, side-by-side with the electoral machine. G.D.H. Cole maintained that two strategies were needed to create socialists. The first was to avoid seeming to rival the local Labour Party, and the second was to work as an individual, and to refrain from pushing programmes which conflicted with the official plans.[4]

The third book is on microfilm and is a dissertation submitted to the History faculty of the University of North Carolina for the degree of doctor of philosophy. Copyright was applied for from 1988, so this study precedes that of Collette. A copy of it did not arrive in Australia until January, 1991; too late for a detailed examination in this thesis. Its main theme is the promise of political power to working-class women. The author is Donna Price Paul. Paul suggests that the WLL women were serving an apprenticeship for the exercise of power.

Historians may have paid little attention to the WLL, partly because its appearance was almost coincidental with that of the far more spectacular Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) which preceded it by three years. The WSPU, a revolutionary, feminist organisation was founded in Manchester in 1903 to win votes for women, and even as the temporary executive committee of Labour women was planning the formation of the WLL at No. 3 Lincoln's Inn Fields, London, on 9 March 1906, members of the Women's Social and Political Union were storming No. 10 Downing street in a second attempt to see the Prime Minister (they had first tried on 2 March). Some were arrested for their invasion.[5]

The bold actions of militant suffragettes of all classes which continued to attract publicity until August 1914, diverted attention from the staider organisation of Labour women. Middle-class and aristocratic women of the WSPU were defying convention by invading the House of Commons, but the women of the WLL adopted a gradualist attitude to the attainment of the vote, for now they wished, 'by establishing this League, to sharpen their weapons so that they might be enabled to make more progress in the new crusade against the evils of society'.[6]

Suffragette history is well-documented. It was colourful. Such revolutionary striving, especially of women, *made* history. Historians chose to write the history of the WSPU's agitation for the vote, rather than the history of Labour women's participation in the workers' rebellion against inadequate work conditions. There were moreover, ample sources for the history of the suffragettes. Educated people recorded the action and preserved the records. There was also the fact that action which took place in London was newsworthy. London was a Mecca which beckoned to many people in the provinces. It seemed, to the simple and unsophisticated, to be the centre of the world. Events in the provinces were much less fascinating. The WSPU transferred itself from Manchester to London in January 1906, and Annie Kenney arrived to organise its work from Sylvia Pankhurst's house in Chelsea — a mill girl and a middle-class girl working together, at least for a time.[7]

The WLL was an even more lasting alliance of middle and working-class women. But its activities were far less London-centred than those of the WSPU. In the WLL working-class women learned how to keep adequate accounts of their own political activities. Their leaders did record and preserve reports of national conferences, and of printed publications (as the Labour Party would require). But, by contrast, lesser constituency meetings, recorded by working-class minute secretaries, were often thought not worth preserving, or were inadvertently mislaid. They looked unimpressive to male branch secretaries, because they were written in cheap exercise books in an unlettered hand. They referred to the 'minuets' being read and the 'delecates' who attended.[8] Only a few of such records survived and they are scattered widely.

Branches of the WLL were formed in Scotland, north-east and north-west England, throughout the whole of Wales, in the midlands, around Bristol and in the London area. Their papers were not always preserved alongside Labour Party material. In addition, space in which to store records was sparse. Working-class houses were usually four-roomed, that is 'two up and two down'. Indeed, an Australian academic who visited the home of Edmund and Ruth Frow (who were assiduous hoarders of Labour Party archives), before their collection was housed in the impressive Working-class Movement Library at Salford, told me that papers were stacked on every available flat surface of their home.[9]

Probably because typewriters were expensive and the Labour Party was poor, the WLL records and minutes were often written by hand until 1916. Some of the WLL literature was written by Margaret MacDonald, and her handwriting is difficult to read. She was the leader of the WLL and the wife of the first secretary of the Labour Party, Ramsay MacDonald. When she died unexpectedly in 1911 her husband burnt most of her papers. Margaret was a cultured, well-educated woman and had been involved with many women's organisations, in Britain and overseas, with whom she maintained a voluminous correspondence. Contemporaries remarked on how she worked, from home, surrounded by babies and children and often interrupted by visitors, some from overseas.[10] It is hardly surprising then that her manuscripts were difficult to decipher.

Because official records were also bulky, the League minutes of 1912 instructed the secretary to destroy correspondence written before 1912, the year after Margaret MacDonald died, and also unimportant letters since that date.[11] The women seem to have been undecided at this stage about the importance of keeping their records, and during moves to different locations some papers were almost certainly lost. The WLL's absence from mainstream histories is, finally, an expression of the fact that the majority of historians are, and have been, men, and they have written about the issues in which they were most interested. In recent years, however, feminist historians have begun to rescue from oblivion the women who worked in Labour and socialist movements, as well as the suffrage movement and have shown that their actions also were innovative and effective. It is time to acknowledge that women were present and active in political organisations as well.

It was possible to live in England and not to know of the WLL. Although I lived in England until 1949, I had never heard of this organisation. I think this was because the Labour Party tended to preach to the converted. Also, households which are headed by a woman worker (as mine was) tend not to have time to be involved in politics. Unless one was a member of the Labour Party one did not hear about its style of operating. I was therefore intrigued when I read Jill Liddington's book *One Hand Tied behind Us* to find that the town where I was born — Accrington — was prominent in the index, because it had been strongly supportive of the early suffragists in the Labour Party.

I read Liddington's book on the plane to England from Australia in 1979. We emigrated to Australia after the Second World War, and my trip to the 'old country' in 1979 was a gift from one of my children. I visited my town's Carnegie library and found, in old editions of the local, twice-weekly paper, that Ada Chew's articles had been a regular feature in 1911-12 and that there had been a branch of the WLL and the Women's Cooperative Guild active in politics in Accrington. In 1914 and 1915 Selina Cooper, an organiser for the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS), had spoken at Maternity and Child Welfare weeks in this and neighbouring towns, taking advantage of the sympathy and interest aroused by the publication of the Women's Cooperative Guild's book *Maternity* in 1915. [12] This book was a collection of accounts of childbirth as it was experienced by working-class women, and its revelations made both middle-class and working-class women wish to use political action to impel reform in this area.

I had become interested in Labour politics in the 1930s when I liked to listen to my husband arguing with his brothers about politics, although none of us were members of a political party. In 1945, when a Labour government was elected after World War II, Labour supporters were excited and hopeful of a better life. However, rationing and deprivation continued for some time after the war, so that when my husband's older sister (who had lived in Australia since 1929) wrote and urged him to come out to 'a young man's country', we decided to emigrate and arrived in Australia in March 1949.

Years later, I found that the University of Adelaide held microfiches of the annual conferences of the WLL which was affiliated to the British Labour Party. I became interested in finding out more about this organisation on the left of British politics.

The annual conference reports supplied much information about the founding of the League and its subsequent history. Even when I visited the Labour Party archives in Walworth Road, London, there was not an abundance of other sources, for the emphasis was on preserving the records of the 'men's party'. [13]

In the north of England I found evidence of Women's Sections in Durham, Newcastle, and Leeds. In the north west I read *The Vote* in the

Working-Class Movement's Library in Salford for accounts of the WLL's activities. There is no doubt that the records are both scattered and scanty.

However, the information I have gathered will support a thesis. In this thesis I will argue that the work of the WLL was successful in involving working-class women in the central arena of mainstream politics. Investigation of the work of the League gives the historian an opportunity to explore the tensions between socialists and feminists, and between classes and genders, and allows one to assess the unequal relationship between men and women in their efforts to promote socialism.

I shall survey the WLL over the first fifty years of its existence, assessing its political position and activities, compared with other women's organisations of these years. During the years which this thesis covers there were marked changes in the extent to which British society acknowledged a place for women in political life. At the time when the WLL was established, public speaking by women was not fully accepted. By the 1950s, however, when my survey concludes, women were not only speaking in public vociferously, they were also being elected to, and speaking from, seats in the legislature.

In 1906, women regarded the Labour Party as the one most willing to accept women into politics. I shall consider the relationship between the main Labour Party and the Women's League. In that examination I will discuss four themes — the concept of leadership and grass-roots politics; the concepts of equality and socialism; the problems posed by gender and class; and the issue of autonomy and dependence.

In Chapter I will argue that a combination of factors favoured the appearance of a Women's Labour League. The Labour Party was the officially recognised Opposition and the new organisation could call on educated women capable of being leaders, and on working-class women sufficiently aroused by social injustice to want to be politically active.

In Chapter 2 I will discuss the negotiated and sometimes difficult relationship of the leaders of the WLL with the working- class membership, and I will include a case study of a working-class and a middle-class leader. In Chapter 3 I will examine the concept of equality, which was important to many socialists. In 1906 G. Stanley Hall, a psychologist, wrote that any idea of equality was 'cant' — boys might be

feminised, and girls would be presented with false goals in life. [14] Did this attitude change? How did practice relate to theory in the areas of labour, health care and education?

Chapter 4 will deal with the issues of class and gender, as questions arose about solidarity and dissidence in the administration of the League. 'Class' is a crucial concept in the analysis of organisations formed around the opposition between employer and worker, particularly relevant to Great Britain. It affects every aspect of life.

'Gender' is a noun fairly recently adopted by feminists as a way to distinguish the socially constructed feminine subject from the biologically female human being. It is a term which can be used comfortably to challenge the conviction that the sexual division of labour is 'natural'. Increasingly today the expression 'gender-blind' is used to denote analyses that ignore the fact that humanity is comprised of women as well as men. Although 'gender' was not used in this way in the early twentieth century, women were familiar with the manifestations of 'the sexual division of labour' which distinguished 'women's work' from 'men's work'. All women were legally subject to the power of the father, and were expected to conform to time-honoured behaviour appropriate to women.

Chapter 5 discusses the possibility of a women's organisation achieving autonomy in the twentieth century. Dependence was a feminine characteristic, which many people thought to be endemic. Could it be easily eliminated?

The final chapter will argue that though women were late-comers to mainstream politics, they made consistent headway. Today, still not adequately represented according to their numbers, their contribution in this time-span has been impressive. I shall approach my analysis chronologically, relating each chapter to a section of the fifty years over which the thesis ranges.

REFERENCES

1. Both European and colonial women attended the conferences. In 1909 a South Australian woman was present. In 1956 Danish, Norwegian and Dutch women attended; WLL Annual Conference Report (Portsmouth, 1909), p. 13. LPWO, Annual Conference Report (London, 1956), pp. 35-36.

2. The bibliography compiled by Harold Smith in 1981 entitled *The British Labour Party to 1970* does not mention the WLL.

3. There are also two article-length studies of some aspects of the work of the Women's Labour League. They are:
Caroline Rowan, 'Mothers, Vote Labour! The State, the Labour Movement and Working-Class Mothers, 1900-1918' in Rosalind Brunt and Caroline Rowan (eds), *Feminism, Culture and Politics* (Lawrence & Wishart) London, 1982, pp. 59- 85. and
Caroline Rowan, 'Women in the Labour Party, 1906-1920' in *Feminist Review*, No.12, October, 1982, pp. 74-91.

4. G. D. H. Cole, *British Working-Class Politics 1832-1914* (Routledge) London, 1941, p. 251.

5. Midge Mackenzie, *Shoulder to Shoulder: A Documentary* (Penguin) Harmondsworth, 1975, p. 36.

6. WLL, *Annual Conference Report* (Leicester, 1906), p. 2.

7. Mackenzie, *Shoulder to Shoulder*, p. 33.

8. Durham County Archives, County Hall, Durham, Minutes of Crook Labour Party Women's Committee D/x 330/1 1927; Minutes of Lanchester Labour Party Women's Committee D/x 330/2. 1950.

9. I am obliged to Dr. Carol Johnson for this information.

10. James Ramsay MacDonald, *Ethel Margaret MacDonald: A Memoir* (Hodder and Stoughton), 3rd ed. London, 1913, p. 129. She respected children's rights and individuality.

11. Labour Party Headquarters, Archives, *WLL Minute Book, WLL/164*

12. Jill Liddington, *The Life and Times of a Respectable Rebel: Selina Cooper: 1864-1946* (Virago) London, 1984, p. 267.

13. Christine Collette, *For Labour and for Women: The Women's Labour League, 1906-1918* (Manchester University Press) Manchester, 1989, p. 8.

14. G. Stanley Hall, *Youth: Its Regimen and Hygiene* (Appleton) New York, 1906, pp. 284-95.

CHAPTER 1

BEGINNINGS

I will argue in this chapter that Labour women organised as a result of various factors which arose between 1901 and 1906. Social injustices stimulated the Labour Movement to gather its different factions together to form a political party representative of the workers. Unfair practices such as fining trade unions, exploiting unskilled workers, and neglecting the health and safety of both children and adults became unacceptable to fair-minded citizens. [1]

The different factions of the Labour Movement included the Social Democratic Federation (SDF) which was a Marxist sect under the leadership of H. M. Hyndham (there were also several smaller socialist societies). Also, there were trade unions and trade councils, the Independent Labour Party (ILP) and the Fabian Society. The last two were the most socialist. The ILP supported female franchise, although the whole alliance, the Labour Representation Committee (LRC), did not. [2]

Labour women wanted to have a political league in the years leading up to 1906. Liberal and Conservative women already had their political leagues. The Conservative Party caused a Women's Council to be formed — a support group with no power of initiating or even amending policy — known as the Primrose Dames and set up in 1883. [3] Mary Gladstone started the Women's Liberal Foundation in 1886, so that the wives of Liberal candidates could assist their husbands at elections. Also, the Women's Liberal Association (1888) included many prominent suffragists and divided, where it did not monopolise, their energies. [4]

These women's organisations were formed after the first reasonably effective Corrupt Practices Act (1883) had been passed to prevent abuses at elections. The Act put a stop to the paid employment of men to do the subsidiary work necessary at general elections, including canvassing. [5] Henceforth this work was to be done voluntarily. The volunteers were often the female relatives and friends of candidates, and might have seemed to onlookers to be inappropriately dabbling in politics — a male concern.

Some women did have the vote in 1906 when the WLL was established, but they were women of the self-governing colony of New Zealand, and of the new Commonwealth of Australia. Australian states

had enfranchised women with the Act of Federation in 1901, after female suffrage bills had passed through the parliaments of the self-governing colonies of South Australia and Western Australia. [6] In Britain in 1906 no woman had the parliamentary vote, though WLL women *without* votes willingly canvassed men *with* votes to return Labour Representation Committee men as members of Parliament.

Both women and men were discontented and desired to have more influence on governmental actions, especially as many people had perceived that the Prime Minister, A. J. Balfour, and other members of the upper classes lacked sympathy for the workers. [7] Three Labour Representation Committee members had won by-elections, at Clitheroe in 1902 and at Woolwich and Barnard Castle in 1903.

The Clitheroe candidate was David Shackleton, secretary of the union of Darwen weavers, who was elected unopposed. His success was due to a special effort by women weavers, for whom he promised to promote 'the immediate enfranchisement of women on the same terms as men' when he reached parliament. However, in 1905 when the Labour Party conference at Belfast voted against the immediate extension of votes to women, Shackleton agreed with Henderson and MacDonald that the Party could by no means sponsor the Women's Enfranchisement Bill. [8] Selina Cooper, a Nelson weaver, and soon to be the leader of a WLL branch, dubbed Shackleton 'a broken reed', because women without votes were helping to pay his salary through their union fees, and he had not tried to help their cause. [9] It was better for women to fight for themselves. Although women weavers were the most unionised of the female workforce, the initial pressure for a women's organisation did not come from them, for their union leaders were men. The letters to the Labour Representation Committee that have survived are from an all-female 'guild' and a concerned housewife with children. From 1904 such women wrote letters to Ramsay MacDonald as secretary of the LRC, asking for a National Labour Women's Committee. One letter was from the Women's Railway Guild (WRG), a subsidiary of the Associated Society of Railway Servants (ASRS), and unique in that it admitted only the wives and daughters of railwaymen.

Their honorary secretary, Mary Macpherson B.A., wrote to MacDonald in 1905 about a resolution passed at the Railway Women's Guild conference of that year which said that:

> This meeting is strongly in favour of the true principles of Labour representation on our local governing bodies and in the House of Commons and pledges itself to do all in its power to return direct representation of Labour, and that this conference requests the Labour Representation Committee to form a National Women's Labour Committee. [10]

MacDonald's reply, dated 9 October 1905, and sent from the ILP conference thanks them for their support and goes on:

> My committee is willing to advance the political organisation of women in any way practical. It desires to point out, however, that women are eligible for membership on all local LRCs, and also that they may be elected as representatives at our annual conference, and upon this Executive. Some of us think that women ought to make more use than they do of these opportunities of taking part in our work.
>
> With kindest regards,
> Yours very sincerely,
> M. [11]

This letter has a cavilling tone as if MacDonald is doubtful about allowing women to have a separate organisation. He recommends that women join local LRCs, which militates against the formation of local Women's Labour Leagues. He seems to expect women to attend the main conference along with the men, without much consideration of the reasons why they do not do this. The double burden of paid work and housework, and the difficulty of travel and the associated expense ruled out MacDonald's option for working-class women.

Another woman had written to MacDonald and suggested a Women's Labour League 'to bring knowledge and understanding of our will and purpose to the mass of women'. She was Mrs.Cawthorne, the wife of a Hull docker, and she wanted to know what to do to support her husband 'when employers were hostile'. [12] She was very different from the educated, erudite journalist, Mary Macpherson, for she was a country girl who had never attended school, but had learned to read and write by persuading her children to teach her what they had learned at school each day. [13] These two women symbolise the WLL. There were both tertiary-

educated, intelligent, articulate women, and women who were minimally literate, yet knew what they wanted, and were willing to act to get it.

The working classes had been perturbed by the rejection of many young men from army service in the Boer War, fought in South Africa from 1899 to 1902. In 1899, 330 out of every 1,000 young recruits had been rejected as physically unfit. [14] People were also alarmed by the alacrity with which the British government agreed to the importation of thousands of Chinese coolies — to work in the depressed Transvaal gold mines in 1904. These people accused the British government of discriminating against its own workmen, because they were union members, and of depriving them of job opportunities unavailable at home. [15]

Labour leaders remembered past injustices and were more critical of the government because the Taff Vale decision of 1901 still rankled. (This was a decision by Law Lords that unions were financially liable for damages inflicted by their members during a strike). [16] In addition to Taff Vale, at the end of 1901 the Blackburn Weavers Association (all women) had found itself liable for damages for peaceful picketing during a strike, and had to pay a fine of £11,000. The *Cotton Factory Times* referred to this action as 'Taff Vale Number No. 2', and implied that it was a flagrant wrong. [17]

After the Boer war men were concerned about the hostility towards unions and women resented criticism of child-bearing and rearing, for an easy patriarchal explanation for the ill-health of recruits in the Boer war was to blame the mother. Both Labour men and women wished to have some say in their own government. Labour men thought that the process of the law was the means by which the weak obtained redress against the strong, and the law emanated from parliament. Therefore the party sought representation in Parliament to impel reform by constitutional means. Being already 'deeply imbued by parliamentarianism', [18] they would not have been surprised by the number of Acts to do with health passed by the Balfour government. These Acts were necessary because of the revelations about national fitness and the falling birth rate and high infant mortality revealed by the 1901 census. Poverty surveys at this period also revealed unacceptable levels of subsistence.

Before the WLL was in being, a Midwives Act was passed in 1902, a Provision of Meals Act in 1906, Medical Inspection of school children in 1907, and an Act to ensure the early notification of births in 1907. In addition to this legislation, voluntary societies were formed to monitor

health, such as the Institute of Hygiene (1903), the Infants Health Society (1904), and the National League for Health, Maternity and Child Welfare (1905). [19] Since eleven WLL branches formed before 1906, one wonders if a reason for their impetus was a concern to dispose of this blame of women for the deterioration of the nation's health.

Medical Officers of Health blamed mothers for failure to breastfeed, for exposing infants to the cold in the early morning on the way to the minder, and for being inadequate carers of their children, when, as Anna Davin points out, they ignored the awful, insanitary conditions in which people lived in overcrowded, old houses where there was no waterborne sewage system to replace middens and shared ash privies. [20]

Margaret MacMillan wrote as early as 1901 of the frail condition of young children in elementary schools. British children could attend school from the age of three (as I did myself), and many did so because their mothers often worked to supplement the family income. Margaret MacMillan thought the expenditure of nervous energy and living tissue of children in school who were hungry, was permanently damaging to their health. She declared that education was failing because, 'The bottom rungs are rotten'.[21] As an ILP member of the Bradford School Board she later helped to establish its admirable school meals service with the headmaster, J. B. Priestley's father.

Labour women believed in the importance of education for their children, and although they had not lobbied for these laws, as soon as the WLL was formed, they pressured local authorities to implement them.

As mentioned, Labour women had formed a temporary Executive Committee to establish a Women's Labour League less than a month after the 1906 election had brought new (mainly socialist) MPs into parliament as Labour Representation Committee candidates. An agreement with the new Liberal government promised that in return for Labour support a Bill which would make it impossible for trade union funds to be attacked would soon be passed. [22]

The new MPs chose the name 'Labour Party' and the women quickly formed its women's section. They were, I think, confident in doing this because of overt support from the Fabian Society which I shall now describe. The Fabian Society was one of the different factions which had an interest in the Labour Party. It was a group of middle-class Londoners brought together by a Scottish philosopher. They attracted attention by publishing a leaflet in the late 1880s which asked, as Michael Holroyd

observes, *Why are the many poor?* Hubert Bland was the leader of the Fabian Society and 'during its first twelve valiant years it had done great things and lined up what was potentially a great following, including Annie Besant, H. G. Wells and George Bernard Shaw'.[23] In the early 1900s more than a quarter of the members were women.

Bernard Shaw was an early member and he persuaded Sidney Webb to join and to write a tract *Facts for Socialists,* for the rules of the Fabian Society in 1887 maintained that they were socialists. [24] They had been giving lectures around London since 1888 about producers, consumers and the control of land and capital. The Fabians had a policy of gradualism and 'permeation', that is the use of organised influence inside institutions to encourage social change. [25]

G. B. Shaw gave nearly a thousand lectures around Lancashire from 1888 to 1898 to convert people to his brand of socialism. [26] Feminists were wary of him, because they distrusted his levity and capriciousness. However, he really believed that a combination of men's idealism and women's practicality would be better than the patriarchal government practised in the early twentieth century. The best of Shaw was his insistence on women's economic independence. [27]

In 1906 he said, 'The only decent government is government by a body of men and women, but if only one sex must govern, then I should say, let it be *women* — put the men out! Such an enormous amount of work done is of the nature of national housekeeping, that obviously women must have a hand in it'. [28] Compare this statement with Margaret MacDonald's speech when she chaired the first conference of the WLL in June 1906. Then she said, 'Their [women's] share of the [political] work was no mean one because all the problems were associated so much with the home and daily life of the workers'.[29]

Margaret MacDonald, like other Fabian women, was concerned about the economic dependence of working-class women. [30] She was alert to the need to follow quickly when the Labour Party succeeded in forming a sizeable Opposition. The time was appropriate, and the Labour Party was the only party which had expressed its willingness to 'recognise women's full rights as citizens and fellow workers in behalf of social and political reform'. [31]

There were probably at least two other reasons why women formed the League. One concerned the banishment of women from the London borough councils which occurred as the result of a facetious debate in the

House of Lords when a member joked that councils included alderMEN, and how could a woman be an alderMAN? This was a 'joke' which eliminated women from council work in the London municipalities for several years. G.B. Shaw attempted to give publicity to the need for women on public bodies, but *The Times* declined to publish the letter he wrote. He probably discussed this hindrance at meetings of the Fabian Society and made many people aware of it.[32]

The second reason was again a Shaw anecdote about being present at a sub-committee meeting of the London County Council Health Committee, whose 'grave elderly men members' burst into a roar of laughter when a speaker uttered the word 'pregnant'. Shaw maintained that the only way to repress such schoolboy behaviour was to have women present on committees. [33]

Many women must have wanted to change this behaviour, caused by the excessive prudery of the times. To have it condemned by an eminent Fabian who believed in emancipation and the economic independence of women must have encouraged them to go forward with their plans for an influential league of political women. Margaret MacDonald, as leader of the WLL, once asserted, 'My socialism grows entirely out of my religion'. [34]

Margaret MacDonald was religious. She attended the Presbyterian church in Scotland and the Anglican church in England. She believed that 'the perfection of the human soul consists in serving Christ daily. The assuming of religion at intervals contradicts its essential idea'. [35] As a devout Christian (she liked to be called a Presbyterian Quaker) she would not in any way condone the mockery of maternity, given that the Christian religion itself taught the veneration of Mary, the mother of Jesus Christ. MacDonald was also one of a group of 'social feminists', so-called because they connected social reform with obtaining women's rights, particularly the rights of women workers. This group had existed since the late nineteenth century, and among its members were Clementina Black, Catherine Webb and Margaret Llewellyn Davies. Clementina Black attended Trade Union Congress meetings and had written a report on married women's work, and the other two women were leaders of the Women's Cooperative Guild (WCG). They were part of the Women's Industrial Council (WIC) in 1894.

What was the WIC doing in 1906? On its behalf Margaret MacDonald was conducting a 'truck' enquiry, and had helped to mount an

exhibition of 'sweated work'. [36] 'Truck' meant the practice of employers 'who fined or otherwise cheated workers of their true earnings by deductions for lateness; paying for necessary materials required to complete the job; charging for gas or electricity used; and paying for spoilt work'. [37] MacDonald would be glad of the formation of the WLL at this time. Soon it would be able to pressure MPs to outlaw such practices.

The new Labour MPs had to adjust to working with the Liberals. They were gratified when, in return for Labour support, the Liberals passed the Trades Disputes Act of 1906, which then protected trade union funds, thus pleasing the trade unionists' section of the Parliamentary Labour Party. [38] Then the Independent Labour Party declared itself socialist and supported Votes for Women, but even that organisation emphasised working-class solidarity rather than socialism.

Victor Grayson stood as an independent socialist without Labour Party endorsement, and won the seat of Colne Valley in Lancashire. Enthusiastic canvassing by women won this seat for him, because only Philip Snowden of the Labour Party had supported him — a sign of the rivalry between the official Labour Party and socialists. Grayson later wrote articles for *Woman Worker* urging women to maintain their interest in politics. [39] Women had to learn to be more careful in their choice of candidate, because neither Shackleton nor Grayson advanced their cause.

The Labour Party National Executive Committee (NEC) minutes recorded on 4 February 1906 that the salaries of Labour MPs be paid for two months from February, 1906. [40] Funding was not easy for the new party. (The central government did not pay MPs' salaries until 1912). Some working-class men may have thought that a women's organisation was unaffordable while salaries for MPs had to be paid, and indeed the League did get an extra allocation of money in 1912 when all MPs received government salaries. [41] In spite of the envy of some men the WLL was established by the efforts of women.

Some women had always been interested in politics, but were prevented by patriarchal convention from openly participating. Victorian custom had confined middle-class women to their domestic sphere, deprecated public speaking by women, and thought them incapable of understanding political science. However, when women's own lives were disrupted by oppressive and unjust political decisions, and they were unfairly accused of child neglect, then they became increasingly interested in political action.

Several wealthy women of the later nineteeth century had worked to improve the education of girls. By 1898, over two-thirds of British girls had access to secondary education, and in 1902 the Tory government passed an Education Bill which tidied up the piecemeal growth of secondary education, gave control of it to county boards and county boroughs, and greatly increased the number of teacher training colleges, which enabled single women to train for a professional career. [42]

By 1906 there were educated, articulate and efficient women who could act as leaders for a Labour Party women's organisation, and, bound by their socialist convictions, were able to cooperate amicably with working-class women in active politics.

Moreover, there was an element of pioneering in being involved in politics which followed neither liberal nor conservative ideas. They could argue convincingly, not only for their own rights, but for the rights of all people, and counter the trenchant criticisms of their claims, not only from men, but from other women antagonistic to such modern aspirations.

Working-class women with an education that ended at the age of twelve must have strongly resented the injustices they perceived in society /to have resolved to join in political protests. Hannah Mitchell listed some of the practicalities which had to be overcome for a working-class woman to devote time to political activism. She wrote of the 'tyranny of meals' which clamps down on one immediately on marrying. She mentioned the disgruntlement of husbands when their wives were out too often, and said, 'No cause can be won between dinner and tea and most of us... had to work with one hand tied behind us, so to speak'. [43] Women conscious of their exploitation interpreted it in terms of class conflict. [44] Only a minority became Labour Party activists.

A few of the working-class members of the WLL had taught themselves to read and write. As well as Mrs. Cawthorne, Hannah Mitchell claimed that she had had only a fortnight's schooling, being the fourth of six children on a remote Derbyshire farm. Yet she became a 'speaker in demand' in the suffrage campaign, and the lecturer/secretary of the local 'Labour churches' in Ashton-under-Lyne.[45] Margaret MacDonald could work with five children around her because she had money and experienced leaders to help her. It is not clear why she was given the task of establishing the national WLL, when Mary Macpherson had proposed it, and groups were in existence before the 1906 conference. MacDonald was already involved with the Investigations Committee of

the Women's Industrial Council, which monitored wages and conditions for women workers.[46] Perhaps Ramsay felt that he needed to know what the WLL was doing, and with his wife in charge he could easily find out. Christine Collette conjectures that Mary Macpherson had envisaged a separatist Women's Party, to work as an equal partner, alongside the men's party, and it does seem that there was some dissatisfaction about the lack of independence on the part of the Railway Women's Guild, for they delayed affiliation to the WLL until 1909. [47]

On 16 March 1906 the temporary executive of the WLL sent out a letter to Labour Party constituencies, stating that 'A national Women's Labour League in connection with the Labour Party has been formed with a central committee for organising and advisory purposes'. The letter urged the recipient to get in touch with the trade unions, the cooperative societies, the Independent Labour Party, the Social Democratic Federation and other organisations in the town, so that an inaugural meeting could be held and a branch formed, which could send a representative to a conference at Leicester in June. [48] Ramsay MacDonald was Member of Parliament for one of the Leicester constituencies, and the choice of this venue again suggests that he wished to keep the projected league under close scrutiny.

It is a credit to the temporary executive that in such a short time they rallied over one hundred delegates to the June conference in 1906. They probably advertised the conference through the branches of the main Labour Party, and through such supportive women's organisations as the Women's Trade Union League, and the Women's Cooperative Guild.

Margaret MacDonald chaired the conference, and she strongly emphasised that Labour women had always had equality with the men, and had worked with them for social and political reform. [49] Margaret MacDonald was very knowledgeable about the conditions and pay of women workers owing to her work for the Women's Industrial Council, and in 1906 she investigated 151 laundries. [50]

Other women with knowledge of women workers were on the first Executive Committee. There was a member of the Poor Law Guardians, an ILP member, a secretary from Leeds WLL, a member of the Central London branch of WLL, Mrs Macpherson of the Railway Women's Guild and Mary Macarthur, the dynamic secretary of the Women's Trade Union League. [51]

The women decided that their 'object' was to work for independent Labour representation in connection with the Labour Party, and 'to obtain direct Labour representation of women in parliament and on all local bodies'. This last clause was 'daringly added' after a long discussion, by Isabella Ford, an ILP member and a highly respected activist on behalf of young women workers in Yorkshire. [52]

Unlike the Labour Party, the WLL provided for individual members to join, for one shilling per annum, often paid at a penny a time. The women present decided on five aims or 'methods'. The first was to work with the Labour Party both locally and nationally, and to help Labour candidates at election time. The second stated that they would educate themselves on political and social questions, by means of meetings, discussions, distribution of leaflets, etc. The third aim was to take an active interest in the work of the Poor Law Guardians, educational bodies, Distress Committees, Town, District and County Councils and MPs. Next came a promise that they would work for the full rights of citizenship for all women and men, and the last was what Margaret MacDonald was most interested in — to watch the conditions of women workers in their own neighbourhood, and strive, where possible, to improve their social and industrial positions. [53] In the course of this first meeting the women suggested about a dozen issues which they were eager to investigate, such as 'sweating', feeding school children, the medical inspection of school children, free education, fairness to natives, and hours that shop girls worked.

Mary Macpherson was the first secretary appointed, but in 1907 she resigned due to ill-health, and Mary Middleton took her place. Middleton was the eldest daughter of an Ayrshire miner, had been a domestic servant, and was of a quiet and happy disposition. She became a close friend of Margaret MacDonald. [54] For the next five years the two worked together, as secretary and leader, at sending directives to provincial branches, and exhorting them to work in their town for the Labour Party.

The lack of correspondence from headquarters to the branches inevitably detracts from our knowledge of the effectiveness of their work. But extracts from the branch reports were included in all the annual conference reports up to 1911. After the League leaflet became *Labour Woman* in May 1913, Dr. Marion Phillips continued to publish branch reports, probably for the benefit of new branches, to help them to decide about their activities, because Mary Middleton had written in the first

League leaflet (in 1911): 'One of the great difficulties experienced by a new branch is what will be the best work to take up'. [55] The WLL modelled itself on the men's Labour Party, to the extent that their early conferences were held in the same place as the men's conferences. They followed a similar procedure, and invited branches to send in resolutions in advance to the national executive committee of the WLL, whose agenda sub-committee then selected which resolutions were discussed. Branches could send a delegate for every twenty five (or part of twenty five) members. There was a formal order of agenda for the annual conference, which involved the appointment of scrutineers, tellers and a Standing Orders Committee. The rules and by-laws specified the dates by which resolutions, amendments and nominations should be forwarded, and required that a new executive of ten be elected at each annual conference.

Leaflets and pamphlets were continually produced for the benefit of women inexperienced in conducting conferences, and there were always advisers to hand. In the year before the First World War Marion Phillips produced a leaflet of twelve pages for a penny on *How to do the work of the League.* She was fulfilling Margaret MacDonald's pledge made in 1909 that

> We do not want to organise ourselves separately from the men, but we have found that the best way to cooperate effectively with them is to educate ourselves. To teach ourselves to discuss and understand and take responsibility for our knowledge and at the same time our power to do right. [56]

Immediately after each annual conference the new executive met, and arranged for bi-monthly meetings. By 1911 when both Margaret MacDonald and Mary Middleton died, twenty seven women had served on the executive, some being re-elected a number of times. Ad hoc sub-committees were appointed by the Executive when needed, as well as standing committees such as the literature and the literature/publicity sub-committee and the general purposes sub-committee. Useful leaflets were distributed on topical concerns. The first one was appropriately entitled *Why Women Want a Labour League* and argued that women's opinion and experience was of special value to the whole party.

The administration of the WLL in the early years was uncomplicated. The organisers visited the provinces and contacted the

WLL branches which had written to them, and attempted to inspire the formation of new branches. By travelling out to the remote branches of the WLL the middle-class organisers came across disturbing instances of poverty, for underlying the discontents that had caused the Boer war was the need for the government to accept and act upon the fact that Britain's dominance in industrial technology was at an end. Other modern nations like the USA, Germany and even Japan were usurping Britain's position in various branches of industry, such as engineering, chemicals and textiles. Though there were many skilled tradesmen in the new unions, outside them was also what E. J. Hobsbawm refers to as the 'stagnant mass of poverty at the bottom of the social pyramid [which] remained nearly as stagnant and as nauseous as before'. [57]

Since Seebohm Rowntree had conducted his survey of poverty in York in 1902, incomes had stopped improving, the cost of living had increased and the unskilled workers earned barely a subsistence wage. Campbell-Bannerman, the Prime Minister in 1906, had written in 1904 that millions of British people were 'constantly on the verge of hunger'. [58] Collection of employment and wages statistics revealed the conditions of working-class life, and caused a change of attitude to poverty. People no longer blamed the inadequacy of the individual, but under- and un-employment and the fact that wages were too low to maintain physical efficiency. Women, often the financiers of the household, were well aware of the strain, and so were the planners for the new League, because on the elected executive were women acquainted with Boards of Guardians who were dealing with problems of poverty and women such as Margaret MacMillan, one of two American sisters who worked for the better nurturance of young children and for the universal provision of nursery schools.

Margaret MacMillan would have been a splendid asset to the first conference, able to pass on advice about the school meals service and the care of children under five. She would have encouraged pressure for school meals by mothers, though not as school board members, because the Education Act of 1902 had deprived women of the right to be elected to school boards. [59] Women were encouraged by the WLL to work for local authorities, and many did try to be elected to the new Education committees, and later to Maternity and Child Welfare committees, set up by Local Authorities after the government issued a circular offering a grant of 50 per cent towards expenditure on health and welfare work in 1915.

But there were never as many WLL women as Cooperative Guild women who took up this work, as Caroline Rowan has pointed out in her work on the WLL. [60]

There were women leaders of other organisations elected to this first executive. Charlotte Despard was a well-known activist, also interested in feeding hungry children. She founded the Women's Freedom League in 1907, and devoted her energies to the suffrage question and to publishing *The Vote*, but she was ready to give new recruits to political activism the benefit of her experience. [61] Mary Macarthur was the most dynamic leader on the first executive. She was dedicated to improving the position of women workers, was an outstanding platform speaker and an enthusiastic organiser. Her aim was to spread the message among all women workers that they should organise and act collectively to ameliorate their status as workers. At the second conference (1907) she said that

> Members were left free to agitate the question [of suffrage] on whatever lines appear best to them but I re-affirm the need for the recognition of the equality of women and men as citizens and direct representatives. [62]

In 1906 Macarthur had established the National Federation of Women Workers (NFWW), a general union for women which soon had two thousand direct members in seventeen branches. [63] In these first years of the WLL Macarthur was elected six times to the executive committee, thus revealing the confidence with which Labour women regarded her — 'golden-haired Macarthur, fine and tall and erect'. This was how she was remembered in 1934. [64] However, following a disagreement with Margaret MacDonald about the effectiveness of trade boards, which Macarthur fervently believed in, the latter had resigned from the WLL executive by 1911, though she still attended some of its conferences. [65]

It is apparent that Mary Macarthur was hoping to get the help of WLL women in her efforts to persuade women to join their appropriate union. The annual conferences would provide her with access to the women of many provincial branches, and she could also publish her views in the League leaflets. She miscalculated the power of the desire for female franchise, however, because when some of the women at the first conference realised that the WLL rejected women's suffrage in preference

to adult suffrage (as adopted by their menfolk), they decided to leave the WLL.

Edith Rigby, secretary of the Preston branch resigned, saying that she preferred to join the band of women willing to work for the vote. She was referring to the Women's Social and Political Union, of course. [66] Mary Gawthorpe also left her place on the WLL Executive to become deeply involved in the WSPU's militant programme.

Mary Macarthur revealed what she really wanted from the League in the wording of the resolution which she moved, which was seconded by Edith Rigby. The resolution said:

> That this conference is in favour of further legislation in the direction of regulating hours and conditions of labour for shops, laundries, home-workers and child workers, state compensation for accidents and diseases incidental to employment, and abolition of fines and deductions. [67]

Macarthur, experienced in platform speaking, used the conference to call for state intervention to improve conditions for women and child workers. She must have been well aware of the use of resolutions to publicise a cause, and gave the audience of representatives from all over the country some ideas to take back with them to country and city branches. Representatives of the Central London branch, the first in the London area, were at the conference and before the second annual conference took place, had formed four more metropolitan Women's Labour Leagues. [68] As one would expect the London branches were well documented.

London was one of the nine districts in the country, each of which had an 'organiser', a woman paid to go to the area and form WLL branches connected to the local Labour Representation Committee members. 'There were few local LRCs — only 14 in 1907', wrote G. D. H. Cole. [69] North-east and north-west England were two separate districts, as were the midlands and the eastern counties. The southern and the home counties were differentiated from London, and Wales and Scotland were each administered as separate districts which held their own annual conferences every year.

The first leaders of the WLL seem to have allowed the branches to be quite autonomous, and to decide for themselves the kind of work

which they would choose to do. Often ILP men had given women a chance to put forward motions, to move resolutions and to practise chairing meetings. When the WLL began, if they had no place to meet, a prosperous ILP branch such as the one at Nelson offered meeting space rent-free. [70] All was not smooth sailing, however, because the second conference report reveals that 'organising work has been much hindered by lack of funds'. The women decided to start a fund to pay speakers' expenses, and their leader started it off with a donation of £20. They also wrote a circular letter to Labour Representation Committees and Trade Councils asking for cooperation in the work of organising branches, and even appealed to the executive committee of the Labour Party to use their influence in getting local leagues formed. [71] These were only teething troubles, for by 1911 there were 86 branches, and reports coming in from the provinces proved that Labour women were asserting themselves to demand social reform in their own communities. A unique organisation had entered the British political world.

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CHAPTER 2

LEADERS AND GRASS ROOTS

The British Labour Party was the first political organisation in Britain to attract a mass membership of working-class women. As a rule only a minority of the working-class is politically committed and active, and possibly many will have had little or no training in the handling of ideas, let alone analysing them. In the party of their choice they will be continually faced with the need for compromise and adjustment with their more experienced middle-class colleagues. Some well-educated middle-class women, able to access information, and skilled in communication, can become leaders of the more numerous working-class members. Both classes of women learn from each other as they pursue the political goals in which they have faith. Can their alliance as a feature of the Women's Labour League be considered a success? In this chapter I shall examine who became leaders of women in the WLL during the years from 1906-1918.

I shall assess their relationship both with their members and with the men of the Labour Party. Then I will look at their attitude towards the political work (sometimes unexpected) with which they were confronted, and the cost of the involvement of both classes of women. I shall end the chapter with a case study which will compare and contrast a working-class leader with a middle-class one.

Throughout the last decade of the nineteenth century a 'new' woman was emerging — one who declined to be the 'angel in the house' that Virginia Woolf thought needed to be slain, if ever woman was to achieve anything of education.[1] In the early twentieth century in Britain only upper- and middle-class men had access to extended education. All children had been compelled to attend school since the 1870 Education Act, so both women and men of the working class had been given an equal chance to become literate and numerate — a necessary requisite for an understanding of political science. Working-class women leaders did appear, such as Margaret Bondfield, and Margaret McKay. [2] Middle-class women, though not as highly educated as their brothers, had access to tertiary education and could enter the professions. Could working-class women have formed their own organisation in 1906 without the aid of

middle-class leaders? I think they needed first to follow their more experienced sisters.

LEADERSHIP

It is understandable then that the WLL's first leaders were either middle-class in terms of their father's or husband's occupation, were married to leading figures in the Labour Party, or were professional women in their own right — doctors, lawyers or qualified teachers.

On the first elected executive of the WLL in 1906 were women who were leaders in other organisations, whose experience would be useful in guiding the new WLL. Charlotte Despard was the wife of a magistrate's son, and when she became a widow she devoted herself to social reform, beginning with hiring a nurse to treat ailing school children, whom she scooped up from the streets. [3] She was president of the Women's Freedom League and so was able to spread news about the WLL.

Another leader of women was Mary Macarthur, daughter of a prosperous conservative draper in Glasgow. She joined the Shop Assistants' Union and became dedicated to the task of improving the economic position of young women workers, founding the National Federation of Women Workers (NFWW) in 1906, and publishing the *Woman Worker* for a penny — again an outlet for news about Labour women.[4]

Mary Macpherson, who acted as WLL secretary for the first year,was a graduate and a linguist for international conferences, helping to keep contact with continental socialist women. Other women on the executive were the wives of Labour Party men. Mary Middleton was married to J. S. Middleton, assistant secretary to the Labour Representation Committee and Margaret MacDonald was the wife of Ramsay, the national secretary. Socialist marriages meant shared socialist ideals. As political colleagues as well as wives such women had learned much about political organisation.

Having politically experienced women on the executive meant that more than one leader was always available. These middle-class women wanted to be involved in meaningful political activity outside their homes. By contrast, working-class Labour women, the rank-and-file of the WLL, were seeking to widen their knowledge of public affairs and to acquire some political skills, hoping to find means of working for a better

future. Working-class women took longer to attain leadership, due to financial, family and health constraints.

Margaret MacDonald was formally established as Chair of the WLL at the inaugural meeting (9 March 1906). MacDonald was experienced in administration. She had been the first woman appointed to a British Association Committee of Enquiry into the effects on women of industrial legislation. [5] She had travelled in Europe, the colonies and the USA, and could speak French and German. Millicent Fawcett had instructed her in political economy at King's College. MacDonald's aspirations for the WLL were not radical. All she wanted was for that 'great majority of women whose first duty ... is to their home and their children to take part in the civic life which surrounds and vitally affects their home life' (and to do political work for the Labour Party.) [6]

MacDonald wrote about the civic activity and political work in a *Women's Labour Day Souvenir* in 1909 when she had actually seen such work being undertaken by the women. She wrote of deputations, petitions, letters to MPs, street corner speaking, talks over the wash-tub with unconverted friends, and such political work as going from door to door leaving political leaflets or asking for signatures to some petition. The members also canvassed in by-elections, and up-dated electoral rolls. The basic work was usually done by the lower class, but some middle-class women also did it willingly to demonstrate their altruism.

Immediate involvement, that drew upon nineteenth-century assumptions about women's interests and capacities was provided by the passage of three pieces of legislation concerning social welfare. These were the Education (Provision of Meals) Act (1906) by which cheap school meals for children attending public elementary schools were given statutory recognition, and the Education (Administrative Provisions) Act (1907), which ordered medical inspection for all elementary school children. The third Act opened up a new area of activity for competent middle-class women. This was the Qualification of Women Act (1907) which enabled women (married or single) to sit as councillors or mayors or chairmen on county or borough councils. The first of these Acts was 'the Labour Party's own'. [7]

Educated, experienced leaders proved their worth at this time in translating the legal language into more accessible terms for working-class women, who then monitored their local Education Authority to see if it

intended to implement the Acts. The women soon learnt the meaning of the terms 'permissive' and 'mandatory', and how local authorities used the first term to excuse themselves from providing meals for needy children.

News from provincial branches, which formed a large percentage of the WLL annual reports until the First World War, sometimes described the methods used to stir the conscience of the councils which had done nothing to provide school meals. At Gateshead the WLL members took part in a procession of hungry children to try to arouse public feeling, and also collected signatures for a petition to the town council. [8] Cleverly, the Central London branch of the WLL pressured the London County Council into voting £10,000 to the scheme by writing to the press about the LCC's negative attitude. [9] This Provision of Meals Act preceded the twentieth century reform of the Poor Law, and was the first to supply a free service under an authority different from, and without the taint of, the Poor Law. The open provision of meals also acknowledged the difficulty for under-paid workers of satisfying their children's hunger.

In these years, by articles in Labour papers and leaflets put out by the WLL, the diversity of the League's membership and its work were publicised. In 1909 Margaret MacDonald wrote a column in *Woman Worker*, and welcomed as a member a professor of Sanskrit at London University, stressing that

> We want the women who are learned to help the women who hardly know their ABC, we want the women who know and study history to bring their trained intelligence to bear upon present-day problems. [10]

She probably hoped by such publicity to encourage other middle-class women to join what appeared to be a predominantly plebeian group, but actually one which had a good proportion of well-educated women.

Ordinary women of the working class did sincerely commit themselves to political activity, but the conditions of everyday life were more difficult than they are today. Women really did have to spend long stretches of time to produce tolerably comfortable home conditions. The temperate British climate necessitated some heating every day, except for a few weeks in summer. I remember that, due to the winter chill, a coal fire had to be lit every morning, however perverse the wood and paper

needed to ignite the coal, a dirty fuel which pollutes the air and deposits fine layers of soot on furnishings, then as now. Electrical household appliances were unavailable. Gas for lighting and cooking was pungent and could be unhealthy. Most poorer houses would have only one gas ring on which to cook, in addition to the coal fire.

There was usually only a cold-water supply to rows of houses, so heating water was a never-ending chore, and to undertake the laundry of a household in winter (when the annual rainfall was about forty inches per annum) was a daunting and time-consuming task. The housewife waged an endless battle against dirt. Dry-cleaning had not yet been introduced, nor the drip-dry fabrics of today. The female fashion was to wear several layers of long garments to ensure modesty and warmth, so grooming took longer, especially as women had to 'put up' their long hair.

Travel was lengthy and arduous, and only the rich owned motor-cars. Railway, tram and bus timetables were not conveniently frequent, because British cities were slow in adopting street traction, and so plenty of time had to be allowed to reach one's destination. [11] The streets were busy with many horse-drawn vehicles delivering goods or conveying people, and there was noise, dust and manure. Depending on the prosperity of the local authority, streets were not always paved or adequately cleansed, and pedestrians had to traverse pools of water and piles of rubbish on their way to shop or to work. (The Road Board was only established by Lloyd George in 1909). [12]

I dwell on these details to emphasise the difficulty which a working-class woman would have in organising her time so that she could be involved in political activity. Possibly few women who were actually working ever got to the annual conference, unless they attended one happening close-by when they were free, or snatched an hour or two from a day of rest. Even the elite of women workers, the cotton weavers, worked a ten-hour day, while women in sweat shops and 'domestic industries' sometimes worked even longer hours.

Child care, when families averaged from four to eight children, was another imperative not always easy to arrange unless there was a network of relatives, friends and neighbours. And, as the Insurance Bill of 1911 revealed, many women endured chronic ill-health through inadequate (or un-affordable) medical care and too much responsibility. Mary Macarthur believed that the health problems of married women workers were due to the triple strain of child-bearing, wage-earning and household drudgery. [13]

These deterrents did not usually apply to middle-class members of the WLL, and therefore we need to recognise the strong commitment to political action felt by many of the rank-and-file in order to compel authorities to improve their conditions. Even affluent women were expected to spend much time at home to supervise the domestic staff.

By the time the second conference met in 1907 one of these affluent women (Mary Macpherson) had resigned as secretary, owing to ill-health, and Mary Middleton was appointed as honorary secretary, and worked closely with Margaret MacDonald. Lucy Cox, who later became the third wife of James Middleton, wrote that 'the splendid friendship between the two Mrs M's laid the foundation on which the finest political organisation of women in Britain was later built'. [14]

Because the Labour Party had been responsible for introducing the Provision of Meals Act, Labour women took a special interest in it, and at the 1910 conference of the WLL a resolution from ILP women for the Act to be made compulsory inspired much support, and led to another resolution which expressed dismay at the vast and unnecessary starvation existing in all parts of the country. [15] This was an attention-seeking ploy probably promoted by the more politically aware women, encouraging the ordinary delegates to protest. Many women adept in politics thought it very necessary that working-class women make their own strong protest when injustice was perceived.

Later in the same year another leader sympathetic to the Labour Party wrote in her diary about the same subject, re-confirming the observation that some statesmen were uncaring. Beatrice Webb had been staying with the Haldanes (he was a liberal statesman), and wrote in her diary:

> What makes one despair is the atmosphere in which these leaders live. Their lives are so rounded off by culture and charm, comfort and power, that the misery of the destitute is as far off as the savagery of Central Africa....They don't realise the extent of the misery itself or the possibility of preventing it. [16]

Beatrice Webb had been an investigator for the Royal Commission on the Poor Law. She had also collected rents from working-class flats, and had stayed with the working-class relatives of her housekeeper and they had voted her 'good company and interesting like to talk to'. [17] Even

though her life had its culture and charm, comfort and power, she was more an ally than an enemy of working-class women. She wrote in 1910, after her work for the Royal Commission on the Poor Law,

> I enjoy the excitement of successful leadership. I like the consciousness of the use of faculties which have hitherto been unused — the faculty for public speaking and the faculty for organisation. [18]

Many of the women in the WLL, given the opportunity to become leaders, must have felt similar gratification. No-one wants a successful leadership to end, but in 1911, death ended the leadership, first of Mary Middleton, and then of Margaret MacDonald. Mary Middleton died of cancer in April and in September Margaret MacDonald died of blood poisoning, usually fatal before the discovery and use of penicillin in 1941.

Mary Middleton was a quiet and placid woman, who had continued secretarial work from her sickbed, and had attended the 1910 conference, though sick. The death of Margaret MacDonald was quite unexpected and shocked her family and friends who were euphoric in praise of her qualities. What did the grass-roots think of their leader?

It had been customary for WLL leaders to go out to the branches to encourage enrolment. Often after such a visit membership increased and activity was more vigorous. Lisbeth Simm, organiser for north-east England, was keen on inviting London leaders, and writing about their visits in the *Northern Democrat*, edited by her husband, M. T. Simm, who was an organiser for the Independent Labour Party (north east). Florence Nightingale Harrison Bell, Newcastle WLL branch secretary, who called herself Harrison Bell (and who can blame her?) wrote about the 1911 local conference:

> Later a reception was held with music and short speeches from Mrs. MacDonald, Mrs Annot Robinson, Margaret Bondfield and Marion Phillips with intervals for conversation, when the great who are MPs and Trade Union secretaries and so on were as plentiful as the flowers in June.[19]

And, she did not need to add, their presence was as short-lived.

The September 1911 paper reported on the visit of Gertrude Tuckwell, niece of and secretary to Lady Dilke, and reputed to be as beautiful in mind and character as she was in appearance. In the same issue the obituary notice about Margaret MacDonald recalled that after a public meeting at Jarrow, she was up betimes to catch the 8 a.m. express to London where, she laughingly said, 'five children and five committees awaited her'. [20] Rank-and-file women probably liked this intimate, friendly way of confiding in them. When she died a spokeswoman said,

> One of the reasons why Mrs MacDonald was so wonderful was her power of making diamonds from dust. She would take the unknown woman and set her to work in a good cause, bringing out unsuspected talents of organisation or speech. Her capacity for fitting jobs to people has been one of the greatest assets the Labour Party and the women's cause has ever had. [21]

Working women perceived that Margaret MacDonald had the 'common touch'. Despite her academic prowess and her place in society she was approachable and friendly. Many reports from the branches testify to the efforts which followers were making to catch the inspiration of these two leaders and to build up a women's Labour Movement. This phase of the WLL's administration has been called 'amateurish'. Middleton was a sick woman for most of the time, and MacDonald had probably too many commitments to fulfil all her aims for the organisation. These leaders allowed the branches to act autonomously, and judging by the reports that arrived at the London office, members seemed to be practising and spreading socialist ideas effectively. A list of the subjects discussed and lectured upon from the 1911 report has thirty-one subjects ranging from the WLL Housing campaign to Bernard Shaw's play *Getting Married*. Surely plenty of expansion of interest and concern was happening which employed the talents of both classes of women.

Margaret Bondfield temporarily took over the secretaryship of the WLL, and (nursing) Sister Kerrison, a rich socialist who had financed her own nursing training chaired the next conference. Together, leaders and followers decided to establish a baby clinic at North Kensington 'as a fitting memorial to the two friends'. [22] In the next year Margaret Bondfield was taken ill while on an organising tour, and the general secretaryship was offered temporarily to Dr. Marion Phillips, a young Australian historian

and a trained administrator, who had come to England in 1905 and joined the WLL in 1908. She had worked under the direction of Beatrice Webb for the Royal Commission on the Poor Law. Marion Phillips and Mary Longman lived with Dr. Ethel Bentham at Holland Park, and from there Phillips had founded the North Kensington branch of the WLL in 1910. [23] She was a good choice for a temporary general secretary while Miss Bondfield was on leave. Margaret Bondfield lived with her friend, Maud Ward, and some rivalry existed between these two feminist households.

In January 1912, Miss Bondfield resigned from the secretaryship for diverse reasons. Perhaps because she thought she was disrupting the executive, or because she was often travelling and so far away from the London centre. Another reason might have been resentment at the choice of a colonial, when an Englishwoman was available (herself), who had made a startling debut at the Trades Union Congress of 1899 — the only woman among 384 male delegates — and who had worked for the Labour Movement ever since. [24] Also perhaps because her real interest lay with the industrial, not the housebound woman.

Marion Phillips was appointed officially as secretary after Margaret Bondfield had formally resigned. The London and Home Counties membership now had a responsible and capable spokeswoman for women's rights, but the rank-and-file women had little influence over these jostlings for leadership. In the north west a different alliance was taking shape.

This was a merger of Labour men and suffragist women textile workers, which had formed when a motion at the 1912 Labour Party conference stated that any franchise bill which did not include the enfranchisement of women would not be accepted by the Labour Party. [25] Robert Smillie and the miners opposed this measure, but an alliance was formed between the Labour Party and the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) founded in London in 1897 by Millicent Fawcett. [26] The NUWSS linked groups of constitutional supporters of votes for women, those who deplored the violence practised by the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU).

THE GRASS ROOTS

When suffrage prospects seemed more hopeful in 1912, the NUWSS formed an Election Fighting Fund Committee (EFF) managed by

Catherine Marshall. As well as collecting money, it rallied active textile women trade unionists to canvass at by-elections for Labour Party candidates, who believed in votes for women. [27] These rank-and-file women now used their numbers to fight by-elections for Labour Party candidates. They used socialist methods of publicising their cause, such as pavement chalking, street corner meetings and distributing leaflets. [28] The latter was 'not as easy as the uninitiated might imagine. The terraced rows of houses did not boast letter-boxes. One had to find cracks between door and step, or door and wall through which the leaflets might be slid'. [29] Leaders had easily recruited working-class women because both fervently believed in this common cause.

The NUWSS had been started in Manchester, and was headed by university women, sympathetic to the economic troubles of women workers whom they charged one penny to join. These leaders trusted working-class women as organisers, and sent them to outlying districts where they were often disappointed by what they thought was the incompetence of the electoral machine of the local Labour Party. [30] Although in this campaign no Labour candidate was elected, the Liberal vote was reduced, and women disillusioned by the Liberal inaction regarding female franchise, joined the NUWSS. Women leaders of the NUWSS had the help and encouragement of Labour Party leaders such as Philip Snowden, Ramsay MacDonald, Keir Hardie, Arthur Henderson and Will Anderson. From 1912 to the outbreak of the First World War this competent organisation, which included *some* WLL women, amassed a fund of over £30,000 and employed sixty-one paid organisers. [31] The Labour Party was adept at the rallying of numbers of women in such causes, which made ordinary women feel useful to the party. A small number of alert leaders, usually middle class in origin, and a multitude of lower-class women seemed to be a pattern which suited the Labour Party's style of operating. Reaching non-political working-class women to inform them of their rights was a major undertaking.

At the end of 1911 the WLL executive published twice the usual number of leaflets to explain the National Insurance Bill prepared by William Beveridge. [32] The Bill greatly disappointed married women for their only right was a maternity benefit (paid to the husband) of 44 shillings. Children were not insured.

On 24 January 1912, the WLL Executive decided to ask their sister organisations, the Women's Trade Union League, the National

Federation of Women Workers and the Women's Cooperative Guild to form a small committee to watch the interests of working women in regard to the National Insurance Act. [33] The Industrial Women's Insurance Advisory Board was duly formed and used the WLL offices in London for its headquarters. Seven other women's groups joined the board and did useful work, including arranging classes for women workers to explain the provisions of the bill, and forwarding names of women suitable to be on local insurance committees to local authorities. By involving large numbers of women the WLL ensured that non-political women were made aware of their entitlements.

This action was so successful that the government later set up a Departmental Committee to inquire into alleged excessive sickness and malingering of women workers. Again the grass roots proved useful for they collected evidence of women's absence from work due to illness. The Departmental Committee itself began to hear evidence from doctors, approved societies and social workers.

In May 1914, Dr. Marion Phillips gave evidence before the Government Departmental Committee on Excessive Benefit claims (a committee of ten men and three women). Phillips said that she was 'the general secretary of an organisation of more than six thousand working-class women'. This was a political body largely occupied with educational work, but it also trained women for administrative duties. From a very large number of insured women, seventy two served on insurance committees, and of these the majority were married women not in paid employment.

Cultivating and nurturing the grass-roots had enabled Marion Phillips to impress the committee by the numbers of women contacted, and to advertise the existence of such supportive bodies. She asserted confidently that there was no extent of malingering. 'Fear of loss of wages induces women to go back too soon to work, which causes illnesses later'. She then boldly claimed that women in general needed more food, more rest, and more outside air, and that a great many suffered from pre-maternity illness. When asked if she thought that National Insurance was ever intended to compensate fully for wages she retorted, 'That is hardly the point I meant to make. My point was that even before the Insurance Act a great many women neglected illnesses altogether'. [34] She also took the opportunity to put forward a plea for more women doctors.

COOPERATION BETWEEN LEADERS AND GRASSROOTS

This cooperative exercise involved the collaboration of women workers and WLL leaders. The grass roots component supplied impressive numbers and collected the evidence, and the educated women presented it formally, mainly to refute mistaken assumptions about the integrity of women workers. This cross-class alliance was innovative in using the occasion to request further much needed health reform, which had to be reiterated continually almost until the Second World War in 1939.

Three years before the First World War, WLL leaders began to be uneasy about the state of the nation. The League sent a delegate to the Women's Cooperative Guild's Congress and Peace Council in Edinburgh in 1911. In 1912 they passed a resolution against secret diplomacy, and probably discussed conditions in Germany with a German social democrat who was a visitor. In May 1913 the League leaflet became *Labour Woman* and on page 98 of that issue an article appeared on 'Facts in Figures: the Cost of War'. Later in the 1913 conference the women were led to condemn the military bias of boy scouts! [35] WLL leaders were mainly ILP women who were against war. Marion Phillips spoke up for them in a lecture to the Fabian Society in 1913.

This lecture was aimed at the rank-and-file Labour members urging them not to pass 'pious pacific platitudes' but to play a more positive part. Phillips appealed to socialists to take more interest in foreign affairs, stating that only the ILP and the WLL had paid serious attention to international peace. These two bodies thought that a general strike (if war were imminent) would remove the feeling of apathy and helplessness among the workers. The difficulties of organisation could be overcome if miners and the transport unions agreed. [36] This was a plea to both sexes of the rank-and-file by a thoughtful leader dedicated to peace. But war was an exciting challenge — an escape from the drabness of life. No-one then envisaged the slaughter which would ensue when the First World War began in August 1914.

Rank-and-file women made a last protest inside (and outside) the Kingsway Hall on 4 August 1914. Leaders of the WLL, the WCG, the NUWSS and the International Suffrage Alliance had mobilised over two thousand women at very short notice. Millicent Fawcett of the NUWSS presided and declared that war was 'insensate devilry' for which vote-less women were not responsible. The assembly of mainly unionised women

passed two unanimous resolutions. One urged mediation by countries not yet involved, and the other advised women's organisations 'to offer their services to their country'. [37] 'But', as Margaret Bondfield wrote in her autobiography, 'when we came out the Guards were on their way to Dover. The die was cast. We were at war!' [38] This was a cross-class feminist response to war showing that middle-class women leaders could rally working-class supporters at call. But the *power* to avert war lay elsewhere.

The socialist response to war had been organised on 1 August by the British section of the International Socialist Bureau. The Bureau issued a manifesto signed by Keir Hardie, among others, as documentary proof that organised labour in Britain was united in its opposition to the war. A monster rally in Trafalgar Square on Sunday 2 August included all sections of the Labour Movement, and speakers representing a range of British socialist opinion addressed the vast gathering under a stormy sky.[39] By using the term 'speakers' this account conceals the presence of respected and eloquent women speakers such as Mary Macarthur, Margaret Bondfield, Marion Phillips and Charlotte Despard. But men and women socialists, nearly all members of the ILP, were united across classes in their abhorrence of war.

There are periods in history, such as at the beginning of a war, when a sudden sense of alienation is widespread. It is in such periods that leaders' deep convictions and special gifts can manifest themselves. A conference supported by the Labour Party, the Trades Union Congress and the Cooperative movement had been called to protest against the drift to war. By the time it met on 5 August 1914, the situation had so changed that it set up the War Emergency: Workers National Committee, (WE:WNC). Beatrice Webb later wrote,

> This body on which Sidney [Webb] sat did excellent work suggested by leaders on rents, prices, allowances for the families of enlisted men and pensions for war casualties. It also helped to secure representation of the workers on a whole range of government committees. [40]

Sidney Webb drafted many of the WE:WNC documents and through his membership began to build a new relationship with Labour politicians and trade union officials. This was quite a significant alliance by leaders for the protection of the workers in war-time. Women leaders

were included on the WE:WNC committee. They were Mary Macarthur, Margaret Bondfield, Marion Phillips, Susan Lawrence and Mrs. Gasson from the Women's Cooperative Guild. [41] Mrs. Gasson was on the 1909 WLL Executive. She must have been reticent about her private life, because we never learn her Christian name. Susan Lawrence, a former Conservative member of the London County Council, fought for better pay for school cleaners, and found this so difficult to obtain that she joined the Labour Party. [42] At first the WE:WNC committee concentrated on the effect of the war on workers as producers and consumers. When they investigated the producer aspect, the committee had to be tentative, because trade union organisers were involved, often not affiliated to the Labour Party and protective of their status. The WE:WNC acted to protect the workers' interests from day to day. [43] In March 1915, the Board of Trade invited women of all classes to register at labour exchanges. This angered trade union women and feminists as a devious way of introducing conscription for women. The WE:WNC brought together a large conference including women trade unionists, socialists, cooperators, and suffragists, because this was a time of great unemployment for women in the early months of the war. Mary Macarthur addressed the assembled women and urged them to join their appropriate trade union and to stand out for equal pay for equal work. All women, whether on men's or on women's work, should receive an adequate living wage. They should demand a) facilities for training, b) protection against unemployment after the war, and c) women representatives on the newly-constituted Labour Advisory Committees for women, and on courts of arbitration. [44] It is impossible to know if women workers followed this advice, and in any case unemployment for women was soon ended as war work proliferated. This was nevertheless a well-meant attempt on the part of WLL leaders to forewarn women about the trials of war-work.

Women leaders were innovative in suggesting ways to avoid the sudden eruption of masses of unemployed youngsters on the streets as the economy adjusted to military expenditure. A plan to protect the most insignificant of the grass roots — unemployed girls — was exercised when the WE:WNC asked local education authorities to keep school leavers at school by granting maintenance scholarships for girls as well as boys, so that they could stay at school until employment improved. [45]

From the annual reports of the three conferences held during the war in 1914, 1917 and 1918 we read how the WLL members were involved

in the WE:WNC's work. They joined in protests about food prices, demonstrated against conscription, and objected to attempts to use children as agricultural workers. When the WE:WNC asked the WLL to investigate pensions, they reported that the increase in the old age pension had been nullified by the rise in the cost of living. As pressure groups often do, they discovered anomalies in planned schemes, and found that the wives and children of men on torpedoed ships did not receive pensions. They declared that the pensions for wives of men shot after a court martial should be paid because 'they would have an additional burden to bear in the knowledge of the reason for their destitution.' [46] The WE:WNC acted as a pressure group for about two years of the war, protecting the grass roots from being crushed. Women benefited by involvement with its work, gaining useful knowledge about war-time laws and alerting the government to their competence in working in their own community.

By 1916 women trade union leaders became more concerned about the wages of women workers in industry. From 15 August 1915 all persons had to register for employment and by July 1917, 819,000 women had replaced men in the metal trades and engineering. [47] On 11 February 1916, Mary Macarthur called a conference of representatives of the Women's Cooperative Guild, the Railway Women's Guild (RWG), and the National Federation of Women Workers. The government had asked for an advisory committee to faciliate the carrying out of the proposals for the acceleration of output on government work, and Marion Phillips had suggested that the committee should include representatives of unionised women workers. Mary Macarthur then became Chair of the Standing Joint Committee of Industrial Women's Organisations (SJCIWO). Margaret Llewelyn Davies (daughter of a rector and educated at Girton) was the vice-chair, and Mary Longman (who lived with Marion Phillips and Ethel Bentham) was secretary. This committee was formed 'to represent the women of the political, industrial and cooperative movements of the workers'. Women's unions which were national and had over a thousand women members could join. Each member organisation instructed its branches to work together locally. [48] Within a short time Marion Phillips had been elected secretary and soon became spokeswoman for this organisation. The members helped to prepare documents and arrange deputations to Ministries. They also lobbied in the House of Commons. [49]

The objects of the SJCIWO were to forward the interests of working women and secure their representation. The Trades Union Council, the WLL and the cooperatives could each send eight delegates to it, and the other organisations one delegate for the first 5,000 members. The rules say that 'no campaign shall be commenced, nor any action taken, until each represented organisation has had an opportunity to consider and support the action proposed'. [50] Both the Labour Party and the government recognised this democratic body as the 'main voice of women in industry'.[51]

By 1922 the Labour Party executive committee had decided that the four women on the executive should be their delegates to the SJCIWO, but they allowed the annual WLL conference to elect the other four — an equal number of leaders and ordinary women. Marion Phillips had now attained a powerful position as leader of other leaders as well as of rank-and-file women. Ambitious women were able to advance their status by their service in the SJCIWO, for this organisation was one of the most significant developments of the women's trade union and political movements. It had a curiously unanimous birth in 1917 — letters proposing its formation from the WTUL to the WLL and vice versa actually crossing in the post. [52]

As women workers and their leaders thought of the right to work for women in 1917, a middle-class leader was thinking of all women's political rights. The Asquith government realised the need for a new franchise bill to enable soldiers to vote when the war was over. Millicent Fawcett wrote to Asquith demanding that women should not be forgotten, and Asquith had to admit that 'women have aided in the most effective way in the prosecution of the war'. [53] Over a period of months the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies pressured the government, and in 1918, the Representation of the People Act gave men the vote on the basis of residence, and women the vote if they were householders or the wives of householders and had reached the age of thirty. The Act passed the House of Commons by a majority of 289, probably because there was no danger of the women's vote being higher than the men's.

In November, Marion Phillips on behalf of the SJCIWO invited the Labour Party to cooperate with it in forming a deputation to Sir George Cave, to ask him to give government support to an amendment extending the municipal franchise to women on the same terms as men, and this

was passed in the House of Commons. [54] Class collaboration now replaced class rivalry. Labour men and women acted cooperatively in a matter which affected them all. Middle-class women leaders were at last sure of the vote for their followers who had turned thirty.

Isabella Ford, a Labour activist and a founder member of the ILP, wrote during World War I that 'she was proud of the ILP's stand on the war. No other party had stood for common sense and civilisation, to say nothing of the principles of Christianity and humanity'. [55] This declaration was timely because some of the leaders of the WLL were members of the Independent Labour Party which was passionately pacifist. They did not exhort women to join the forces or to work in munitions, but when women took routine, monotonous work in war-time the WLL, often working through the War Emergency: National Workers Committee, tried to ensure that they were not exploited. In this they were not successful because a common practice developed of 'diluting' the work of one skilled or semi-skilled man into un-skilled tasks to be performed by two or three women at a very low rate of pay.

Two million women were estimated to be directly replacing men in paid work by the end of the war, largely drawn from the working-classes, transferees from declining industries or escapees from domestic service. They undertook de-skilled, feminised tasks in munitions for a wage less than half that of a man. Economic necessity was the main reason for women working and only during the last two years of the war did women begin to respond to the pleas of trade union organisers and WLL leaders to join their union. [56] The war gave women the opportunity to join in a corporate life and to be more aware of public affairs. There was a small improvement in the average female wage, more willingness to unionise and a wider choice of work after the war, but women were still regarded as cheap and docile labour doing 'women's work'.

The WLL's monitoring of women's lowly status in the labour force and their work for pensions and welfare was their answer to the inhumanity and militarism of the war which had been foisted on them. They also supported the Union of Democratic Control (formed November 1914) which aimed for open diplomacy and a firm and fair peace. They had some sympathy for conscientious objectors and acted to monitor their treatment before tribunals and courts. These kinds of activities maintained institutional and personal contact between the Independent Labour Party and the Labour Party, so that in spite of their differences the two

organisations did not split and this helped post-war reconstruction. Nevertheless the silences are eloquent in the first two WLL conferences of the war. There is no hint of the hostility and unpleasantness which was almost certainly shown to people who were openly against the war.

By 1917 women who worked in munitions were provided with improved amenities. There were welfare supervisors and a rest room with trained nurses on day and night shift. Girls had a separate canteen and mixed with the men in an aircraft factory very little. A women's aeroplane fitting shop was set up and proved efficient. Later the women did machine tool-fitting and inspection work. Some women welfare supervisors provided a free daily pint of milk for those who worked with TNT. But working-class women were wary of too much supervision. [57] 1917 was a grim year of the war, so the news of the Russian revolution in February and the overthrow of the oppressive Tzarist regime was hopeful news to socialists in the Labour Party (which they thought they should act upon). Accordingly, a united council of socialists from the British Socialist Party, the Independent Labour Party and various smaller socialist bodies arranged to hold a convention at Leeds on 3 June 1917 to greet the Russian revolution and to encourage British democracy to follow this successful socialism. Delegates from militant left to extreme right attended — about one thousand one hundred and fifty of them, including Marion Phillips from the WLL. Lisbeth Simm, the second WLL delegate, was unable to attend. About fifty four women were present along with men leaders of the left such as Mann, Macdonald, Snowden, Smillie, Tillett, and Anderson.

There had been strikes in May 1917 and since the middle of April the government had been worried about the commitment of the working classes to the war, and the Cabinet had called for detailed reports on labour unrest. Some of the delegates must have known of this unease, for Robert Smillie, the miners' leader, uttered a reassuring quip for the government spies to pick up: 'We have come here to talk reason not treason'. [58] Large delegations from trade councils and local Labour parties, from trade union executives and branches, and from the ILP attended. Smaller groups from the British Socialist Party's women's organisations, the Council for Civil Liberties and the Union for Democratic Control were there, perhaps hoping to lessen the gap between the grass roots and the middle class. A resolution to set up Workers' and Soldiers' Councils like those in Russia was proposed by the fairly moderate Will Anderson. There were

discussions and spirited arguments, but nothing eventuated from this convention. Ralph Miliband observed that

> The Leeds Convention had fortuitously brought together revolutionaries and constitutionalists. But the gulf between them remained as profound as it had ever been and the installation of the Bolshevik regime in November 1917 only served to widen that gap.[59]

The Convention gave Marion Phillips knowledge that was useful to her as the Chief Woman Officer of the Labour Party. Like a government, a leader needs to be aware of both the open conflicts and those which are concealed. She could return to her followers and encourage them to consider how to meet the challenge of victory, knowing that the revolution was not about to happen.

Arthur Henderson, as leader of the Labour Party, was a member of the inner war cabinet of the war-time Coalition government. In May 1917, on behalf of the War Cabinet he went to Petrograd to assess the effects of the Russian revolution. He returned ready to encourage the presence of Labour delegates at a proposed socialist peace conference in Stockholm. However, passports were withheld and no-one could go. Beatrice Webb recorded Henderson's resignation from the government:

> On 11 August 1917, Henderson came out of the Cabinet with a veritable hatred of Lloyd George who insulted him at their last interview immediately after the Labour Party conference.... From that day Henderson determined to create an independent political party, capable of becoming His Majesty's government, and he turned to Sidney [Webb] to help him. [60]

Henderson also resigned as secretary of the Labour Party, and as the war drew to a close he was free to plan for the future. He wanted to unite the Independent Labour Party and Labour's right wing. MacDonald, Sidney Webb and Henderson collaborated in drawing up the new constitution of the Labour Party. As early as 12 October 1917 Henderson attended a WLL Executive Committee meeting to discuss the new constitution. The minutes record that 'in the discussion it was felt very strongly that special provision should be made for women to have

opportunities of discussing special women's questions or problems from the women's standpoint'. [61] This request was never ever acceeded to at subsequent meetings.

There were three new proposals for the new Labour Party. One was to establish individual membership (perhaps to accommodate the anti-war Liberals and Fabian intellectuals). The second was to include four women on the National Executive Committee of the Labour Party which was to be elected by the Labour Party conference. And the third was to adopt socialism. This was stated in Clause Four, a famous aphorism, which said that the aim was

> To secure for the workers by hand and by brain the full fruits of their industry, and the most equitable distribution thereof that may be possible, upon the basis of the common ownership of the means of production, and the best obtainable system of popular administration and control of each industry and service.

On 1 November 1917 a sub-committee of the masculine Labour Party leaders, including Henderson and MacDonald, reported their decisions to the National Executive Committee. Sidney Webb wrote the document *Labour and the New Social Order* which was published in 1918.[62]

The War Emergency: Workers National Committee had been a training ground for collaboration between unionists and theorists both masculine and feminine, and in formulating the new constitution consensus was made easier by the experience of the administrators of the WE:WNC. By March 1918, Cole, Webb, and Henderson established nine Labour Party Advisory Committees, one of which was already operating. This was the Standing Joint Committee of Industrial Women's Organisations under the leadership of Marion Phillips from 1916 — a sign that women were not being excluded. [63] Their inclusion, however, was hardly generous. Even the four women of the executive committee were to be elected by the main Labour Party Conference. At least this concession did recognise that WLL leaders were worthy of such promotion.

The loosely constructed Labour Party was now a national party with individual membership and a network of local branches, and the influence of trade unions was greater because of their block votes at Labour Party conferences. The ILP had little part in this reorganising

because of its attitude to the war. But the WLL (valuable because of the grass roots) was presented with a ready-made plan for its continuance. Henderson promised that, if the Labour Party conference agreed, the Labour Party would take over the assets and liabilities of the League at the end of January 1918. When he came to the 1918 WLL conference on 21 January he had already appointed an office secretary for Marion Phillips (now Honorary General Secretary), because the work due to reconstruction would soon greatly increase. [64] The WLL had just cleared its debts through a legacy of £450 left to it by Dorothy Hollins, a member. Henceforth outstanding debts would cease to worry them. The receipt of a legacy was unusual because women rarely left legacies to women (as Winifred Holtby asserted in 1934). [65] Leaders from the men's party came to the June 1918 WLL conference to explain that women could still continue their annual conferences. Ramsay MacDonald said that 'If they put life into the Women's Section, then they would be self-governing, and self-dependent'. The eleventh Annual Report of the Labour Party added to all this cajolery some words of praise:

> The Women's Labour League has been the first national, self-governing, political organisation of working women; its strength has lain in the knowledge that it is the expression of the political consciousness of the woman worker, as the trade union is the expression of her industrial solidarity. The work of these years has now led to a new step in the political emancipation of women and in the attainment of their full equality with men in the national organisation of the Labour movement. [66]

The branches, though consulted, were not given the chance to discuss objections. Indeed, when Mrs. Corrie said (at the 1918 WLL conference at Nottingham) that the suggested scheme would put them in the same position as the Conservative Primrose Dames, an Executive member suggested that such discussion should be postponed until the draft was clearer. [67] Such discussion never took place. The grass roots were now expected to support and guide executive members not elected by them. The delegates had been adroitly out-manoeuvred!

A CASE STUDY OF TWO LEADERS

I wish to examine the different routes to leadership taken by two women, one middle-class, the other working-class, which aspect of politics they worked in, and each one's relationship with the Women's Sections. The first we know about partly from her time at Cambridge University, the other from her autobiography, a classic form of self-expression for the working-class autodidact.

GRACE COLMAN (1892-1971) was the daughter of a canon of Worcester Cathedral and was educated at home with her brother and sister by governesses, who must have been good teachers because she won a scholarship to Newnham College, Cambridge, and later took honours in history and economics, but Cambridge did not confer degrees on women until 1947. She missed the social contact and rough and tumble of working-class elementary education, but gained excellent qualifications in a privileged and elite institution.

Grace Colman's family was Conservative and Church of England and she did not join the Labour Party until she was about to leave university in 1916. This probably indicates that she became a socialist by philosophical reasoning rather than by sentimental benevolence. Colman taught advanced subjects at Ruskin College for working-class men, for 5 years from 1920 until 1925, proving thus her concern to help the education of the working classes so that they could improve their earning power, and be more aware of the community and its needs.

Colman was a gifted teacher of difficult theory, tolerant of, and friendly to, her working-class students, and encouraging in the way she led them to participate in argument and discussion, so that they could deal with and understand the more difficult political concepts, and thus be able to explain them to their peers.

In 1925 she joined the General and Municipal Workers Union, because she became keenly interested in industrial questions. She attended branch meetings of dockers and was very interested in the problems of women members. Being a well-balanced person she kept up her student interest in sport (rowing), but also spent part of the summer teaching working-class women in summer schools. Over the years she extended her areas of teaching to include schools in the eastern counties and the south-west, found great satisfaction with this work and was very popular

with her students. She knew both the union organisation of the Labour Movement and the importance of its basic ideas.

In 1938, after a membership of six years, Grace Colman became the Chair of the Standing Joint Committee of Industrial Women's Organisations and encouraged the build-up of a peace front against Hitler, which would have pleased the majority of Labour women. In October 1940 she was chair of the twentieth National Conference of Labour Women, held at Southport, and during the Second World War she worked for the Ministry of Labour and the Board of Trade in London, turning out in the evening to do the work of an Air Raid Precautions Warden. Of course her record of good service was recognised, and she stood for parliament, but was not successful until 1945 when she became Tynemouth's first Labour M.P. She was eager to improve the security of the conditions and wages of men in the north-eastern fishing industry. She moved to live in the area and attended Women's Section meetings regularly, helping with recruitment. During the fifties she was a member of the Tyneside Fabian Society. She never completely retired but remained interested in social questions until the last year of her life. She died on the 7th July 1971, unable to walk, but researching the conditions of care for the aged, for she aimed to produce a report on the subject. [68]

ELIZABETH ANDREWS, born at Aberdare in Wales, wrote that she was the eldest of a family of seven girls and four boys. Her father was keen on politics, but could not read English, so she read and translated political speeches to him. She had listened to Keir Hardie and been stirred by him, and became immersed in politics while still a child. This was a religious and emotional decision rather than an intellectual one.

Andrews wrote of her early life for *Labour Woman* in 1948. She left school when she was thirteen and was apprenticed to a dressmaker. Later, Andrews married a Rhondda miner in 1911 and was secretary of a newly-formed Women's Section of an ILP branch. In time, she applied for a Labour Party position as women's organiser for Wales. She was appointed and supplied herself with a copy of the Labour Party constitution, a packet of notepaper from head office, a few large scale maps and a railway timetable provided from her own purse. [69] She took with her a firm belief in the political capacity of ordinary women and in the need for a dynamic Labour Party with an active women's section — a class working for itself.

In *Labour Woman* of May 1920, it is reported that she spoke to the WLL conference about the menace to national health and social welfare in the failure of the government to deal effectively with housing. [70] Mrs. Andrews had agreed in 1919 to appear with two other miners' wives to give evidence before the Sankey Commission about the woeful state of housing for miners. This was said to be the first time that working-class women had been invited to appear to give evidence to a royal commission and the commissioners were impressed by their attitude. [71] Later, when the workers' wives had at last been aroused and given a chance to express themselves, Andrews organised mass canvassing with a bell, to bring women out to street and cottage meetings in the 1920s. She recalled that the canvassers would lend their coats and shoes to the poorest women so that they looked 'respectable' enough to go to the polling booth. [72]

She was admired by communist women for her efforts when the miners were locked out. She then addressed twenty rallies of housewives between 12 and 13 May 1926. [73] However, she was staunchly anti-communist and alert to the attempts of Communist Party women to infiltrate the Labour Party. For the 1935 General Election Andrews encouraged the women's sections in Wales to process through the streets following tableaux of Peace and Socialism. There were also daily rallies of women against Part 2 of the 1934 Insurance Act which discriminated against married women. [74] As the campaign for the 1935 General Election was only a short one Andrews set aside one day for women's meetings only, and encouraged women to make rosettes with a portrait of the candidate, to be distributed to the voters. [75] Organisers had to maintain their interest in every aspect of social reform, and Andrews was present when the first nursery school under an education authority was opened in Wales for one hundred and twenty children. She gave the school a framed poem by Margaret MacMillan to mark the occasion. [76] The local Labour women had such regard for her that at the successful conclusion of the 1936 LPWO conference at Swansea, which she had organised, they presented her with a bouquet of red roses. [77]

Both these women showed a sincere faith in socialist doctrine, and were disseminating it at elementary and advanced levels. They showed resourcefulness in their planning, courage in travelling alone in strange places and initiative in the use of their shock troops. Colman had an easy relationship with her students, and women's rallies listened and learned from Andrews's propaganda. Andrews roused and enthused working-class

women so that they were encouraged to speak out about their deprived state. Away in the north east, Grace Colman had a scholarship instituted in her honour by the Northumberland Women's Advisory Council. This was awarded to the winner of an essay competition about socialism or labour politics.

Each woman conforms to the characteristics of her class. Grace Colman was a gifted individual concerned to contribute to the education of women in the Labour Movement. Elizabeth Andrews employed collective tactics to draw attention to the rights of working-class women.

The range of the work that each of these leaders undertook was immense. Colman attempted to provide the grass roots with a believable and inspiring British kind of socialism, and Andrews stimulated Welsh working-class women to make their own efforts to draw attention to their plight. Elizabeth Andrews is probably an example of the converts won for socialism by Keir Hardie through temperance and non-conformist religion. Both women kept up their work for the Labour Movement throughout most of their lives.They served the Women's Labour League differently but worthily.

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CHAPTER 3

SOCIALISM AND EQUALITY

It is a disorienting experience to be writing about early twentieth century women's faith in socialism, in 1990, when every night capitalist television screens depict major revisions to the meaning of socialism in eastern European socialist states. Can Max Frisch's pleasingly compact aphorism be true? He wrote that 'Socialism is the humanly impossible possibility'. [1] Anti-socialists have been arguing against this contention throughout the century. They argue against the basic belief of socialists in equality, the assertion being that equality is unattainable, and socialism itself a creed too difficult for imperfect human nature to follow. It seems that these European forms of socialism might end where they began — in Germany, where, after 1848, the new theory of political science took the name of its instigator. Other historians will eventually write the European political history of the last decade of the twentieth century. It is my task now to examine the commitment of the WLL to British socialism, and to assess its leaders' attempts to teach working-class women the meaning of socialism and the importance of equality.

In this chapter I shall discuss the face of feminism which sought equality, and how and where it began to show itself. I shall consider the socialist ideas which were being tested in the nineteen twenties, particularly those which caused dissension between men and women. Different types of socialism in Europe are at present about to be re-considered, but in the time-space of this thesis many women had a passionate and enduring belief in socialism, and in a socialism that meant equality for women and men quite as much as for worker and employer. While few women of the WLL have left evidence of their personal, political philosophies, it should be possible to speculate about their long-term goals by looking at their priorities after the First World War, and the strategies they used, and the opportunities they took, to achieve them. At times these goals brought them into conflict with socialist men who perceived different and more urgent goals. Sometimes same-class women united against women of another class. The women were not simply reactive, but determined to press for women's rights, seizing the chance to grasp at more equality in a patriarchal, capitalist democracy, rather than

delaying action until the socialist commonwealth was established, which they hoped for in some distant future. [2]

My argument is that the women made good use of the art of the possible, practising and spreading socialism wherever they could and reducing inequality in the home (the 'den of inequity' as one socialist calls it), [3] in child care, in education, in law and in the economy. The women who pursued these long-term goals had also to contend with antagonism from those who did not share their socialism. Nevertheless the WLL, as the only political champion of working-class women, did achieve a lessening of women's oppression.

I doubt if the majority of the WLL women could have written a theory of socialism. The leaders were probably aware that socialism had taken more than a century to be accepted. It is significant that the word 'socialism' is not written in the reports very often until after the First World War. As a political stance socialism had been influenced by various theorists who searched for a return to an attitude (by rulers) of more respect for, and belief in, the innate dignity of each individual human being. I will examine some socialist ideas and late nineteenth century criticisms of them.

Since the end of the eighteenth century enlightenment philosophy had challenged the perceived difference between men and women as being socially constructed rather than 'natural'. First Mary Wollstonecraft then John Stuart Mill propagated these ideas, preferring to encourage acknowledgement of the similarities between the sexes. Both wanted an end to masculine dominance and emphasised the value of the appeal to human reason as much as possible. This trend of thought developed into demanding equal rights for women. [4] Then, in 1884, Olive Schreiner, author of *Women and Labour*, an important socialist text, wrote to sexologist Havelock Ellis, thus:

> I object to anything that divides the two sexes. My main point is this: human development has now reached a point at which sexual difference has become a thing of altogether minor importance. We make too much of it: we are men and women in the second place, human beings in the first. [5]

These kinds of sentiments led to women demanding the right which they thought would transcend all others, that is the right to vote. Socialist

feminism, which most pertains to the women of the League, comes from the earlier tradition in France of communitarian socialism. Charles Fourier, an early French socialist, denounced the oppression of women and declared that 'the extension of privileges to women is the measure of all social progress'. [6] These early socialists looked forward to new ways of living together and saw socialism as involving the organisation of familial relations and labour, as well as the re-organisation of relations between capital and labour. Thus socialism meant a total transformation of society.

Later in the century Auguste Bebel's *Woman and Socialism,* published in 1879 in Germany, argued that women were oppressed under capitalism and that this oppression could be alleviated by women being in charge of their own liberation, and by a fundamental change in the social structure against exploitation. They would need women's suffrage, entry to the professions, equality in civil and criminal law, equal education and legal safeguards against all kinds of exploitation. [7]

When Bebel's book was published in England, Eleanor Marx and Edward Aveling reviewed it in an article entitled 'The Woman Question: A socialist point of view' in the *Westminster Review.* They agreed with Bebel that women must free themselves. 'Women will find allies in the better sort of men, as the labourers are finding allies among the philosophers, artists and poets now'. [8]

Eleanor Marx and Edward Aveling toured the United States of America from August 1886, and Eleanor gave a speech listing the misunderstandings about socialism which they had had to refute — probably very similar to the kind of arguments the women of the WLL used to defend their political stance. When denying the charge that socialists would abolish private property, Eleanor asserted that it was capitalists who confiscated the private property of the labourer, that is his labour, 'the only possession he had to sell'. She said,

> We want to end this by abolishing all private property in land, machinery, mines, railways, etc., that is, all means of production and distribution — giving it to those who have none.

Then there were those who said socialists had no law and no order. To these she replied that the 'anarchy of today meant that women had no resources while men worked twelve hours a day'. People said that

socialists would 'level down' all men to make them equal. She replied, 'We want to do away with classes, both the proletariat and the idle rich, and in our society all men and women shall perform their share of the necessary labour and enjoy their fair share of leisure and pleasure'. To the charge that women were to be had in common she replied that women were human beings, not property, and she ended by proclaiming that

> We socialists then, want common property in all means of production and distribution and as woman is not a machine but a human being, she will have her profits and her duties like men, but cannot be held by anyone as a piece of property. [9]

Eleanor, as Karl Marx's daughter, had imbibed socialist ideas throughout her formative years. She may well have been encouraged to consider these specifically in relation to women by her own friendship with Frederic Engels, Marx's friend and principal collaborator, whose work *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* was published in German in 1884 when Eleanor was 29 years old, and, as her native tongue was German, she would not have had to wait for the English translation. In this text Engels used Marx's notes on recent anthropological research as a basis for an analysis which regarded the oppression of women as historical and therefore capable of change. Real social equality between the sexes, democracy in government, and co-operation in society would be the next and higher plane of society to which socialists should aspire. [10]

Although foreign theorists helped to shape British socialism there were several British thinkers and philosophers such as William Morris, Edward Carpenter, Keir Hardie and the Webbs, who contributed a specifically British orientation to socialism, and it was part of the work of the leaders of the WLL to familiarise the rank-and-file with these theorists. They felt justified in this work when, in 1918, Clause 4 of the Labour Party's new constitution definitely adopted socialism as party policy, though some noted that by using the term 'workers' the Labour Party negated the presence of women workers. [11]

Women in the WLL had become socialists in response to varying influences. Some responded to religious teaching (usually non-conformist for the working-class) and wanted the fundamental rights and equalities preached by Christianity. Margaret MacDonald was the granddaughter of a Presbyterian minister, and thought she should serve Christ daily by good

work. Other women were less idealistic and sought for a more lenient government than capitalism — one less harsh to the lower classes. Many WLL women saw socialism as a cure for the economy, especially when depression struck. Then they wanted a Parliamentary Labour Party to control all land and industry, to give benefits to the working-classes, to censor the hostile press and to reform education so that imperialism and nationalism were not revered. [12]

Socialist issues which women were clear about were that the means of production and distribution should be placed in the hands of the community; that education should be accessible to every child; that all adults had a right to work; that war and poverty should be eliminated and that there was a need to foster the brotherhood of man and the sisterhood of women. It was also very clear, after the Russian revolution, that communism was not a socialism acceptable to the Labour Party. The WLL did, however, believe in international cooperation, demonstrating this in 1907 when they sent two delegates to the Women's International Council of Labour and Socialist Organisations (WICSLO) which met at Stuttgart. [13]

ILP women favoured the fundamental transformation of all relationships, including sexual ones, which Edward Carpenter had stressed, and which would be possible under socialism, for then women who married would not disappear from view. Women who attended the conferences had to be constantly reminded that married women had a right to work. Chief Women Officers at conferences always suppressed resolutions suggesting dismissal of married women workers, chiding the mover as they did so. [14]

Equal rights were important to the Labour Party women. They wanted political, economic and intellectual self-determination, and also social equality. But the latter in the view of Labour Party and trade union men was impossible because of women's motherhood. Equality was therefore nominally asserted, but hid a deep conviction of gender difference. It was a paradox then, that the Labour Party paid lip-service to equality, while at the same time ignoring it in two areas, in social life and in working life.

In 1918 one of the inequities which had plagued women was unostentatiously removed. A woman over 30 received the vote if she or her husband was qualified on the local government franchise by owning or occupying land or premises of an annual value of £5. [15] Some politicians feared that if all adult women were given the suffrage the

parliament which would result would concentrate on women's issues. The Act was known as the Representation of the People Act and was rushed through parliament, so that women could vote for or be elected as MPs at the 1918 election. [16]

No Labour women were elected to the 1918 parliament, but at that time there were three women (members of the WLL) who were very lively members of the National Executive of the Labour Party. They were Susan Lawrence, Ethel Bentham and Harrison Bell, and in these years Arthur Henderson and Marion Phillips also worked felicitously at increasing the number of individual members around the country.

Labour had sixty seats in parliament as the result of the election, forty-nine of which were held by trade unionists. Only three Independent Labour Party members had been returned because of the ILP's pacifist attitude to the war, and the leaders of the Parliamentary Labour Party were inexperienced in government.

Labour women had agitated for the vote while men had been either indifferent or actively hostile to their campaign. Six hundred and eighty thousand miners had rejected their attempt to gain female suffrage before adult suffrage. [17] Even after their long struggle, the women had been denied full voting rights due to the hostility towards political women of aristocratic and upper-class statesmen. Women felt the need for a political voice and had wanted this 'right' to be conceded without further delay, even though in making this demand, they had to argue against men of their own class and political commitment.

A large gathering of suffragists and suffragettes attended a victory meeting in London in March 1918 and sang 'Jerusalem' to music composed for them by Sir Hubert Parry, to celebrate the achievement of women's voting power, even if limited. [18] Millicent Fawcett wrote that she had not at all expected that the eligibility of women for Parliament would follow as a matter of course immediately upon their enfranchisement, but it did. [19] Countess Markievicz, who was the only woman elected, could not take her seat because she was a member of the Sinn Fein. None of the three Labour women candidates was elected. [20]

Almost too many things were happening at once. The election was in December 1918. The Women's Conference in January 1918 was their first meeting as a *dependent* Labour Party Organisation. Arthur Henderson and Tom Jones reorganised the Labour Party's Advisory Committees and Henderson had presented his list of nine Advisory

committees to the Party Executive in March 1918. In *Labour Woman* of April 1918 women were assured that under the new constitution women would be equal with men in national and local councils. [21] The Labour Party had also recruited middle-class intellectuals to supply Head Office with information on topics of interest to the government.

That Arthur Henderson was on very easy terms with Marion Phillips, terms which he did not achieve with other women leaders, seems to be confirmed by his acceptance of her charge (the SJCIWO) as one of the Advisory committees. These two leaders fervently wished the newly constituted Labour Party to be a success.

Beatrice Webb commented in her diary in May 1918 that Marion Phillips had succeeded in wrenching the secretaryship of the Labour Party from Miss Bondfield, but concluded,

> On the whole I rather like her....Her worst defect is her insolently critical attitude towards all persons and institutions. She was for years the head of the Women's Section of the Labour Party. [22]

Perhaps Phillips' attitude was her way of asserting her equality with the other (British) leaders.

The ILP emerged from the war weaker in influence, but attempted to remedy this by going about its strongholds such as Yorkshire, South Wales and the Clyde coalfields holding open-air meetings every week and enrolling individual members under the new constitution. Every category of the Labour Party's organisers made a conscious effort after the war to integrate each local party with the local community and mix politics with the social life of the people. Local weekly papers were used for propaganda and a *Labour News* distributed from Head Office. [23] Socialist ideas were thus being spread in spite of official hostility to the ILP.

Quite soon the new government brought in the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act, 1919, which abolished disqualification by sex or marriage for entry into the professions, universities and the exercise of any public function. This was a delayed but much appreciated victory for women activists who had campaigned for women jurors and magistrates, especially for matrimonial cases, as the WLL had been doing since 1911. [24]

Now that the war was over there was opportunity to identify the needs which had been neglected for the last few years. In this decade women identified long-term issues which they pursued over many years,

as well as responding to the short-term impermanent crises which emerged from time to time. The long-term issues included health, housing, education and various aspects of employment.

Different strategies were used to publicise the women's concerns. After a Ministry of Health was instituted in a Bill enacted on 3 June 1919, the Labour Women's Conference of June 1924 recalled that they had pressured the government in advance for one of the General Consultative Councils to be attached to the Ministry to be exclusively of and for women. This proposal had been opposed by at least three MPs, two being military men. [25] The Ministry itself was set up in response to general agitation by the SJCIWO and the WLL and other women's organisations in 1917.

Another urgent matter with which the WLL was anxious to be involved was housing. WLL leaders asserted that women would need energetic propaganda if they wished to be consulted about post-war housing. The Local Government Board announced its intention to build 100,000 houses in the first year of peace, and a Housing Sub-Committee of the WLL Executive was formed in October 1917. Mrs. Sanderson-Furniss, as secretary, was to conduct a campaign among working women all over the country to obtain their views about the kind of home women workers wanted. Delegates supported a resolution that asserted that working women's opinions should be sought regarding proposals for housing reform. [26]

By January 1919 a leaflet *The Working Woman's House* had been produced, with plans and sketches of two houses. The branches were asked to appoint a Housing Correspondent and to keep in touch with the secretary. [27] By mid-1919, 50,000 leaflets and questionnaires had been distributed, and delegates were to try to be elected to local authority housing committees.

Special housing conferences were held in Finchley, London, Yorkshire, Swindon and Northampton. [28] The women made suggestions about controlling the price of building materials, arranging loans and calling in working women for consultation about both design and amenities.

Enthusiasm was cut short in 1920, however, by the report of Eleanor Barton, a strong personality of the Women's Cooperative Guild. She reported that 'The government was not serious about housing'. She was on the Advisory Committee to the Ministry of Housing, which had not

met since November 1919, in spite of the protests that she and Mrs. Sanderson-Furness had made. [29]

In the event, the government's quite innovative plans to relieve the housing shortage had been thwarted by the collapse of the inflationary boom from 1918 to mid 1920, which gave way to a serious slump in the economy from 1921 to 1922. The government was well aware of the huge deficit of houses. There had been, according to Enid Gauldie, 'an almost total stoppage of house-building for the lower income groups between 1890 and 1918, and the pre-war shortage of 300,000 houses had doubled by 1918'. [30] In 1919 the Housing and Town Planning Act had helped local authorities to build houses with the aid of government subsidies and 213,800 houses had been built of the 800,000 required. [31] But before long, the Cabinet, lacking finance, stopped the housing programme. For most of the 1920s government was forced to recognise that the decline of Britain's staple industries had eroded its prosperity, and the working classes had again to postpone any chance of the equality promised by socialism.

Labour women had begun agitating for houses fit for heroines even before the war had ended. They passed censorious motions in 1920 and 1922 at the WLL conferences. Welsh women claimed that houses in Abertillery were accommodating twenty people at a time. [32]

The intention of the 1924 Housing Act introduced by John Wheatley for a Labour government, was to replace privately-rented accommodation with council housing. A fifteen-year housing programme was devised to more than double output. This was the beginning of council housing estates — a planned collectivist socialist programme. [33] Labour women approved of this effort to ensure cheap rental for the working classes. In 1924 they urged women to get onto housing committees to ensure that suitable houses would be built. They wanted restricted rents and safeguards against profiteering until enough houses had been built to satisfy the demand. Their resolutions, aimed at a Labour government, demanded five-roomed houses with bathroom, pantry, and coal storage. They suggested that the supply, manufacture and price of building materials should be regularly monitored. [34]

In 1925 Dorothy Jewson (ILP) praised the departed Labour government for the speeding up of the housing programme, and suggested that delegates pressed their local authorities to use the Wheatley Act. She added somewhat dramatically, but truthfully, that it was 'a matter

of life and death to women to decide the kind of houses they were to live in'. [35]

In the Second World War the Labour women remembered their 1920s experiences regarding housing and, in 1943, working with the SJCIWO again, suggested that representatives of working-class women be included on the Central Housing Advisory Committee to the Ministry of Housing. Two women were subsequently appointed to the sub-committee on the Design of Dwellings, for the SJCIWO had circulated a questionnaire about working-class housing with detailed recommendations about the size and arrangement of rooms, windows, floors, and walls etcetera. The women also stressed the need for communal services. One Women's Section secretary said that meetings on this subject (Housing) reminded her of a trade union meeting in the middle of a wages dispute, with every member eager to be heard. [36] There was a sustained interest in housing maintained over the years, and as house prices gradually declined there was a more equitable supply of working-class accommodation. [37] This was in line with the socialist desire to lessen the inequity of society whenever possible.

The women of the League did this in 1922, when the government was trying to reduce expenditure. The government reduced the grant to Local Authorities for free milk to be supplied to needy children, and distributed Circular 185, which stated that children aged three to five would be allowed free milk only on the production of a doctor's certificate. Pregnant women's supply of free milk was only for the three months prior to confinement. Labour women promptly 'bombarded' the government, demanding that it withdraw the cancellations, and the SJCIWO moved a caustic resolution against this rationing:

> This committee affirms that the care of infants and mothers is a primary duty of the state. It protests against any reduction of those services, and in particular against any reduction of the supply of milk to infants and expectant mothers. [38]

Their campaign succeeded. The conservative government restored the provision of free milk. As this confrontation showed, women believed in the need to move away from liberal ideas of small government. The women clearly held the view that the state ought to intervene to maintain its children at a time of unemployment for women.

By this time Health visitors had been appointed by Local Authorities to check the welfare of new-born infants, and the low salaries of the visitors concerned the WLL, because these people were fully-trained nurses. Nurses were not unionised, because they were in an occupation notorious for its authoritarian management which discouraged attempts to form a union. There was also an element of snobbery towards a 'trade' union when women regarded nursing as a vocation.

Health visitors were in an invidious position because, often being middle-class, they were suspected of being superior and condescending by working-class mothers. Socialists wanted to do away with class to eliminate these wasteful antagonisms, but poverty was so prevalent that some working-class wives were sensitive about their domestic conditions. Gillian Tindall, a Birmingham historian, describes the experiences of a young woman practising as a doctor in the 1920s, in her novel *Looking Forward*:

> The great majority of births were still home deliveries of course — pathetic interiors with inadequate stocks of bedding, clean sheets, etc. Many of the families had no notion of hygiene or even common cleanliness. (A colleague kept his hat on because of the bed bugs that dropped in his hair.) Chloroform was used for difficulties. ... It was the quiet, shy humble couples full of good intentions, but of limited intelligence, who most desperately needed more than our help. They needed our understanding and our guidance. [39]

Understanding and guidance came from an unexpected quarter — from a doctor of science rather than a doctor of medicine — and aimed at preventing, rather than aiding child birth. Marie Stopes, whose doctorate was for palaeobotany not medicine, had researched the physical aspects of marital sex for reasons of her own. She later thought it necessary to improve the accessibility of sexual education and wrote the book *Married Love*, published in 1918, which soon sold one million copies. [40] She received so many letters after it became known that she opened her Mothers Clinic For Constructive Birth Control at Holloway in London in March 1920. [41] Her claim to fame is that she caused the knowledge of contraception to be extended to a large number of poor women, who were then (theoretically) able to control the size of their family as they chose.

Knowledge of contraception was hardly respectable in the 1920s, but in 1923, 2,368 women spurned respectability, and visited the Mothers clinic. [42] In this year too, towards the end of the proceedings of the WLL conference at York, this resolution was moved:

> Having in mind the importance of a future generation this National Conference of Labour Women considers it essential that full information as to birth control shall be made available to all classes of the community. It urges on the Standing Joint Committee the necessity of making representation to the Ministry of Health with a view to the required information being obtainable at Child Welfare and Maternity Centres and other suitable places. [43]

This subject was pursued at every conference until 1928. The Labour Party consistently rejected birth control as a political issue, and the Ministry of Health just as persistently refused to divulge the desired information. Historian Jane Lewis thinks these attitudes stemmed from anxiety about population decline. [44]

What was the socialist attitude to birth control? Historian Barbara Taylor wrote that of all socialists in the early years only William Thompson and Robert Owen's son argued for birth control, as a way of separating sexual pleasure from reproduction, thereby allowing women the same measure of sexual freedom as men. [45] This was at least an approach to equality.

But open discussion about sexuality was not acceptable, and it was daring of the feminists to discuss birth control publicly even at an all-female conference in 1923. Also, at this time Catholic archbishops viewed contraception as worse than abortion. [46] But once the Stopes clinic had opened, birth control campaigners ensured that there was ongoing discussion. In the early 1920s Communist women promoted birth control. Stella Browne and Cedar Paul believed in the right of woman to choose or reject maternity. They wrote letters and articles in the *Communist*, gave lectures and promoted discussion. [47] Equality was aimed for but class adherence obstructed it. Russell herself said that 'rich women had been employing birth control methods for the past twenty-five years'. [48] And Naomi Mitchison declared, 'that on the whole good health was a privilege which belonged to the middle and upper classes'. [49] Doctors, who were usually middle-class, had the smallest families of any occupation

according to the 1911 census, yet they withheld contraceptive information from poor women. [50]

Class inequalities were to be eliminated by socialism and in mentioning classes in their resolution the women were trying to instigate social justice by socialist means. Marion Phillips claimed that birth control was not a political issue and Arthur Henderson ensured that the resolution was not passed. Ellen Wilkinson was politically correct when she declared that a matter which affected all women should not be a party issue. [51] But the personal was now political.

The personal life of a woman bringing children up alone became a matter for state intervention, and some laws were passed in the twenties which improved women's status. Women themselves had claimed that some of their rights should be protected by laws. Like the Labour Party the WLL was interested in constitutional action and change by parliamentary means, and its leaders were always alert to the need for familiarising themselves with new laws in order to instruct their members about changes which affected them.

By the passage of the Removal of Sex Disabilities Act, 1919, women could be appointed as magistrates and as justices of the peace. The Lord Chancellor had an Advisory Committee which recommended suitable women to serve on committees and Beatrice Webb and Gertrude Tuckwell were appointed to it. [52] Leaders urged women to press for representation of women workers on all appropriate national committees. [53] The Matrimonial Causes Act of 1923 relieved a wife petitioner of the necessity of proving cruelty, desertion, etc., in addition to adultery, as grounds for divorce. Men had always been able to divorce on the grounds of adultery alone. [54] Thus men and women were granted equality of treatment, as in the Guardianship of Infants Act (1924) which invested guardianship of infant children in the parents jointly. If parents disagreed either could apply to court, the court's subsequent decision being guided solely by consideration of the infant's best interest. [55]

The Widows, Orphans and Old Age Contributory Pensions Act 1925 provided for a contributory scheme, covering almost the same field as the National Health Insurance Act of 1911. Pensions were payable to the widows of insured persons, and to insured persons and their wives over the age of 70 years (reduced to 65 years in 1928). The weekly rates were ten shillings for widows, with five shillings for the first child and three shillings for each other child, seven shillings and six pence for orphans

and ten shillings each for old age pensioners. [56] Then the New English Law of Property (1926) provided that both married and single women could hold and dispose of their property, real and personal, on the same terms as a man. [57]

The leaders of the WLL monitored these laws as they were propounded, publicised them at annual conferences, wrote about them in *Labour Woman* and sent letters to provincial branches to suggest discussion if necessary. They were always aware of the need to counsel widows and tried to elevate the status of widows with children through the years.

The inequity of British society greatly concerned Labour Party theorists. R.H. Tawney, who lectured in history, published a book about equality in 1931. He wrote of the army of wage-earners in Britain, which included more than three quarters of the nation, while the nation's wealth was owned by one per cent. He wrote that

> Every year a race of some 600,000 souls slips quietly into the U.K. About one in eighteen dies within a year. The business of the survivors is first to live and then to grow. Here, if anywhere, it should be possible to forget the tedious vulgarities of income and social position. [58]

He deplored an inferior education for an inferior class with 3,000 or more school classes of more than fifty children, who would become the fodder of industry at the age of fourteen. The primary school should be the common school of the whole population, so excellent that all parents would want their children to attend it. [59] He also thought that it was 'educationally vicious' to have private schools for children of rich parents.

In 1932 Professor Tawney was described as a good propagandist for nursery schools when he addressed a nursery school conference at Reading. [60] He attacked the economy. 'Nursery schools could be provided for the whole of London for the same sum that was spent on building one thousandth part of a battleship', he said. Tawney's argument in favour of nursery schools was that the neglect of the child during its infancy was largely responsible for the loss of half a million days' work a year through sickness, and caused the spending of £150 million per annum on preventable sickness. The WLL too supported nursery schools and regarded Tawney as an ally, particularly as he sat on various education

committees and could put forward their views. He had done this since the First World War, when education reform was at a standstill.

In 1918 H.A.L. Fisher, an eminent historian and Lloyd George's Minister of Education, brought in the new Education Act — the Fisher Act. He later said the war was his opportunity for introducing far-reaching reforms. The Act established a universal leaving age of fourteen, abolished the half-time system, strengthened local authorities and extended the school meals and medical services. It also planned a school-leaving age of fifteen years in the near future, day continuation classes up to eighteen years, and the provision of nursery schools. Only one continuation college at Rugby was ever built, and the two other planned reforms proved inoperable. [61] Indeed the whole Act partly failed because of the economic downturn in 1921.

Delegates at the 1922 Conference registered their resentment against the Geddes report which 'axed' spending on education. They reiterated in 1923 that Labour women wanted free education for all, from nursery school to university. In 1923 also the Standing Joint Committee presented a report on the Education of Children in the Ideals of the Labour Party and of Peace. The International Federation of Women Workers (IFWW), of which Marion Phillips was secretary, wanted to establish an International Department of Education whose secretaries would meet once a year, and work to promote the positive aspect of peace among children. [62] This was an international attempt to promote socialist ideas of the desirability of internationalism rather than competitive nationalism, but it proved not to be feasible, and in 1927 the IFWW became defunct.

In order to counter the presence of competitive nationalism the WLL wanted to change the militant aspect of Empire Day and to stop military training, songs and war games in school. From my own observation it took time to succeed in dismissing Empire Day. My school had a large central hall which was bedecked (to the children's delight) with colonial flags and pictures of 'our lands over the sea' on Empire Day each year. From 1934, however, it was known as Peace Day, and a further small step was taken towards the education which socialists desired.

The Hadow Report of 1923 (R. H. Tawney was a member of this committee) gave new hope that some reforms in education would eventuate. The report reiterated the need for a school-leaving age of 15 (still not achieved in 1931); advocated the re-organisation of all-age elementary schools into separate junior and senior schools; gave official

sanction to the transfer (at the age of eleven) to secondary schools, and proposed that another type of post-primary education be developed alongside the grammar schools, based on existing technical and secondary schools. Eventually there were three types of post-elementary schools — the grammar schools, the technical schools and the modern schools. [63]

More awareness of, and enthusiasm for education had been rising since the later years of the war. The status of teachers was improved by the institution of national salary scales by the Burnham Committee (1918), and working-class children competed for scholarships for secondary education which were given more generously by local and county education authorities. The secondary schools were not, however, expanded sufficiently to receive the lucky scholarship winners. Lancashire County Council granted 911 scholarships in 1926. The scholarships included free tuition at the nearest approved secondary school, travel expenses, a book allowance not exceeding thirty shillings per annum, and in the fourth and subsequent years a maintenance allowance to £5. [64] When I arrived at my secondary school there were four classes of new entries and some of us were ensconced in a former art room, around the walls of which stood plaster casts of Greek gods in all their manly glory. An education indeed for an innocent eleven-year old!

Scholarships were awarded for approved secondary schooling. But often some working-class parents could not afford to let their children accept a scholarship. My friend, of Scottish descent, was sent to live with her grandmother in Scotland because her parents had other children and could not afford to let her take up her scholarship. Talent will not be thus suppressed however, and she later became an authority on the Lancashire witches and lectured on the subject.

In 1924 Labour women had pressed for the need to increase secondary and technical education and suggested that the Board of Education authorities and the Ministry of Labour should co-operate to provide training centres for school-leavers who could not find employment. There were 600,000 children each year leaving school aged 14 years. R.J. Davies, M.P., had come to speak to the WLL conference in 1924 and he pointed out that only 350,000 children out of a total of 6 million in England and Wales were enrolled in secondary schools. [65]

Morgan Jones, M.P., also spoke at the League's conference. 'I feel almost disposed to apologise for having interpolated my presence into this Eden where there is no Adam,' he joked, 'I come to learn for my job in the

government is concerned with education'. [66] Education was paramount for the delegates.Through the late twenties they complained about the poor health environment of the schools (1925), about the large classes (1929), and about the limited entry to training colleges of working-class children. Their interest and their protests helped to encourage better standards so that in the Report on Primary Education in 1931 it was found that a third of children over 11 years were being educated under the Hadow system, even though education was still socially stratified. [67]

Conference chairmen often interpolated socialist ideology into their opening speeches, particularly in times when unemployment was high. Ellen Wilkinson at Birmingham in 1925 cited their 'three weapons' (the political associations, the trade unions and the co-operatives) which, if rightly used, could not only end 'this hateful old system, but help us to recreate the new.' [68] They looked forward to the beautiful social order based on the equality of class and gender as a desirable and challenging possibility.

The particular inequality of class and gender which concerned the WLL in 1924-5 was the maternity provision for poor working-class wives. There was a shortage of lying-in hospitals reported at the earlier conference, and at the 1925 conference Katherine Glasier, a dynamic ILP activist, moved a report on the Care of Maternity with special reference to the Maternity Convention adopted in 1919 at an International Labour conference in Washington. [69] Labour women had persistently agitated for the British government to ratify this convention which recommended that working mothers have money in lieu of wages for twelve weeks, to include six weeks rest before and six weeks after childbirth. This matter was brought up in 1925, because women were becoming concerned at the maternal mortality rate, which continued to be unacceptably high. [70]

Because the SJCIWO was about to give evidence before a National Health Insurance Committee, it revived its demand for the ratification of the Washington Convention, and intended to ask for post-natal clinics also, and the employment of 'home helps'. Miss Evans, a Labour Party woman, reported that since the Health Insurance Act (1911) there had been over £107 million contributed in excess of expenditure, so that the whole scheme was a fairly rich, money-making source of income, rather spoilt by a fossilised way of distributing benefits. Then Marion Phillips, perhaps thinking of a future socialist health scheme, said that it was important to take all medical benefit, educational and preventative work out of the

hands of Insurance Committees and to form medical service committees of local health authorities.[71] But the Insurance Committees were powerfully resistant to such socialist ideas.

In 1927 the Labour women wanted National Health Insurance to cover wives and dependents, and even to supply artificial sunlight treatment to tuberculosis cases. They deplored the fact that fourteen- to sixteen-year-olds had no health insurance cover whatsoever. [72]

At the 1928 LPWO conference in Portsmouth Susan Lawrence (Chair) was impressed by the political acumen of the young 'flappers' who attended, and rejoiced that they could now vote. She announced that a special committee had been formed by Gertrude Tuckwell (a respected activist) to enquire into ways of reducing maternal mortality, which had been rising slightly but persistently since the end of the war. [73] It went on rising until 1934 when it reached a rate of 5.04 per 1,000 live births.[74]

In 1933 Gertrude Tuckwell became the Chair of an unofficial Women's Health Enquiry Committee, of which Margery Spring-Rice was the honorary secretary. Spring-Rice was a niece of Millicent Fawcett and Elizabeth Garrett Anderson (one of the first qualified women doctors). Spring-Rice had founded the North Kensington Women's Welfare Centre and was passionately interested in social welfare. Representatives of women's organisations and two women doctors, a midwife and a public health officer were on this committee formed by women for women. [75]

Their aim was to investigate the health of working-class wives, because they had been dissatisfied by the lack of action after the Final Report of the Departmental Committee on Maternal Mortality and Morbidity (1932) had appeared. They claimed that their investigation, which used questionnaires, government statistics, WCG records and University Settlement files, was 'a careful and true sample' of the health and the social and domestic environment of the working-class mother. [76] This committee made no report to a government body. Margery Spring-Rice wrote a book about their findings published in 1939. Their motives were 'to bring greater happiness to women less fortunate than themselves by pointing out this gap in the social services, and contributing suggestions for curing their ills'. [77] A representative from the SJCIWO was on this committee and other Labour women approved of and supported the campaign.

'A Local Government Act of 1929 gave the County Councils and the County Boroughs the power — though not the obligation — to provide

assistance ... and from this point maternity and child welfare came under their wing'. [78] But it was 1936 before maternal mortality began to decline.

The requirements of health care for men and women are necessarily different. Equality of care for each sex is the socialist aim. The prevention of maternal mortality was definitely a problem which needed swift action, and yet such was the resistance to open discussion of a taboo subject that more than 20 years elapsed before remedial measures began to accelerate. These women were repeating the tactic used by the WCG whose book *Maternity* in 1915 had been the first to draw attention to the need for mother-care as well as child-care. Between 1921 and 1930, 39,000 women died in childbirth in England and Wales. Such a number of mainly young women is a statistic which hides the suffering of motherless children and sorrowing widowers. [79]

By the time that Margery Spring-Rice's book publicised this unacceptable situation in 1939, the introduction of sulphonamide drugs enabled doctors to control puerperal sepsis, the greatest single cause of maternal deaths. The Labour Women's Organisation had been interested in this topic since 1924 when they noted with dismay that in 1922 there had been 2,791 maternal deaths. [80] Along with other women's groups they continually pressed for reform, which was delayed perhaps because of inadequate medical leadership.

In 1928 the SJCIWO had presented a well-researched report on The Prevention of Maternal Mortality. The report included international information (always sought because of the socialist belief in internationalism), and revealed that New Zealand and Australia also had high maternal death rates, striking because of their country's low infant mortality rates. In 1924 an Australian government committee had written that 'puerperal mortality is probably the greatest reproach which any civilised nation can, by its own negligence, offer to itself'. [81]

The SJCIWO report suggested what work could be done (with grants from the government) for home helps, ante-natal care, and, if needed, free nutrition, and suggested that the Health Insurance needs of mothers should be re-assessed, so that a nation-wide policy of protection of motherhood could be established. The Labour Party was pleased with the report and suggested that 'this was an ideal form of cooperation between the party and the women's organisation'. [82]

Perhaps Winifred Holtby was right when she wrote that

> the protection of chastity became a social obsession which held back interest in child-care, gynaecology, birth control and so on, and English society today [1933] suffers from a lack of respect for maternity. [83]

Or was it just plain misogyny?

Another way in which the Women's Labour League tried to help working-class wives was in monitoring women's employment. From 1906 one of its aims had been 'to watch the interests of working women in their own neighbourhood, and strive where possible to improve their social and industrial positions'. [84] This aim or 'method' as the WLL called it was not innovative, for, as early as 1906 it had already become a trend for politically motivated women to help industrial women to improve their status as workers. Selfless women in each generation in the late nineteenth century had established a formidable record of effort to introduce protection for women workers.

In the year when the WLL was founded Mary Reid Macarthur, the daughter of a prosperous Glasgow draper, had become interested in the unionisation of shop assistants. She set up the National Federation of Women Workers (NFWW) which was a protective umbrella organisation for unskilled and semi-skilled women workers. [85] Mary Macarthur, an egalitarian, as has been mentioned, was on the WLL's first executive, which would help to legitimise to working-class women her work for them.

Margaret MacDonald also had a background of experience of women workers' problems, from her work with the Women's Industrial Council (WIC) and its satellite the Clubs Industrial Association (CIA), which attempted to persuade working women that they were entitled to some leisure time, and suggested to them ways of spending it. Margaret MacDonald worked with both branches of the WIC, and lectured to the women on Factory Acts which affected them. [86]

Fabian women too were linked to the Labour Movement by their work on the problems of female unemployment. Barbara Drake, a Fabian and a niece of Beatrice Webb, also became an expert on the unionisation of poor women workers, as her germinal work *Women in Trade Unions* (published in 1920) reveals. Four organisations — the Women's Industrial Council, the Women's Cooperative Guild, the Fabian Women's Group

and the Women's Labour League — worked as an informal alliance committed to the need to improve the position of women workers.

The structure of capitalism required that women should work as the economy expanded. Employers hired women workers because they were cheaper than men, and women workers wanted to be employed, but often men's unions would not accept them as members, and would not agree to the same pay for both sexes.

During the First World War Macarthur negotiated an agreement with the Associated Society of Engineers and together they put forward a claim for one pound a week for all women over eighteen years in government munition factories. [87] Mary Macarthur signalled her allegiance to the Labour Party when she chaired the conference called by the War Emergency: Workers National Committee (WEWNC) in 1915 — a conference which urged women doing war work to join their trade union and to demand equal pay for equal work.

By the time of the armistice the NFWW had 80,000 female members, then, by the Restoration of Pre-War Practices Act, all were discharged within a year. But at the end of 1918 female membership of all trade unions (except teachers and artists) was 1,086,000, a rise of 160 per cent compared with the rise of male membership of 45 per cent. [88] A bad sign though, was that very few unions had women on their Executive Committees at the end of the war, and the formula for equal pay had been changed to 'equal pay for the same job'. The Civil Service Union which catered for all classes of 'brain worker' applied for equal pay in 1920 and received instead equal bonuses which did not make the salaries of men and women anything like equal. [89]

The NFWW became initially a separate women's 'district' of the National Union of General Workers in 1921, with its own office, and some autonomy, but the number of women organisers soon diminished — an ironic situation, because the women had had high hopes of continuing the excellent initial representation of women after the war. [90]

During the 1920s Labour women probably knew that to claim equal pay for equal work was useless in the prevailing economic climate. Nevertheless they referred regularly to the concept by passing resolutions and making protests. In 1920 they deplored the failure of the Whitley Council for the Civil Service to establish equality between men and women. In 1921, the Conference Report referred to the wholesale dismissal of women with radical views, to make room for ex-servicemen,

and it exhorted its young women to keep up the fight for universal suffrage. In 1923 Labour women protested against the dismissal of married women teachers by the London County Council. [91]

Women's organisations were effective in supporting and encouraging women workers at this period, for capitalist employers exploited unorganised, unskilled women workers and kept wages down. Equal pay was not to be achieved, even in name, until 1970.

The leaders of the LPWO in 1928 said that 'Women in industry have been very much unrepresented, because their average age is low.Their needs in regard to protective legislation have been argued and settled over their heads; they will now be able to speak for themselves.' [92]

In 1929 a Democratic Labour Party woman, Mrs White, spoke to clear up a 'misunderstanding' that opponents of protective legislation were opponents of all protective legislation in industry. This was not so — they wanted protective legislation for men and women alike, based on the nature of the work and not the sex of the worker. [93] By the 1930 Conference representatives of the LPWO had been to a Labour and Socialist International Conference at Zurich, where the chief subject had been the Open Door (International) Council's propaganda against protective legislation for industrial women workers. Britain was represented by Jennie Adamson, Marion Phillips and Dorothy Jewson (ILP). They reported that ten countries voted in favour of protective legislation — only Sweden and Dorothy Jewson voting against it. [94] Later in the conference Dora Russell argued very strongly that women 'would be restricting their spheres of employment in the professions, and their progress physically, mentally and morally in the future, if they supported protective factory laws'. She asserted that socialists demanded equal treatment for men and women alike, but Anne Loughlin, a trade union organiser, argued that she and her colleagues would continue to fight for unorganised women, who needed all the legislation they could get. [95]

Both sides firmly believed in their own case. Working-class women who sought elusive employment for the sake of their own and their family's subsistence were justifiably angry at the intervention of middle-class women who had never been inside a factory. Poor and unorganised women, however, could hardly bargain effectively with profit-seeking employers to ensure good working conditions. There were dissidents among socialist feminists who wanted equality first, whereas trade union organisers, who knew the difficulties, aimed to ameliorate women

workers' low status by organising, educating and protecting them. This protection was eminently necessary in order to free women workers eventually from the bonds of low wages and disorganisation which restricted them. Their protectors supplied them with justice, not privilege.

It was interesting to find that at this time Russian women workers were arguing about the same topic:

> In the Soviet Union in the 1920s, when unemployment hit women workers particularly hard, it was widely felt that protective legislation disadvantaged them; as one woman put it at a trade union congress, in 1924, it was better to do night work than to go on the streets. [96]

In Britain the women workers of World War I had been so under-valued that they had not received the reward of female franchise in 1918. The general election of 1928 was the first time that young women had equal opportunity to vote. Jennie Adamson, the Chair of the 1928 Conference, interpreted this as equal opportunity 'to mould the policy of the state'! Women's position was too lowly to allow them even to practise socialism. They were for ever being side-tracked by the need to alleviate poverty rather than eliminate capitalism, and there were many who mistrusted socialist ideas.

To establish socialism in Britain meant to contest an entrenched tradition of rule by aristocratic and moneyed classes. Socialists had thought that their future lay with the organised Labour Movement. Yet there were many in that movement who saw nothing desirable in socialism. They had not remained addicted to it for forty years as Harrison Bell had. [97]

In 1911 the leaders had tried to arrange debates with anti-socialists such as the Carleton Club and the Anti-Socialist Union. Anti-socialists often thought that a socialist society would be colourless, unprofitable and inefficient. Socialists could not assume that the working class would vote for them. Historian, E.J. Hobsbawm, stated that only a third of the working-class voted Labour. [98] In deference (or loyalty) to good employers they voted for liberals or conservatives. Members of the working class frequently thought that to govern was an inherited skill only possessed by eminent, often aristocratic families. They were unflatteringly sceptical about even Labour government, which was only mildly socialist, and the idea of socialists being in charge of the public sector was not attractive to

non-socialists. They anticipated that socialist rulers would be untrustworthy, would practise nepotism and operate inefficiently. Despite the work of Eleanor and Edward Aveling, they impugned the morals of socialists, who were, they thought, not inclined to accept the family as a fixed and enduring institution, but who did believe in 'free love' and women 'in common'. Anti-socialists were also inclined to interpret the socialist regard for equality as meaning a levelling down to the lowest common denominator, not a levelling up to a humanitarian excellence. As for the economy, shareholders had no confidence in the financial skills of socialists.

Equality was a heady concept for socialist women — an escape from oppression seemed enticing. But to trade union and labour men equality was not possible, for women were constrained by their child-bearing and ongoing child-caring. British Labour men too often confirmed by their actions Ann Curthoys' opinion that socialism is 'founded on male-dominated theory which cannot deal with women except by adding them on to pre-existing categories'. [99] Yet the best of socialist men did realise that the socialist belief in egalitarianism recognises that emancipation requires that men change as well as women — a requirement which for some, was another reason for anti-socialism. Perhaps the most disappointing aspect of socialism is that it delays delivery of what it promises. It is often 'jam tomorrow and rarely jam today'. The socialist commonwealth remains out of sight over the horizon.

To many Labour women, socialism remained a political ideal, which they worked towards by attending to the details and strategy of social change diligently. In 1932, the worst year of the depression, they urged the Parliamentary Labour Party to show that they believed in socialism by pledging themselves to end capitalism and establish socialism on securing a parliamentary majority. [100] Even though there was a rise in real income for the whole population after 1932, there was still too much inequality. [101] Could socialism remove it?

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CHAPTER 4

CLASS AND GENDER AND LABOUR WOMEN

During most of the fifty years from 1906 -1956 which this thesis covers, Tory governments imposed their own class-specific ends and their own vision on British society, and in 1906 when the WLL began, there was obvious class inequality, as Enid Gauldie argues:

> Separation of the classes had never been greater than in the early twentieth century. The housing conditions the well-to-do found necessary for themselves, demonstrate the separation. Within the house the green baize door, the servants' staircase separated one class from another. Shuttered and barred windows, ritually locked doors, spiked railings and padlocked gates protected those within from the unsafe streets outside. [1]

Yet in spite of these symbols of separation of classes, socialist beliefs were at this time bringing together the 'new woman' of the late nineteenth century - young, principled, educated and of the middle-class — and the politically-aware working-class woman recruited for the WLL by its organisers. Both classes of women were doubtless eager to succeed in this class collaboration to practise socialist ideas.

I shall argue in this chapter that women were more disturbed by class oppression than by gender disagreements. Statesmen with whom the women had to contend to gain reforms were of a different class from them. In what areas did the women impel reform? I shall first discuss the concepts of gender and class and then examine what kind of problems arose involving class and/or gender annually during the 1930s, in the areas of health, employment and child care. I shall then discuss gender relations between men and women politicians, and the influence of class in a very class-conscious society. But first it is useful to say more about working-class women at this time.

Working-class women were involved in a double struggle as workers themselves and as workers' wives, not only as women. [2] During the opening decade of the twentieth century there was a growing desire among working-class women for more knowledge about Labour's

struggles and for a larger share in the work for labour emancipation, as letters to the Labour Representation Committee revealed. [3]

Working-class women were not isolated in their homes as were middle-class women. They helped one another in emergencies such as major illnesses. Some forms of resistance were routinised in women's culture — protecting their streets from authorities for example, or harassing court officials during evictions. [4]

London working-class husbands and wives lived in quite separate worlds, organised around their responsibilities in a fairly rigid sexual division of labour. Marriage was not viewed as creating a new unit, the fissure between wife and children on the one hand and husband on the other was an accepted part of cockney marriage arrangements well into the twentieth century. [5] Many working-class wives had to find paid work because men's wages were too low to sustain a family.

Engels in the mid-nineteenth century had noticed that working-class marriage was more equal than that of the middle classes. [6] At a later date E. P. Thompson wrote:

> When we speak of a class we are thinking of a very loosely defined body of people who share the same congeries of interests, social experiences, traditions and value-systems, who have a disposition to behave as a class, to define themselves in their actions and in their consciousness in relation to other groups of people in class ways. But class itself is not a thing, it is a happening. [7]

In her oral history of working-class women of the early twentieth century Elizabeth Roberts wrote that:

> Men and women believed themselves to be working-class because they worked with their hands, were employees and not employers, and in comparison with the latter were poor and lacked material goods.
>
> [Regarding religion] Durham [and other] families were not so much interested in doctrine as in establishing an ethical pattern to their everyday lives. Women in particular were concerned with 'love thy neighbour'; a 'good' or Christian person being seen as one who cared to the best of her ability for her family and neighbours. [8]

The class position of women is not as obvious as that of men. A woman dependent on her husband financially is tied to his class position, and many women after divorce decline to a lower class. An unmarried daughter is usually assigned the class of her father. Some theorists therefore argue that there is a case for all women to be regarded as a sex/class. [9] They would then be able to change their class position as their status improved. Liberals think that sex/class mobility is possible. They support the idea of success through individual action. As women become fully emancipated because of structural changes they would have the potential to promote sex/class consciousness and to change their sex/class position of performing personal service in return for maintenance. [10]

Class is a basic dynamic of capitalism, as is the sexual division of labour — that is the assignment of work, within the workplace and the home, according to the sex of the worker. The working-class home is also an essential component of capitalism — a place for producing goods and reproducing the next labour force. Women in the Labour Movement were familiar with the expression 'the sexual division of labour', and were aware that the common phrase for women collectively in the early twentieth century was 'The Sex'. [11] They did not seem to use the term 'gender'. That word entered the feminist theory vocabulary later in the twentieth century.

Every woman knew sex was the quality of being male or female. Sex is the biological component, while gender is the cultural aspect of the difference between men and women. Expressed differently, gender comprises the learned or acquired traits of personality, attitudes, skills and types of behaviour appropriate to the biological body. Women's bodies, built to bear and suckle children, were perceived by many as defining their whole corporeality and mind, their social tasks and their psychological capabilities. Women generally were then given the tasks appropriate to their assumed qualities of nurturance, dexterity and patience. [12]

Gradually, during the early twentieth century women were able to expand beyond such gender-defined tasks. In 1919 there were more women in the higher ranks of the civil service than there were in 1982. [13] And by 1930 the Labour Party was in government and there were nine Labour women MPs in parliament. The WLL conference of that year attracted 1,184 delegates, each one representing scores of other women, and there was an exuberance at being in London with their own MPs at Westminster and available to meet their constituents.

But there were several problems for the conference to discuss. From 1928 the output of all the basic industries in Britain had been declining, resulting in a steady increase in the number of people out of work. [14] The leaders of the LPWO were concerned that married women workers were shockingly underpaid. They claimed that women were treated as a special class of workers — not even as human beings. Ellen Wilkinson presented a report on Equal Pay for Equal Work which suggested how women could gradually work towards such a remote prospect. It seems strange that at a time when unpopular domestic service was the only work available for unskilled women such a report should be made. It was part of the continuing effort of feminist and egalitarian trade union leaders to persuade women workers to organise and combine in order to gain better conditions. When, to augment meagre wages, family allowances were suggested, women decided that 'it was not a sex question, but emphatically a class question'. Indeed, one delegate suggested that family allowances could (and should) be financed by direct taxation of wealth. [15]

Family allowances had been pursued since 1917 by Eleanor Rathbone (daughter of a public-minded Liverpool family). She thought family allowances would enhance the status of women both as mothers and as workers, because such an award would strike at one of the main objections to equal pay for equal work — the plea that a man requires a family wage whereas a woman requires only a single subsistence wage. But at this time many low-paid male workers were fearful of the effect on their wages of family allowances. [16] Gender rivalry about wages resulted, and family allowances were long delayed.

This 1930 conference was marked by class resentment against middle-class women for wanting both domestic servants and protective legislation. Domestic service was regarded as a menial and lonely occupation, and women tried to avoid accepting it. Women in industry attending the conference made it clear that, regarding protective legislation, they 'did not want the people who were not in industry deciding what the industrial women should have'. [17]

As well as class discontent there was also gender discontent. Perhaps because a Labour government was in power the women tried to insist that they wanted to be 'inside the men's conference', taking their share in shaping policy and not indulging in 'empty talk' as at the women's conference. Delegates spoke of the women's conference as 'a nursery' from

which they wished to emerge, but Marion Phillips strongly defended it as paid for by the Labour Party. [18]

Such talk ignored the segmentation of the labour market on the basis of sex, and the fact that women who continued in employment were working in jobs that were considered as 'women's occupations' — jobs men would not do.

Yet women's employment did not decline as much as that of men. In the depth of the depression, between 1929 and 1932, the number of men in employment fell by 868,450 or 11 per cent, as compared to only 9,690 or 3.1 per cent for women. [19] Trade union men's opposition to married women working was very strong, and the marriage bar operated in white-collar occupations, and even in the cotton mills. [20] During the 1930s the majority of working-class men wanted a wife not to work away from home, but to satisfy his sexual desires, see to his comfort, care for him and bear his children (sometimes more than he wanted). There was much talk about there being 'too many women'. [21]

At the June 1931 LPWO conference Labour men had granted a small concession to silence the women's complaints of the previous year. They would allow five women (not four) to be elected to the National Executive Committee of the Labour Party by the men's conference. [22] This was an example of gender rivalry which was again shown when the men rejected the women's request for joint conferences. Their reply was that 'no change is needed at present in the arrangements for the expression of Labour women's views through their own conferences'. [23] Such an uncompromising answer with no opportunity for negotiation shows that men were confident of their power to resist change.

More serious problems than conference arrangements needed attention. A world-wide economic crisis began to escalate and in the spring of 1931, Tory and Liberal MPs wanted a committee to be appointed to prune government spending and restore foreign confidence in Britain's solvency. The May Committee was formed, so-called after its chairman, Sir George May of the Prudential Insurance Company. It recommended a 20 per cent reduction in unemployment benefits later adjusted to 10 per cent. [24] Labour, Liberal and Tory ministers conferred and in July 1931 the ILP's weekly journal published a front-page article entitled 'Towards a National Government'.[25] An October election returned such a government inaccurately named 'National Labour', but with a majority of Conservative MPs, and Ramsay MacDonald as Prime Minister.

Facing up to disagreeable truths occurred on 23 August 1931 when the Cabinet learned that the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, from which the Bank of England hoped to borrow, would grant a loan only if the British government imposed a 10 per cent cut on government spending. The Labour Cabinet resigned on hearing this in August 1931. But inevitably in September the pay of soldiers, sailors, policemen and teachers was reduced by 10 per cent. [26] I recall the dismay of the teachers at my grammar school where I was studying for the Higher School Certificate. They were sorry for those of us who would soon be seeking employment, and some tried to compensate for the drabness of the times by offering small pleasures. An English master invited us to hear his records of the Inkspots and other contemporary groups and allowed us access to his books.

Repressive economic measures were now introduced, including the 1931 Unemployment Insurance (No. 3) Bill, which soon became notorious as the Anomalies Act. This was purported to deal with abuses of the dole, but in addition to increasing contributions it reduced benefits generally, and deprived married women, mainly, of their entitlements. Labour women MPs, Ellen Wilkinson, Susan Lawrence, and Jennie Lee along with others, fought the Act clause by clause in the House of Commons. On Wednesday 8 July 1931 the House was kept all night and until 11 a.m.next day by ILP opposition to the Bill. [27] This was the exercise of female support and solidarity (along with some sympathetic men) for married women workers and against the harshness of middle- and upper-class statesmen. In spite of their efforts the Anomalies Act became law.

The next two LPWO conferences published figures to reveal the harshness of the Anomalies Act. During 1931 the claims of 134,089 women were disallowed. [28] That this Act had been introduced by a Labour government was hard to accept. It was a cruel patriarchal method thus to alleviate men's unemployment by sacking married women, and was even more unpalatable because it was promulgated by a woman, Margaret Bondfield. Arthur Henderson wrote of this bitter struggle of class and gender: 'The National government has betrayed the women'. [29]

From 1931 the General Council of the Trades Union Congress held the Labour Party together by insisting on the expulsion of Ramsay MacDonald and other former Labour men. The Parliamentary Labour Party was composed of a majority of trade unionists and paid more attention to men's unemployment than women's. Massive

unemployment in cotton weaving was caused by the establishment of cotton weaving by their own people in Japan, India and China. Employers in Lancashire tried to start a 'more looms' system in the weaving sheds for less money, and began a county lock-out when 4,000 workers went on strike. These strikes and demonstrations about the 'more looms' system were 'the most vicious class battles that characterised the years between the wars'. [30]

At the 1931 LPWO conference the women objected to the forcing of domestic labour onto unemployed cotton workers. Such workers could be refused unemployment benefit if they did not accept a servant's job. [31] Class antagonism which forced near starvation on women was very threatening to the workers.

In 1932 Sickness Benefit for married women was also reduced from twelve shillings to ten shillings. It would have been further cut, but for an unusual parliamentary alliance of Labour and Conservative female MPs led by Lady Astor. [32] This unusual gender and class combination was a protest at this further exploitation of married women workers.

The 1932 conference was not graced with the physical presence of Marion Phillips because she died of cancer on 23 January 1932, but her spirit was present because she had planned the conference and decided what was the main subject to be discussed. She had written the editorial for the January edition of *Labour Woman* from her sick-bed, and had chosen the Report on Women as Wage-Earners Under a Reactionary Government as the most important discussion topic. The report had been prepared by the SJCIWO and was presented by Ellen Wilkinson. Proof that Marion Phillips was far-seeing and supportive of women workers is shown by her advice to campaign for a million members, to move away from past resolutions to new subjects and new issues, and to seize the chance to bring in socialism 'next time'. [33] She foresaw that the increased oppression of women workers just manifested in the dismissal of married women would lead to new degrees of oppression and would need to be fought by large numbers of organised women unionists.

Time was allowed at the conference for delegates to pay tribute to their leader. The address by Susan Lawrence was on the theme of Marion Phillips bringing social redemption to the women of the world. Barbara Ayrton Gould, a former suffragette, said that the SJCIWO had had a bronze memorial plaque made in memory of Marion to be permanently placed in the Board room at Labour Party headquarters. [34]

The Report on Women as Wage Earners presented by Ellen Wilkinson, dealt with the Anomalies regulations, which presumed that married women workers could manage without the unemployment benefits for which they had been insured, and towards which they had subscribed before marriage. The new rule required that unless a married woman had (since marriage) worked for a number of weeks (and paid a certain number of contributions), she would be disallowed her benefit. She had to prove that she was normally employed, would genuinely seek work, and could reasonably hope to obtain it. [35]

Under the heading 'Married Women Defrauded' in the *Labour Woman* of April 1932 the writer asserted that victimising married women under the Anomalies regulations should be outlawed, for they were bona-fide insured contributers with considerable industrial experience and were seeking their livelihood in insurable employment. Recently, feminist historian Sylvia Walby has characterised this action against married women workers during the depression as a patriarchal exclusionary practice. [36]

Married women formed a section of the workforce which was unorganised, isolated and powerless, and could therefore be manipulated without fear of reprisals, particularly as a press campaign of 'calumny' against married women workers was proceeding at the same time. This was not just gender rivalry but blatant gender discrimination within capitalism, and shored up by patriarchy.

Married women were prominent at the second reading of the National Health Insurance and Contributory Pensions Bill in 1932, when the expenditure on married women was said to be £850,000 above the provision allowed for. An article in *The Lancet* had stated that 3,000 women died per annum as a direct result of maternity, and at least 60,000 were crippled annually, or suffered ill health and disablement. [37] The former Minister of Health, in the departed Labour government, Arthur Greenwood, declared that this reduction of married women's benefit to ten shillings was very mean. It seemed also to express resentment that working-class women should be costing so much. The women at the 1932 conference sent an emergency resolution of protest about the cuts to women's health insurance to the House of Commons during the debate. It demanded equal treatment for all classes of insured persons irrespective of sex. [38]

Labour women fiercely resented the 10 per cent cuts in education, a service they must keep in being, because it was the basis of progress. Leah Manning, MP asserted that men on the Conservative May Committee feared the education of working-class children as ousting their own children. [39] Manning urged young mothers to fight for their children's education, but Lady Sanderson criticised working-class women and men for not valuing education enough, and letting their children leave school too soon. She had not thought that children's labour earned money for *food*. One woman advocated organised protest which had worked in 1922 (in the campaign to restore free milk). The women openly spoke of 'class war' regarding the cuts in education. [40] Another protection which the delegates wished to ensure for their own sex was their resolution for the appointment of women police rather than policemen to interview girl victims of criminal assault.

In 1932 angry demonstrations were held against the salary cuts by teachers and civil servants, and a Means Test was applied to those who were on transitional payments (that is, those who had used up their contributory benefits). Some new Public Assistance Committees (PACs) refused to administer the Means Test, which required that any assets or savings had to be used up before benefit was paid. [41] They were appalled by its harshness.

Some local authorities sacked women employees on the day of their marriage — a cruel wedding present — and given even in the cotton industry. [42] 'There is a general resolve to attack the unemployment problem by the removal of women, and more particularly married women, from jobs', claimed one journal. [43]

Women of all political persuasions worked for peace throughout the decade, but 1933 was named 'a pacifist year' probably because of a well-publicised debate at Oxford University which ended with the motion that 'this house will in no circumstances fight for its king and country'. [44] Arthur Henderson had been chairing a conference trying to achieve disarmament among European nations for fifteen months with little success and the LPWO conference passed a resolution deploring this result. Ellen Wilkinson, perhaps influenced by the Oxford decision, suggested that women should declare 'that we will not lift a finger in any war'. [45] Pacifist and anti-war attitudes were maintained, but ended abruptly in 1939 when the Second World War began. However, among Labour and Socialist women the support for peace was steadfast. There was

gender solidarity across classes on this issue. But among Labour supporters, there was also class solidarity; the Labour candidate won the East Fulham by-election by accusing the Conservatives of war preparation.[46]

Unemployment was still high in 1933. A LPWO deputation to the Minister of Labour complained of the discrimination against married women for the total number of disallowed claims under the Anomalies Act was 179,888. [47] Susan Lawrence presented an SJCIWO report which dealt with the management of unemployment and reported that the impoverished, depressed industrial areas had so many able-bodied unemployed that the government had accepted responsibility for them, and had created the Unemployment Assistance Board (UAB), but that its scales of relief were niggardly. [48] This was the period of large hunger marches organised by the communist party. The majority of the marchers were men, but there were always some women present.

In April 1933 the Labour Party moved a vote of censure against the government for driving thousands of unemployed to the UAB. Leaders of both the LPWO and the trade unions urged women to begin persistent agitation locally and nationally to get school meals for their children if the father was on transitory benefit, for an Act of 1921 empowered Local Education Authorities to feed necessitous children and not wait (as some LEAs did) until the doctor had diagnosed malnutrition. The women passed a resolution to compel the use of powers given in the 1921 Meals Act and demanded boots for poor children as well as food. This led a knowledgeable delegate to praise Sheffield which had had a Labour-dominated local government for six years — one which saw that school children were properly fed. The result was that only eight children had tuberculosis out of 500,000. [49]

Working-class women challenged the cost of a 'right' diet promoted by the Minister of Health, saying that the amounts were too low and the diet too monotonous. Women leaders were well aware of the fact that lower-class women 'had a very sound idea of dietetics', but not the money to purchase the right foods.

Poor diet would always affect health and Labour women were still monitoring the care of mothers and babies in their concern for the high maternal mortality figures. At these pre-World War II conferences they urged the Labour Party to prepare detailed plans for a national health service with home helps, and suggested that doctors attending home

births should wear sterile clothing and a mask. They also took the opportunity during debates on housing schemes to point out that poor housing raised the infant mortality rate. There had been a downward trend in infant mortality in the past twelve years, but the gap between the rate in the slums and affluent areas had not diminished. [50] This was a class problem which they wanted government to remedy.

Women reiterated that there was a 'class onslaught' on women's and children's education as capitalism broke down. The SJCIWO had organised a protest demonstration at Mile End baths demanding free secondary education. Then they had been invited to give evidence before a consultative committee of the Board of Education, this time about younger children. Barbara Ayrton Gould, Eleanor Barton (WCG) and Mary Sutherland (Chief Woman Officer of the Labour Party) had submitted a written statement about the need everywhere, but particularly in overcrowded, industrial districts and slum areas, for nursery schools to keep small children off the dangerous streets, and ensure for them a healthy open-air environment and proper rest and care. [51]

Because of the high rate of women's unemployment and the consequent poverty the Labour Party Women's Organisation itself suffered declining membership. The number of Women's Sections in the Preston area had fallen from 635 in 1929 to 287 in 1933, showing how lower-class women's occupations in any spare time they had from their paid work were also curtailed. [52]

Labour party speakers at Cheltenham in 1934 spoke of the national government standing firmly behind the class it represented, reducing the purchasing power of the working-classes and sapping the vitality of the men and women of tomorrow by 'the juggernaut of capitalism'. Working-class women particularly felt the oppression of this class rule and demanded that more women magistrates be appointed to the bench, because they were not going to have their children sentenced by members of the 'other class with whiskers flowing down to their knees'. [53] They felt more acutely the burden of remote class-privileged patriarchal power and were well aware that verdicts were harsher for poor children.

Yet Walter Smith, Chairman of the Labour Party, praised the colourful, picturesque gathering at Cheltenham, the LPWO conference of 1934, full of life and vigour and out to 'make socialists'. Later, Arthur Henderson, whose disarmament mission had failed, paid a tribute to the work of women organisers in the cause of world peace. He observed that

the most peace-loving and democratic countries were those where women participated fully and freely in public affairs.

Gender solidarity and support for working-class wives was encouraged by the SJCIWO in a deputation to the Minister of Labour which protested against the injustice of discrimination in law between married women and other workers. A report on the history of health insurance educated the women present on the way health insurance was administered, and tried to justify the attention paid to married women, because they were seen as 'a heavy drain on the health funds'. The report then suggested a Labour Party Health Plan for a national pooling of risks without singling out any section, thus ensuring fair coverage for all. [54] Women were anxious to eliminate any sex discrimination.

The discussion following the report enabled the delegates to criticise the shortcomings of the contemporary system. For example, they thought that there were a number of people of a higher class on the Public Assistance Boards who had no experience or understanding of the needs of those who applied for relief. [55] The presenters produced statistics to prove that the standard of health of working-class wives was lower than that of men, and the health of the wives of men unemployed for two years was, not surprisingly, the worst. Women's right to choose whether to work after marriage was stoutly defended, with reference to the loss of such rights to women in Nazi Germany.

Early in the depression years a speaker had said that the only protection for workers against exploitation was the trade union. At the Cheltenham conference trade union organisers urged the Women's Sections to affiliate to a Trade Council, and to press there for the setting up of a women's trade union committee which would arrange one meeting every quarter about trade unions with a trade union speaker. Only by collectivising and organising could young women (who were cheap to employ) protect and improve their conditions. In the past ten years the experts said, the increase of women in industry was 16.7 per cent, and for men 0.5 per cent. [56] Again middle-class organisers were showing women workers the way of progress, forever fighting prejudice against trade unions among women workers, as well as among conservatives.

A general election in 1935 again returned a conservative government. Ellen Wilkinson was the only woman MP, but the Labour Party had polled eight and a quarter million votes, an increase of two million since 1931. [57] Marion Phillips had been right in 1932 in exhorting

women to pay attention to new issues. These were now emerging both at home and abroad. New light industries were being established away from the depressed areas and labour-saving office machinery was being introduced. Nimble-fingered, low-paid young women workers could be trained to use this time-saving equipment, while men retained more responsible work for higher pay. Men employers and men employees (clerks) won this particular gender battle, without any threat to men's jobs, for these were newly created positions.

Gender solidarity across nations was celebrated in 1935 when 36 Labour women returned a visit of socialist women from Sweden. [58] But the situation of German women socialists was alarming, because they had no right to work if a husband was working, and they were persecuted as socialists. British socialist women claimed that there is a woman's point of view which deserves to be listened to.

The women's point of view at the 1935 Sheffield conference was given regarding maternal mortality, in a report which publicised the unsatisfactory situation that prevailed, suggested answers to it, then encouraged discussion and suggestions from the delegates who urged the Minister of Health to conduct an inquiry. The Labour Party praised the report when it went to the men's conference as 'a model of cooperation stressing a national problem'. The Chief Woman Officer said that, as women, they had perhaps neglected to look after their own interests, because child bearing 'fell entirely on one sex and women ought to make it their special care'. [59] Wishful thinking as it turned out, because of the rivalry between doctors and midwives. The decline in maternal mortality from the later thirties was in the main due to the introduction of chemotherapy and sulphonamide drugs. [60]

In 1935 the working classes were recovering their fighting spirit, and when the government tried to impose further hardships by directing the unemployed to cultivate small-holdings, there was an outcry and the Standstill Act (1935) reversed the order. [61] Older delegates viewed this as the first gain for the workers since 1922. Now delegates spoke out against so-called senior or central schools as not being really secondary. They also wanted Toddlers Clinics (new supervision for children under five), to be run by local authorities (where working-class women could have a voice), rather than through the charity of Tory women. [62]

A second 1935 LPWO report on Women in Industry presented by Dorothy Elliott skirted round the question of equal pay and the verdict was

that despite the call for Equal Pay for Equal Work in the civil service, the lowest paid position was still that of Writing Assistant and remained all-female. [63] Sex-typing work as women's because of women's assumed special manual dexterity, enabled men employers to justify logically to men's unions their preference for women workers, and thus avoided disputes.

By 1936 real battles were being fought in Abyssinia, Spain and the Rhineland. Italian troops had invaded Abyssinia; a civil war had begun in Spain; and Germany had annexed the Rhineland. By August 1936 Germany had introduced compulsory military service. Peace-loving Labour and Socialist women were dismayed at this failure of the League of Nations to prevent war abroad, and at the effect on the cost of living at home.

About this time eleven million people had voted for peace but Clement Attlee brought greetings to the 1936 LPWO conference at Swansea, and said that the House of Commons had disparaged the Peace Ballot. Attlee spoke of class war at home, with some spoiling for war and aggression, but the Labour Party wanted a general agreement for mutual aid and security. [64]

Jennie Adamson was the second woman Chair of the Labour Party, and in 1936 Labour women again pressured the Ministry of Health about maternity. This time they asked for an efficient midwifery service nationally, to be under local health authorities. The Minister ignored this request and handed over the service to voluntary organisation. A Welsh delegate pointed out that 'the unauthorised, untrained people who liked to do a little slumming in order to feel virtuous' would be dealing with the service. Most Labour women wanted a national health service available to all. Mary Sutherland, Chief Woman Officer, praised the work done by Women's Sections all over the country in investigating the maternity services in their own area and amassing so much useful information. [65] It was apparent, however, that middle-class 'do-gooders' were still mistrusted even when they worked under state supervision.

Next, leaders had arranged for useful information to be disseminated about the changing work situation for women in 'white collar' occupations. This gave them the chance to explain and criticise the administration of modern offices, and to make women and girls aware of unnecessary oppression at a time of 'poverty in the midst of plenty ' as Jennie Adamson put it. [66]

The report on Women in Offices pointed out that as office machine operators women had not usurped men's jobs, because these were newly-created occupations. The report also named employers who preferred their employees not to be unionised, namely banks, insurance companies and some distributive trades. The presenters boldly emphasised common injustices which were practised, for example that the great mass of unorganised women work overtime as and when required, with tea money as their only recompence.[67]

At this period time and motion study had been imported from the United States of America and Leffingwell was the American authority on the scientific management of large mechanised offices. A tapometer was used to monitor the speeds of typists in typing pools and competition to increase speed was practised every day.

The presenter spoke of Russian trading companies operating in Britain where payment was made 'irrespective of sex' and she suggested that unequal pay was unjust to women and dangerous to men. She warned women about the insecurity of office employment and recalled that in 1931, to make way for younger women and the new machines, employers had dismissed older women workers in an exercise designated as 'clearing out the old fogies'. Trade unions could have gained for them compensation or adequate retirement pensions.

Trade union leaders wanted to scotch two fallacies about women's work in offices — that women liked monotonous work and that their patience was an asset. Leaders refuted the first and declared that women's patience was a vice not a virtue. [68] Such a comprehensive survey of new trends in women's employment disseminated at a national conference and taken back to inform hundreds of others was a very useful service by women for women. It alerted women to gender inequality, and to exploitation by patriarchal practices in capitalism.

A positive note recognised as 'a splendid triumph for women' at the conference was Ellen Wilkinson's bid for equal pay. In 1936 she introduced in the House of Commons a motion to give the same scales of pay to women as to men in the common classes of the Civil Service. John Jagger, seconding the motion, reminded members that the House had passed a resolution in 1921 encouraging equality in the civil service. He thought that it was surely time now to give it effect. The motion was carried, but the Prime Minister transformed the issue into a vote of confidence in him, and the decision was reversed. [69]

Social consciousness was kept alive in the 1930s by the efforts of Labour women who kept renewing their pressure on a dominant gender, about women's issues. The rank-and-file women of the Labour Party had, by 1936, developed enough self-confidence to challenge the conclusions of nutritionists about an adequate diet for each family. They looked at the findings of Sir John Boyd Orr, of the British Medical Association, of Professor Mottram and of Seebohm Rowntree and they perceived that the cost of food was based on the assumption that every penny was spent to the best advantage and that the housewife could always get to the cheapest market. Some had read the League of Nations report and knew that often body weight would remain the same even though a child was anaemic and weak. [70] They advised substituting the term 'under-feeding' for 'malnutrition', as the former word was more explicit, and they criticised relying on averages, because then the families who spent less on food were obscured. The lack of a proper diet was caused by cuts in services and in wages, and by indirect taxes on several foods which affected the poor adversely.

Barbara Ayrton Gould thought that this section of the population was 'deliberately semi-starved, because the semi-starved don't revolt' — an anti-government sentiment felt by others. Alderman Rose Davies of South Wales invited Welsh delegates to come to the platform and describe their trials in a distressed area. One Swansea woman came forward and said she had to feed a family of seven on twelve shillings a week. A Fabian woman said that she had been struck by the delicacy of some working-class children when she had served as a Poor Law Guardian. [71] Class and gender were both involved here. Women of all classes disliked the poor nourishment of children from whatever cause, but found it intolerable when inflicted on the lower classes by insensitive statesmen who had not learnt T. H. Marshall's contention that the state should see to the citizens' right to welfare and economic and social security. [72]

Welfare and social security were practised in some areas where socialism had a long history. Norwich, where the 1937 LPWO conference was held, was proud of its Labour women and men. William Morris had established the Norwich branch of the ILP in 1894, and Elizabeth Fry had been born there. The Lord Mayor of Norwich was proud to have nine women on the council. Norwich was also the birthplace of the Agricultural Workers' Union, due to George Edwards whose wife encouraged him to teach trade unionism. This socialist marriage had seen

fifty-six branches of the Agricultural Workers Union established in one year by cycling journeys to promote trade unionism totalling six thousand miles. [73]

There was further heartening evidence of gender harmony in Norwich, and the atmosphere was optimistic with news of the expansion of Women's Sections, of the cooperative movement and of trade unionism. But the international scene was not so pleasing with Spain in the throes of internecine struggle, and Hitler teaching children to hate Jews and socialists. However the Chair of the Norwich conference hoped that organised women of the three great movements had faith that political effort could avert war.

The year 1937 was the most prosperous year of the thirties, yet there were still one million unemployed. [74] One woman said that armaments work would be very welcome after years of deplorable poverty, but women now wanted to keep their children out of industry until they were sixteen, and demanded no class distinction in education or health.

LPWO women complained in 1938 about the persisting inequalities in education. The ten per cent cut to teachers' salaries in 1931 was not restored until 1935. All children now stayed at school until the age of fourteen, but for most, their entire school life was spent in one elementary school. The secondary (grammar) schools still could not accommodate all the pupils qualified to enter. By 1939 (when there was no LPWO conference) a system of grammar, modern and technical schools had emerged and an educational philosophy which decreed that children could be assigned to different schools at the age of eleven, according to their aptitude for academic study, applied science or art, or practical work. Labour women had wanted the school-leaving age to be raised to fifteen and then to sixteen years, believing that it would help to relieve unemployment. In 1936 a definite commitment to raising the age had been made, which would have come into effect on 1 September 1939, but on that day Germany had invaded Poland and it was again postponed. [75]

By 1938 63.5 per cent of children over the age of eleven were in modern schools. The number of children in secondary schools rose by 1938 and then fell a little. [76] It seems that an attempt was made to achieve universal literacy in Britain during the inter-war years. Certainly there was a boom in reading particularly among women, and this became a cheap leisure pursuit, catered for by nine new monthly magazines for women, published between 1922 and 1939, which could be seen as

reinforcing and prolonging the domestic role for middle-class women, while publications for working-class women provided stories of romance and excitement. [77]

Historian John Saville has written that the main Labour Party conference of 1938 was the quietest and most listless of the thirties. [78] The European balance of power was changing and there seemed no clear way forward. At the LPWO women's conference Anne Godwin, who had joined the Association of Women Clerks and Secretaries (AWCS) in 1921, when she was 16 years old, and now chaired large conferences, persuaded the women that it was a privilege to live in times of change and to follow the great central ideas of the Labour Movement — to abandon war and to establish socialism.

The rising cost of living was very much to the fore. Both the WCG and the LPWO had sent protest petitions to the Cost of Living Index Committee. Godwin castigated the smug assumption of Sir John Simon that another twopence on tea would be willingly contributed by the workers. Almost thirty years before, in 1909, Mary Macarthur had been equally critical of well-to-do women who failed to appreciate the significance to poor women of two pennies. [79] Some recalled that in 1904 twenty per cent of a family's spending on food went on purchasing bread as the cheapest nourishment. [80]

Women were still doggedly pursuing ongoing problems such as an enquiry into post-natal services, an increase in the number of women magistrates and how to unionise scattered domestic servants. They had just published a table of the profits of armament firms, and a report on Socialism and the Standard of Living allowed them to forget for a while that they were 'living in a world of mad dogs'. [81]

Their most important task at this last conference before the Second World War (there was no conference in 1939), was to vote on the Popular Front. This was in response to the outstanding international event of the thirties — the Spanish Civil War. The events in Spain had caused a left-wing revival in Britain in the late thirties. Various left-wing factions won a quarter of the votes at the 1936 Labour Party Conference in favour of communist affiliation. [82] In 1938 a new body composed of Women against War and Fascism, the Communist Party, the socialist left, the ILP, independent women and the WCG, had wanted to form a popular front against the aggression in Spain. The 1938 LPWO conference passed a special resolution declaring that they strongly opposed a Popular Front

'believing that it will ultimately weaken the position of the Labour Party'.[83] Mary Sutherland, the CWO, had guided the women to adopt the stance of the moderates, and an article in the *Daily Herald* praised them for

> A grasp of the essential purpose and task of Labour, and a rational calmness in face of an emotional propaganda that are wholly admirable. And Miss Sutherland's remark ... that the average housewife is more concerned with 'today's bread than tomorrow's war' is a valuable reminder that no amount of international pressure can be allowed to push aside the need for socialism. [84]

Fabian gradualism had again ruled the day. Perhaps as well, for in September 1938 almost everyone in Britain expected war, which was, however, postponed by Chamberlain's appeasement policy.

* * *

According to Aristotle, politics refers to men's deliberate efforts to order, direct and control their collective affairs and activities; to establish ends for their society; and to implement and evaluate those ends.[85] In this context 'men' does not include women. Women were latecomers to politics. Men had been involved in politics for centuries and since politics is about power, they were reluctant to share it with women. Again the efforts made by many women and some men for peace were cancelled out and war was justified because it was necessary to fight aggression in the form of fascism. The next conference of the LPWO was a war-time one.

GENDER RELATIONS

Labour women were fortunate in establishing their organisation alongside Labour men in 1906. Yet they were already disadvantaged for men had come from trade unions and trade councils, and were well versed in collective action and in the conduct of political meetings. Women had realised this and preferred to meet separately so that they could acquire political skills, and then work with the men.

Gender is a primary way of signifying relations of power, and men politicians had power over the women's organisation both through their

longer experience of politics and through the accepted dominance of men. In the early days men joined the Labour party through their trade union and women joined as individual members. When equality of status was aimed for, both husband and wife could be members of the same constituency. Not many men attended the WLL annual conference unless they were invited in an official capacity. Women could attend the men's annual conference as 'equals', but not many did so because they were usually greatly outnumbered. The highest number of women at a main Labour Party conference was 108 with 1,314 men in 1956, and the lowest number was 3 women with 448 men in 1910 at Newport. [86] Gender relations between women or between women and men were not always harmonious in this troubled decade. As has been described, women differed on questions of protective legislation, on child rearing and on the value of education. On the other hand, women were united in opposition to war and to an array of other injustices. Their desire for a better world in a future socialist commonwealth gave them a powerful incentive to work together. Within the LPWO they accepted with reluctance that men leaders had power over the women's organisation, but were unable to change this while their numbers were smaller.

Women had had to overcome their inculcated passivity and deference in order to become effective political speakers, especially in the days before the microphone. Some former suffragists had mastered open-air speaking by constantly practising it. Others were encouraged when indoors to project their voices towards 'the picture of Queen Victoria on the far wall'. [87] Of course there were the kind of relationships between men and women as in everyday society, ranging from mutual love and admiration to hostility and dislike. However, certain factions such as ILP men approved of and aided women in politics. [88]

The sexual division of labour was carried over into politics, so that women were allocated tasks to do with their assumed traditional concerns, such as child care, education, maternity, housing and health. By the 1930s however, some Labour administrators were realising that women were capable of handling much wider assignments. Herbert Morrison, as Labour leader of the London County Council, appointed women to chair such male preserves as Water Boards and prison governance. [89]

Women were fully accepted as political activists in their own right, but the men's party remained the dominant one, traditional practices being maintained for many years, such as the men's conference

continuing to elect the five women on the Labour Party's national executive committee. And the numbers of women on committees remained exceedingly unequal. They still do today. Despite the gains made in the late twentieth century by modern women emulating these dogged, energetic and inspiring forebears, equal participation in the political arena is still a goal for which women have to strive.

CLASS RELATIONS

The Labour Party was intended to be the party which represented the working class. By the end of the 1920s the Labour Party had enrolled middle-class intellectuals, some of the idle rich and aristocrats. Working-class women activists who joined the party had to have a very strong commitment to politics to overcome the difficulties of poverty and domesticity. Some were rewarded for their commitment by being appointed as paid organisers (though Labour Party salaries were not very high).

Good class relationships existed between women and learned men who addressed themselves to clarifying difficult problems of equality, education, subsistence and the like. R. H. Tawney and Fenner Brockway are examples. Uneasy class relationships existed between working-class men and middle-class women leaders who seemed to be interfering with industrial matters, which would change the status quo. Eleanor Rathbone and her desire for family allowances might have threatened men's wage structure. [90] Also Hannah Mitchell's husband's comfort was menaced by his wife's adherence to the Pankhursts and the suffrage cause. [91]

There was also considerable resentment among working-class mothers towards upper and middle-class statesmen who denied their children free secondary education, and restricted the entry of working-class students to teacher training colleges. Working-class women resented indirect taxes on food, and disliked the lack of training and insurance cover for children between the ages of fourteen and eighteen. Class consciousness was very strong in Britain. To some lower-class women, the state was a repressive class organisation. Throughout the thirties there had been no escape from its restrictions. It seemed to the women that their rights would not be forthcoming from such class rule. By determined pressure they had compelled authorities to improve maternity care. They had challenged the careless assessment of nutrition, and both these

problems could imply life or death. Perhaps the final disillusionment had been the failure of their own middle-class leaders to try harder to encourage working-class women to stand for parliament.

In 1932 the leaders themselves had spoken of 'the big and worthwhile discovery and use of [the] talent of working-class women.'. This was in the debate about the Means Test and Unemployment when, Paton (ILP), Colman, and Godwin debated well,

> but the conference rose to the simple short speeches of clear, shy sincerity from a Nelson weaver, a Nottingham hosiery worker and a Yorkshire woollen worker. [92]

If the Labour Party intended to remain committed to impelling reform by parliamentary procedure to establish socialism, it needed women such as these, for they had been empowered by generously-given political training to speak out in support of socialist principles.

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80. LPWO, *Annual Conference Report* (Leamington Spa, 1938), p. 58.

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82. Hinton, *Labour and Socialism*, p. 156.

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85. Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Public Man, Private Woman: Women in Social and Political Thought* (Oxford University Press) Oxford, 1981, p. 100.

86. Labour Party, *Annual Conference Reports*, 1906-1956.

87. LPWO, *Annual Conference Report* (Portsmouth, 1928), p. 31. (The advice to speak to Queen Victoria was given during a debate on family allowances!)

88. Reports of ILP support were given at the conferences of 1910-1912.

89. Vernon, *Ellen Wilkinson*, p. 127.

90. Family allowances were opposed by unions with large numbers of low-paid workers, chiefly the Transport and General Workers Union (T&GWU).

91. Mitchell (ed), *The Hard Way Up*, pp. 130-1.

92. *Labour Woman*, July 1932, p. 105.

CHAPTER 5

AUTONOMY OR DEPENDENCE

Historian Caroline Rowan has written that 'autonomy or structural links' were not formally recognised by the Labour Party when the WLL was formed in 1906. [1] Christine Collette too, records 'very little comment' at the 1905 Labour Representation Committee (LRC) conference when the final recommendation of the executive was 'that where the LRC was standing a candidate, a local women's organisation should be formed'. [2] I shall examine the uneasiness with which the appearance of the women's organisation was received, and I shall argue that women were familiar in their private lives with the restraints of dependence and 'the risks and joys of autonomy'. [3] They were thus able to achieve the 'object' of their organisation (to form a women's league attached to the Labour Party, and to get Labour women into parliament and on to all local bodies). However, women did not always follow the men in adhering to constitutional methods of obtaining social reform. Their autonomy permitted them to employ different tactics such as direct action. But they, like Labour men, were fascinated by parliamentary procedures. It is, perhaps, due to political inexperience that the women leaders did not do more to improve women's status.

'Autonomy' is a noun of worth. It can apply to institutions or individuals. It is formed from the Greek words autos (self) and nomos (law), and refers to the power or right of self-government, stemming from Kant's doctrine that the human will carries its guiding principles within itself. [4] Freedom to make one's own laws carries with it the obligation to answer for the consequences of this self-generated, independent action. One philosopher writes,

> It may be a fact that individuals who place great value on their autonomy will be less likely to form communities based on the promotion of communally held values. However, the traditional socialist concern with equality may be seen as guided by an instrumental interest in maximising autonomy. [5]

By promoting equality some socialists hoped to encourage the emergence of more autonomous women.

Women leaders of the WLL realised that working-class women would need encouragement and help in fighting for their rights, for they were not only workers but workers' wives, and so had to reconcile two loyalties - to sex and to class. The adjective 'autonomic' was first used in Britain in 1832. In 1833 followers of Robert Owen, the father of British socialism, were writing articles on the women's page of *The Pioneer*, the Owenite news-sheet. From 1833 'autonomy' would be a useful term for Owenites to use, for they wrote of their leader's most famous theory about human character, which could only be changed by changing the circumstances of people's lives. [6] Autonomic (now 'autonomous' is the preferred term) human beings would surely be useful in building a new, moral world. Frances Morrison, a working-class woman who contributed many articles on women's work and wages to the Owenite paper, may have been the author of an article on the need to challenge the subservience of working-class women, in some of the first accounts of gender division in the working-class:

> Working-class women were (they quoted Shelley) the slave of slaves, dependent, subordinate in marriage, secondary labour in the workplace, excluded or confined to a subordinate role in class organisation. [7]

These women were far from being autonomous, but between 1833 and 1906 women leaders and some concerned men were encouraging middle-class spinsters to work in the expanding clerical sector and to be more active and self-reliant. When socialist ideas found fresh expression in the latter half of the century (for Owen's socialism had not been generally adopted), these ideas seemed, to the women of the poorer classes, to be more rewarding than repressive. They were expected to live docilely and respectably on very little money, but socialists such as Edward Carpenter and Olive Schreiner were writing about, and deploring, this contemporary oppression of working-class women.

Edward Carpenter was the author of *Towards Democracy* (1881), and an English disciple of Walt Whitman, the American poet. Ignoring the rigour of class divisions, Carpenter tried through his work as an Extension Lecturer of Cambridge University to befriend the proletariat and he shared their lives, supporting himself in a labourer's cottage on the outskirts of Sheffield, and making contact with Sheffield socialists. [8]

In the 1880s Carpenter taught working-class students to be interested in culture and art. He was sympathetic to working-class women and supported the communalisation of housework under socialism, to enable their liberation, and move them towards their autonomy. He wrote *Love's coming of Age* which gave a positive image of female sexuality and he sensed the possibility of 'soul unions' — free and spontaneous relations between human beings. [9]

Carpenter corresponded with Olive Schreiner, who lived with Havelock Ellis, the sexology theorist. Schreiner, a feminist from South Africa, was also a writer. Her book, *Woman and Labour*, argued the right of women to have access to all kinds of work — for a decent wage with some leisure. [10] Both these theorists helped to change working-class women's beliefs and attitudes about different kinds of love, and about the attainment of economic independence, which would eventually give them a chance of autonomy and freedom.

In the 1890s a group of middle-class people organised themselves to make a 'special and systematic inquiry into the conditions of working women; to provide accurate information concerning their interests; and to promote such action as may seem conducive to their improvement'. [11] This was the afore-mentioned Women's Industrial Council (WIC) with Margaret MacDonald, leader of the Women's Labour League on its Education Committee. Middle-class leaders were thinking more of cooperation and collectivism than autonomy, when in 1906, they envisaged the formation of a national women's committee in Britain to represent women who believed in Labour ideas and socialism. Utilising women's special skills and knowledge they intended to convey the needs and rights of working-class women to Labour Party men.

When Labour women first proposed a women's committee, and Mary Macpherson, secretary of the Railway Women's Guild (RWG), had Ramsay MacDonald's approval to set it up, [12] the minutes of the Executive Committee of the Labour Representation Committee on 25 April 1906 report that

> A letter was read from the Women's Labour League, announcing the formation of the League and enclosing copies of the object, leaflets etc. One leaflet stated that a National Women's Labour League in connection with the Labour Party has been formed with a Central committee for organising and advisory purposes. [13]

MacDonald wrote at once that the LRC executive committee objected to the words 'in connection with the Labour Party', as outsiders might assume an official connection, and he asked that the words be changed to imply nothing more than that the WLL would work with the Labour Party. [14]

Soon after, the Labour Party Executive reported another letter from the WLL, enclosing the Constitution and Object which 'had been altered in accordance with the suggestion of the Executive'. No objection was now taken to the wording. [15] Yet the original words are there in the first WLL annual report. Someone had decided to disregard this petty request.

The first League conference in Leicester in 1906 saw the object of the League resolved and even enhanced by Isabella Ford, an experienced ILP activist, who added the clause about aiming at direct Labour representation of women in parliament and on all local bodies. Two other innovations were that societies of women working and in agreement with the 'object', who were not eligible to affiliate to the Labour Party, would be able to affiliate to the League, and individual members could join for twopence a year. Although Mary Macpherson had not been able to form an organisation equal with the men's party, the women had inserted three aims despite the paternalistic supervision of the men.

Isabella Ford had argued in 1904 that the emancipation of women and of Labour men were different aspects of the same great force. There was prejudice in the Labour Movement (she said) against the Women's Movement, because the latter originated and grew through middle-class women persuading working-class women of their need for economic and political enfranchisement. [16] She hoped for an alliance between autonomous feminists and socialists.

Sylvia Pankhurst, the socialist feminist whose mother and sister had formed the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) in 1903, quoted Margaret MacDonald saying at this time, 'I was glad that we in the Labour Party had not separate women's organisations like the other parties; but now that some people are running off and forming them, I think we should do the same'. [17] Thus, although Margaret MacDonald had not participated in the machinations of Mary Macpherson, she too wanted a Women's Labour League.

ILP men also supported the WLL, as they showed by their attendance at a public meeting on 9 April 1906 to inaugurate the Central

London branch. But some of the men of the Marxist Social Democratic Federation were antagonistic to the WLL, and many trade union men were indifferent, rejecting women in politics, as they did in the trade unions.

The new Labour Party was perhaps nervous of its status — too anxious about its own future to be supportive of the women. Historian Ross McKibbin has described the young Labour Party as 'a sum of affiliates'. [18] The country constituencies of the Labour Representation Committee were formed from local trades councils or little LRCs, or groups of trade unionists. [19] We are mistaken if we imagine that Women's Sections established themselves by attaching a women's group to a small group of Labour men, because for the first few years no large city had a central Labour Party except Manchester. [20] Success in forming Women's Sections seemed to occur in small towns and villages where there was an energetic organiser, such as Lisbeth Simm in north-east England. In some areas ILP branches had already formed a women's section, or the Social Democratic Federation had set up women's 'circles' of which twenty-two were still active in 1909. [21] In some northern towns these were rivals to the formation of the new WLL branches.

Lisbeth Simm had a good year in 1907. Her husband was Labour Party secretary for the area, and also editor of the *Northern Democrat*. He published reports of ILP activities and of the formation of WLL branches in his paper, for instance:

> A meeting arranged by Tyneside ILP was held on January 14 in the Co-op Hall, Gateshead, and addressed by Miss Billington and Miss Adela Pankhurst. Mrs. Simm presided. The hall was packed with an interested audience of men and women, and a resolution calling on the government to enfranchise the women in the next session of parliament was passed. [22]

and,

> In November 1907 Miss Macmillan lectured at the Palace Theatre, Newcastle, hired by the ILP. The lecture was of interest not only to socialists, but to all who care for child life and education. [23]

also,

> Doctor Ethel Bentham stood for the Labour Party and came second. Fighting on a socialist programme, she conducted a dignified contest by setting up and maintaining a lofty standard. She tackled open-air speaking well and generally conducted her campaign to win golden opinions. [24]

These brief reports describe some early activities of the WLL and display the political self-determination of the leaders, for they were allowed a free rein by the WLL's Head Office.

What did women's autonomy imply in the early twentieth century? Truly an unmarried state enhanced by a good education, and adequate subsistence. It was also not entirely impossible for a married woman to have a degree of autonomy, provided that her husband believed in and supported women's rights, and left the separate sphere of the home and child care to be administered as she wished. Professional single women with a steady income such as doctors, teachers and lawyers were often admirably autonomous.

There were professional women such as teachers and doctors on the WLL executive, even though as late as 1912 there were only 533 female physicians in England. [25] Ethel Bentham was financially secure, or she could not have offered to pay the rent for the WLL's Head Office in the MacDonalds' flat. Sister Edith Kerrison was an example of a wealthy woman who had paid for her training as a nurse because she wished to contribute to the medical care of poor children, since she had encountered them while a Poor Law Guardian at South West Ham. [26] Marion Phillips had had a tertiary education and was affluent enough to supplement the small scholarship awarded her to travel from Australia to England to continue her professional career. Teachers and doctors had a first-hand knowledge of needy children, and some thought that the new Labour Party was more likely to break away from the laissez-faire attitude of the other political parties.

Neither money nor class prevented individual women from being autonomous. If they were sufficiently determined, they could negotiate their position and make their own decisions. Among the members of the WLL as an autonomous institution were even some autonomous working-class women who negotiated their position in order to further the suffrage cause. Selina Cooper became known as a good speaker and was employed as an organiser by the National Union of Women's

Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) so that she could pay a housekeeper to care for her husband and daughter when she went away from home on a canvassing tour. [27] Ada Chew was a paid speaker for the ILP and later for the NUWSS, and she arranged her own journeys and activities. [28] Mary Middleton was a working-class woman who worked with a middle-class woman, Margaret MacDonald. They worked together to found the national organisation of Labour women.

When, in 1909, the stability of the trade union movement was threatened by the Osborne decision, these leaders sent two delegates to a special conference about it. [29] This showed that they were interested in men's industrial rights as well as in the effects of down-turns in the economy on their wives and children. The Osborne judgment (which was upheld by the House of Lords) maintained that it was illegal for trade unions to demand from their members compulsory contributions to be used for Labour Party business. This was a hard time for the inexperienced Labour party with two elections in 1911, and strikes becoming frequent. [30] The 1911 WLL conference passed a unanimous resolution for the government to restore the political rights of trade unions (enjoyed since 1868). [31] Unions were now less able to help their members because of the cut in contributions.

There was no rise in the growth of the Labour Party affiliates from 1911 to 1913. [32] This stagnation added to the industrial unrest which erupted in 1911 to 1912. Then, just as women act in a family crisis, WLL women organised the care of more than a thousand strikers' children in other people's homes in the London dock strike of summer, 1912. [33] In 1911 branch reports state that WLL women gave out food tickets in the Hull dock strike, and in Newport they made a house-to-house collection for the sailors' strike. These were all widely dispersed direct actions, and were initiated by Labour women. In 1911 the women proclaimed their autonomy by publishing a leaflet of four pages — 'an organ of our own'. Beatrice Webb congratulated them on this new venture and wrote that 'They were doing far broader work than for their own members. They had to take their part in the great task of the twentieth century — the solution once and for all of the terrible problem of ... chronic poverty'. [34]

Margaret Llewelyn Davies, leader of the Women's Cooperative Guild also congratulated them, stating what she thought were the most important issues — women's wages, the higher education of working

women, school clinics, child labour and education. [35] The League had been recognised and accepted as another battler for their rights by other women.

This approval of their work was given more publicity when both leaders died in 1911. The administration of the League by the two friends from the MacDonald's London home, though unpretentious, was enthusiastic, and had benefited from Margaret MacDonald's experience with other women's organisations, nationally and internationally. She had published articles and conducted seminars on women's questions, willingly travelled to provincial branches, and had asserted that 'to work for the economic independence of women is to work for the purity of family life'. [36] MacDonald had been secretary of a legal committee of the Women's Industrial Council which promoted legislation and watched administration in the interests of working women and girls. [37] She wanted better wages for the ten per cent of married women in paid employment, so that they could free themselves if necessary from the tyranny of marriages that had failed in some way. She supported the Labour party's promotion of the ideology of motherhood to working-class women, having, as the mother of six children, experienced some of the problems of motherhood that even riches cannot alleviate, such as the death of a child. [38]

Mary Middleton was a working-class woman who had continued to do the secretarial work of the WLL from her hospital bed and had attended the 1910 conference in spite of her illness. [39] Appropriately, memorial funds collected for the two women were spent to establish a baby clinic at North Kensington, to cater for pre-school children's health. A separate committee managed the clinic, and proceeds from a sewing circle begun in 1903 by Margaret MacDonald were diverted to help finance the clinic. [40]

On 11 May 1910, 'Vida Goldstein looked in and found the sewing party in full swing'. [41] The visit of this Australian shows both the international status of the League and the way autonomous women sought each other out. The clinic was claimed to be the first run and fully controlled by women, and all that mothers residing in Kensington had to do was present themselves with their children to get help. [42]

Because of the unexpected crisis caused by these two deaths, the Labour Party granted the WLL £50 and another £50 came from Arthur Henderson. The only condition was that the secretary helped in by-elections. [43] Henderson wanted value for Labour Party money. In practice then the WLL's autonomy was limited by its dependence on men and

male organisations for money. At this time the point must be conceded that working-class women could not have financially supported such organisations unaided. (Even the autonomous Cooperative Women's Guild had to accept funds from the Cooperative Party). This was a dependency taken for granted at that time.

Because the control from Head Office was relaxed and accommodating, autonomous women felt free to pursue their own projects. One such woman was Katharine Bruce Glasier, who was present at the first meeting of the National Administrative Committee of the Independent Labour Party in 1893. She wrote a powerful plea for pit-head baths for miners which was a mixture of emotional concern and technical plumbing detail. In 1913, the WLL published a new, expanded edition of *Baths at the Pithead and the Works* .[44] This kind of work justified their claim that they had been the only women's organisation to address the subject of industrial dirt, another area only indirectly related to women and childcare.[45]

However, the Labour Party did believe it could attract the votes of mothers by showing its concern for children. Therefore, after founding its own baby clinic the WLL started a campaign to encourage the proliferation of baby clinics in every local authority area in 1912-1913. The women sent out 40,000 leaflets free, with such titles as *Help the Babies; Baby Clinics and the Doctors;* and *Points for Speakers on the Need for Baby Clinics.* They also distributed circulars to Medical Officers of Health and School Medical Officers, and to other organisations.[46] Articles appeared in *Labour Woman* discussing the progress of the campaign. In 1914 they sent a resolution to provide a baby clinic in every municipality to the Labour Party conference (held in February), and learnt that grants could be made by the Treasury for baby clinics – the work to be divided between local government and the Board of Education.[47] Perhaps because of the onset of the First World War baby clinics were slow in growth, but both the Women's Cooperative Guild and the Women's Labour League aimed for a Ministry of Health after the war, and in the meantime continually insisted on the inclusion of working-class women on committees to do with the care of young children.

Before the First World War it was uncommon for the wives of skilled men to take paid work. Married women only looked for jobs if the husband's wage was too meagre, or if misfortune struck. The range of work available to them was restricted by law and by tradition, and if they

were untrained they would be too poor and too inexperienced to organise, and therefore unable to challenge the reason for their starvation wages.

After six months of war women were needed in munitions. The government failed to organise women through labour exchanges, but a Treasury Agreement between the government, employers and unions in March 1915 (to which women trade union leaders were not invited), permitted women to do *parts* of a skilled man's work at a lower rate of pay. At once the autonomous women at the head of women's trade unions began to work for better pay and conditions for female munition workers. Marion Phillips, at the 1916 WLL annual conference, spoke fearlessly as a confident, self-determined woman. She asserted that militant leadership for the workers had been supplied by the Labour Movement through the War Emergency: Workers National Committee (WE:WNC), which she described as a 'wonderful example of far-sighted and resourceful administrative and legislative ability'. [48] She required the delegates from the Railway Women's Guild (RWG), the Women's Trade Union League (WTUL) and the Women's Cooperative Guild (WCG) to work together to achieve greater freedom, and then spiritual progress would be made through women. [49]

Katharine Glasier asked if her address was an expression of personal opinion, and Phillips replied, 'It is of course an expression of personal opinion, but deals also with what the WLL has *done*'. [50] Marion Phillips as Chief Woman Officer of the WLL thus made public her satisfaction with its actions which contributed to the war effort, but in a different way from those of men — for instance she succeeded in establishing some communal kitchens. These were some of the joys and risks of autonomy.

Male members of the WE:WNC — Arthur Henderson, Sidney Webb and Ramsay MacDonald — were mainly responsible for the new Labour Party constitution introduced at the 1918 Labour Party conference. Webb had written the manifesto *Labour and the New Social Order*, but only 'Uncle' Arthur came to the women's conference in January 1918 to explain it. Henderson had already resigned from his post in the Coalition Cabinet, and he brought forward a comprehensive scheme for the Labour Party's reconstruction.

At this juncture Henderson was the real leader of the Labour Party, and it was he who equipped it with a nation-wide machine of its own. [51] He proposed a national executive of twenty three members, thirteen trade union representatives, five local Labour Party members and four women

to be elected by the men's conference. [52] The ILP section was weakened because of its split during the war into a pro- and anti-war section. It no longer had a voice on the executive of the Labour Party and had lost some of its prestige. But it had always been generous to women and many WLL members had been recruited to socialism by the ILP.

Probably working with highly professional women in the WE:WNC had decided Labour men to accept the women as co-workers. Beatrice Webb wrote that 'Arthur Greenwood, a Fabian school teacher, was one of the assistant secretaries on the Reconstruction Committee. He was later joined by Marion Phillips. She went on to organise the Women's Sections of the Labour Party'. [53] Phillips was appointed as Chief Woman Officer (CWO) of the new Labour Party, and was already secretary of the SJCIWO, so she was representative of thousands of women and informed about their social and industrial positions. She had been quietly busy towards the end of the war in preparing to form Women's Sections which would combine from time to time at regional and district conferences arranged by newly-created Women's Advisory Councils.

The rank-and-file women of the Labour Party expressed regret, hope and relief that the Labour Party would be taking over the financial liabilities of the League. There was much unease about cancelling affiliations and about losing their independence, only partly assuaged by Henderson's statement that he welcomed women's help. [54] Of course there was resentment, and those who had valued the autonomy of their League may never have returned to another conference.

Cynically, some women decided it was their votes which were wanted, but Henderson said they wanted 'not only votes and help at election time, but help with the political education of the masses between elections'. [55] The women were exercising their political skills in producing questions about all aspects of the change. They finally accepted the clear and short recommendations of the Labour Party Executive, and were gratified that among the resolutions was one which aimed for 'the complete emancipation of women'. [56]

The Labour Party men emphasised equality and freedom in the new social order and made equal the subscriptions from men and women. Leaders assured the women that under the new constitution they would be equal with men in national and local councils. The women elected to the National Executive Committee were strong autonomous women. They were Ethel Bentham, Ethel Snowden, Harrison Bell and Susan

Lawrence — stalwarts of the old WLL and prepared to serve the new Women's Sections from 1918. [57] But there had been little practice of democracy in deciding on the new constitution. Provincial branches had not been consulted, nor had the election of women on the executive by the main Labour Party conference been changed. The new social order in the Labour Party meant greater dependence rather than autonomy for its women.

After 1918 the Labour Party was trying to get its new constitution accepted throughout the country. Arthur Henderson travelled to the provinces arranging for the establishment of new parties and choosing candidates.[58] The trade unions were mainly in support, which was a triumph for Henderson, but the ILP was weaker after the war. [59] The big trade unions were uneasy because they feared an influx of middle-class socialists who might challenge their power. But such people had not helped to draft the new constitution. The new system of order for the Labour Party was negotiated by long-standing, cautious leaders who aimed for collectivism. [60]

To form Labour Parties in all regional areas needed a strong collective force, and after 1918 and the granting of limited female suffrage, the Labour Party wished to attract more women members. Soon, Marion Phillips calculated the total number of female members at 150,000. [61] Women were useful in by-elections because independent, confident women often have unorthodox ways of resolving traditional problems. The big cities had unorganised, small constituencies which needed building up into viable Labour parties. In both Manchester and Liverpool the city press commented on the effective mass canvassing of the Labour women. Women with leaflets and pamphlets would invade a street, knocking on doors. The housewife, curious, would come out and be addressed by the speaker, given pamphlets and invited to the next meeting. At this time the Labour Party gained women members drawn in by the original, well-organised recruiting methods of autonomous women, who were distributing attractive, illustrated propaganda prepared by cartoonists Will Dyson and David Low. [62]

As new constituencies were thus being formed the Labour Party leaders had difficulty in containing the ones which wanted to be independent. The Scottish Council of the British Socialist Party claimed to be the Scottish Council of the Labour Party, and therefore autonomous, which Henderson rejected as it might inspire other regions to attempt

autonomy. [63] Also there was the large London Labour Party which had formed its own socialist sporting clubs, drama societies and *women's* clubs. The London Labour Party also argued for autonomy, but the only concession granted to it was that it was made into a 'special region' independent from the southern counties. [64] The Labour Party wanted dependent constituencies, so that it could control the different factions, and construct a more united body of Labour supporters.

At times, during the life of the Labour Party, there was a fear of autonomy. The laughing, singing processions of girls striking in Bermondsey in 1911 might have dismayed trade union leaders who could not effectively negotiate wage scales unless they controlled the strikers. But the Bermondsey negotiator was the experienced Mary Macarthur, indignant about the workers' sweated labour with long hours and low pay. Their strike won them a pay rise, because of Mary Macarthur's experienced negotiation skills. [65]

Another situation where autonomy could be problematic concerns the young and radical for, in 1920 when the Communist Party of Great Britain was formed, future socialist leaders began their political life in the Young Communist League. The Labour Party refused to have autonomous youth sections, fearing the high spirits of youth, thus depriving themselves of the useful energy and dedication of young women and men. Only the Independent Labour Party had a Guild of Youth for young people aged fourteen to twenty-one at this period. [66]

Margaret McKay, in later life a Labour MP, joined the Communist party when young, and says she felt a personage, a symbol — she had become a young worker — not a *woman* worker. [67] In European communist parties there were young people's sections. This was proved by the presence of a group of young German socialists at the WLL conference at York in 1923. [68]

Some male Labour delegates were also affronted by autonomous women invading the workforce — an ongoing problem which they accepted reluctantly. In spite of the fight for equality and a united workforce there were only a few places where women's wages were equal to men's. Even family allowances were seen as a threat to the male wage. Barbara Drake had suggested in 1921 that the best means of obtaining wages equal with men was for women to achieve men's strength in unionisation. [69]

As the economy changed there came periods when competition or rivalry diminished, sometimes through collective bargaining, but to this day equality with male wages has not been gained. Wage structures breed antagonism between skilled and unskilled, experienced and inexperienced, and between sexes. Both of the separate organisations which tried to help women workers (the WTUL and the NFWW) denied gender antagonism in the workplace, but it was undoubtedly present. This was revealed when the WTUL was affiliated to the TUC in 1920, merged into the General Council, and was dominated by the male secretaries of unions with large female membership. [70]

Men's fear of women's political autonomy is clearly illustrated by the savagery of the suffragette campaign, which, when it ceased after ten years of violence, caused Millicent Fawcett, leader of the constitutional National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies, to claim that although the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) had suffered extraordinary acts of physical violence, 'they [the NUWSS] used none, and all through they took no life and shed no blood'. [71] Fawcett was proud of this ability to negotiate peacefully and constructively, and after 1912, NUWSS women worked with Labour Party men and WLL women in the Election Fighting Fund campaign, and they took along with them their propaganda for women's suffrage. Men's fear of women as voters was said to be because men assumed that most self-sufficient women would vote conservatively.[72] They were proved wrong.

Many working-class men disapproved of their wives involving themselves in the campaign. Unwaged, married, working-class women were dependent on the male wage, and who can guess how many frustrated, but potentially autonomous suffrage activists were constrained by this dependence?

DEPENDENCE

One aim of the middle-class leaders of women's organisations was economic independence for working-class wives. The Fabian Women's Group, some of whom were in the WLL, were concerned that working-class women's economic dependence had a detrimental effect on the status of wife and mother. It kept her passive, uninterested in community problems, isolated in her immediate surroundings, incurious. She was

even more dependent when her husband was unemployed and she could not find paid work.

From 1918 the WLL itself was dependent on the goodwill of the men's party. It could no longer decide on its own campaigns, but needed the approval of the men leaders. But one can say that the Labour Party depended upon the political allegiance of thousands of working-class women. Marion Phillips had claimed in 1916 that she represented more than six thousand working-class women. The WLL was then ten years old and had established branches from Scotland to south-east England. The plan had been to recruit the wives and daughters of trade unionists and cooperators to help them to see that the best way to look after their homes was to take an interest in the life of the community. The meetings were to be simple and homely. The women were to be encouraged to read and discuss Labour Party policy, and to be prepared to use their vote 'sensibly' when women were eventually enfranchised. Margaret Bondfield wrote:

> The League fulfilled Margaret MacDonald's hopes. Up to the day of her death it was functioning as an educational medium to qualify women members of the Labour Party not only to agree with, but to expound the political principles and programmes for which they were prepared to vote. [73]

Nothing was said about inviting critical assessment or even discussion from the delegates about the political policies which were about to be adopted.

Labour women supporters during the inter-war years were so poor that social and political activities had to be curtailed. In the north-east, Alderman Margaret Murray recalled that her mother attended a weekend school for Labour women, at which the total spending money was less than £1. For a social event for Emmanuel Shinwell the reception committee could only charge fourpence a head. There were pockets of dire poverty, for instance a Cleveland meeting of eighty women where no-one's husband was working. Among the women who worked for the north-eastern WLL was Ada Lawson of the Durham Women's Advisory Committee. She worked for two years as a domestic servant, to accompany and help support her husband, Jack, at Ruskin, the workingmen's college at Oxford. [74] She was an independent and autonomous woman regulating

her life to serve the Labour Party. Her husband became a Labour MP and later a peer.

Ellen Wilkinson, one of the nine women MPs returned at the 1929 general election, recalled that when the women's conferences were started, women had a very inferior status both politically and economically. They had asked the Labour Party for Women's Sections and women's conferences and special seats on the Executive pending the time when all women would be politically educated. She had looked on these things as temporary privileges, but she wanted the women to realise that now, from 1928 when women over 21 could vote, they were really the dominant political power in the state and must consider their new position as an important influence. She tried to convince working-class women to use their votes wisely. [75] In 1930 she told Labour women that ' the clinging ivy theory is out of date', and earned the praise of Vera Brittain for campaigning against the 'moral slavishness of women'. [76] Dependence needed to be diminished.

By the late 1920s employers and the state were particularly oppressive to the working classes in the aftermath of the miners' lockout of 1926. During the lockout women trade unionists had contributed to the distress fund for miners' families. The Labour Party's Women's Committee organised by Marion Phillips was the only body officially sanctioned by the Miners' Federation of Great Britain (MFGB) to act for them, and was approved by the Labour Party leaders. [77] Labour women's ongoing support showed that they could be depended upon in economic crises for sections of the working-classes.

It was accepted that Ada Lawson should help her husband to advance in public life, but it was not so easy for any woman to enter the public world of politics. Women were dependent on the goodwill of a minority of men in the political arena. Ramsay MacDonald and Arthur Henderson had welcomed women to swell the numbers of Labour Party supporters, particularly when they realised that the enfranchisement of women was inevitable, but, for all their rhetoric to the contrary, they did not regard women as equal political partners. Occasionally there is a patronage underlying their dealings even with the women leaders. Men seemed to think it their right to alter the wording of women's resolutions. Women themselves reported two occasions when their dependence was made clear. In 1909 Margaret Bondfield, as the WLL's delegate to the Labour Party conference, proposed an amendment to an Electoral Reform

resolution. The amendment declared that any attempt to exclude women from an Electoral Reform Bill would be met by the uncompromising opposition of organised Labour *to the whole Bill.* Arthur Henderson, avid for adult suffrage first, objected to the final four words, so she agreed to omit them. 'For this, I had to face a storm of criticism from certain members of the Executive', she wrote. [78]

At the 1931 LPWO conference an ILP woman criticised the reception by the men of WLL's resolutions and claimed that, regarding Maternal Mortality the Women's Conference had 'adapted' a report containing a definite paragraph on a certain subject. When the report appeared after passing 'The House of Lords' of the Labour Party's National Executive Committee it was without the paragraph the women had inserted. [79] It is a violation of a person's autonomy for one to treat another paternalistically. There is an usurpation of decision-making when people are thwarted by quibbling, or are received as equals and then treated as underlings.

In 1910, the men delegates voted unanimously for three resolutions sent from the women's conference. They dealt with unemployment among women, the medical inspection of school children and the nationalisation of hospitals, and Margaret Bondfield proposed them. But when the novelty of accepting women's resolutions had worn off, the debates on them often took place in half-empty halls as the men departed. When crises arose women were not trusted to deal with them. This was apparent in the general election of 1931, impelled by the world financial crisis. In the right-wing parliament which was elected not one Labour woman MP was returned.

Though there was no Labour woman at Westminster, Labour women throughout the country could be depended upon to alleviate the discomforts of the depression, one supposes with the approval of the men leaders. There was great turmoil in the cotton industry as employers tried by means of the 'more looms' system to coerce weavers into working harder for less money. [80] There were thousands of unemployed industrial women who rallied in protest at the 33 per cent increase in unemployment in the cotton industry between December 1930 and May 1931. [81]

Labour men came to the women's conferences throughout the thirties and voiced their approval or criticism. In June 1930 the women made twelve recommendations to Arthur Greenwood, as Minister of Health, in a Labour government about maternal mortality to which he

gave 'close and sympathetic attention'. [82] In January 1931 he sent a circular to local authorities to go ahead with planning a complete national scheme for maternity care. At the LPWO conference in June 1931 Alderman Rose Davies revealed that only 70 local authorities had replied to the Circular. She asked the Minister what he was going to do about non-replies from poor areas, and thought he should speed up the persons concerned. Dora Russell seconded a resolution to establish a municipal midwifery service, and also suggested travelling Maternity Clinics for rural areas. [83] Labour women could be depended upon to pursue their causes tenaciously. This tenacity was perhaps rather grudgingly appreciated and such reluctance to approve highlighted the dependence of their organisation on those of men.

Arthur Henderson, by now a veteran statesman, who, though ponderous, was respected and admired, went twice to the 1930s Labour Party women's conferences. He stressed the inequality of the financing of elections between Labour and the Tories and how Labour depended very much on finance from its members. The Tories had already spent as much on pre-election strategies as the Labour Party would spend on the election itself. [84] Though Labour lost the 1935 general election, supporters polled 8.2 million votes. [85] Some Labour and Socialist men were by this time becoming less intolerant of women workers' problems. The most encouraging message from men leaders came in 1936 from A.A. Findlay, Chair of the Trades Union Congress General Council, who believed in a movement in which men and women alike enjoyed equal freedom and equal responsibility. He acknowledged that there were in his audience, 'those who earned, but were not paid wages as wives and mothers'. [86] Appreciation of specifically women's issues could sweeten the condition of dependence.

In 1935 wageless wives and mothers who attended the LPWO conference, had refused to face the possibility of war, when they passed a resolution *against* air raid drill. In May 1938, however, even before the Munich agreement, a similar resolution was rejected:

> By an overwhelming majority the National conference of Labour women, at the concluding session here today demanded that the government should make air-raid precautions a reality and provide bomb-proof shelters. [87]

Here, they acknowledged their dependence on the protection of government.

Only three LPWO conferences were held during World War II — in 1940, 1942 and 1943. Fewer women attended, probably because of bombing attacks on cities. Their 1940 conference was moved from Wallasey (across the River Mersey from the target port of Liverpool), to Southport some miles further north. The SJCIWO, which was 21 years old, recalled ruefully that it was created in similar circumstances in 1916, and again was charged with the protection of women and children in war-time. [88]

Many people had thought that women had been given the vote because they had been dependable in the First World War, and were sure that women could again be depended upon. They had already supplied 32,000 women for the Women's Voluntary Service for Air Raid Precautions. [89] This is confirmed by a sentence in the official history of the time which asserted that 'The famine for men would breed a hunger for women'. [90]

In 1941, though there was no conference, Labour women held a delegate meeting which filled the Caxton Hall, London, to give greetings to the women of the USSR, because the new British-Soviet treaty gave Labour women hope for a peaceful, cooperative world after the war. The bravery of the Red Army against the German invasion had already altered the attitude of many towards Russia — now depended on as an ally. [91]

Women were not hurriedly coerced in this war. It was March 1940 before the government required women as well as men to register with their local labour exchange. In December this order was followed by the National Service (No. 2) Act, under which single women between 20 and 30 years old were conscripted for national service in the armed forces, the auxiliary services or in industries specified by the government. This widened the social and industrial horizons of many women. [92] It may also have lessened their willingness to accept the dependency of their collective campaigns on men's political organisations after the war, but if it did, such unwillingness was unhurried in its emergence as well.

In 1942, LPWO women could be sure that they were serving the party well, because they were supporting the Labour ministers responsible for the war effort. Labour women MPs came to the conferences to urge the women to take up the government's offer of funded nurseries. [93] They criticised the Board of Education which wanted school holidays fixed to meet agricultural needs, and protested against the employment of 12-year-

olds in term time. [94] The SJCIWO also worked closely with the LPWO and succeeded in the inclusion of non-waged housewives in the Personal Injuries (Civilians) Scheme, so that they, as well as workers, received compensation. [95] As in the First World War, they could be depended upon to identify gaps in welfare and abuses of the education system.

Women were needed in engineering, but were not welcomed. They were given 'diluted' men's jobs for which they received pay lower than an unskilled man. The Amalgamated Engineering Union only began to recruit and depend upon women in 1943 when it was losing members to the Transport and General Workers Union, which was accepting many incoming war workers at that time. [96]

A phrase 'human factor management' was used to describe the necessary tasks which women workers had to do in addition to their paid work. It referred to child care, shopping, washing, cleaning and care of aged or ailing relatives. People hoped that government might have eased women's work-load by providing services, but in the main women and their relatives fought for their own amenities at work and at home. The Second World War had not freed women as much as they had hoped. Labour could have practised the socialisation of services at this time, but winning the war came first. [97]

After the war a new Labour government in Britain had 142 seats more than other parties. Clement Attlee was Prime Minister, and most people were optimistic about progressing towards peacetime reconstruction, forgetting at first to allow for the cost of the war and the loss of two-thirds of Britain's export market. Despite shortages and restrictions there was a golden era of social reform from 1946 to 1948. [98] What leaders had proposed to do was done. The school-leaving age was raised to 15 from 1 April 1947, and the National Health Service was established from 1948. Trade unions now had a sympathetic government which repealed the Trades Disputes Act of 1927. This government also took control of the Bank of England. [99] There was no rush to impose industrial democracy, but plans were being made. A moderate approach was adopted to necessary social reforms because the government was economically dependent on the United States of America, a dependence which was restrictive and regretted.

There were 21 Labour women MPs in parliament, and the more experienced were given prestigious positions. Ellen Wilkinson was Minister of Education and had a seat in the Cabinet. Edith Summerskill

was parliamentary secretary to the Ministry of Food and Barbara Castle was parliamentary private secretary to Sir Stafford Cripps at the Board of Trade.[100] Food rationing, shortages of consumer goods and restrictions on fuel persisted. The LPWO saw the upsurge of problems to do with family life, like the rise of juvenile delinquency, the need for parentcraft, and the shortage of household goods. In 1948 an Act for the payment of Family Allowances to the mother was brought in, a triumph for Eleanor Rathbone, and Myra Curtis wrote an influential report on the care of homeless children and adoption requirements. [101]

Against a background of Tory criticism and housewives' discontent, a second post-war Labour government with a majority of six, took office in February 1950, restricted in what it could do by its small majority, and by the Korean War which erupted in June 1950 and caused a massive rise in world prices. Assessing this government's achievements, Mabel Crout, who chaired the LPWO annual conference in April 1951, pointed out that it had built one million houses and repaired 300,000. It had reduced both the Infant Mortality rate and the Maternal Mortality rate, and was now investigating what could be done for ineducable children. [102] The Labour government promoted social justice, freedom and equality, and Mabel Crout was typical of the dependable women who came to the defence of the Labour government upon whom, of course, they and so many of their hopes and desires depended.

The 1951 election was a 'housewives' election when women were only too willing to discuss their problems and complaints. But Labour women leaders had to 'sell' a tight economy to delegates at the 1951 women's conference (there was no conference in 1950). Women, tired of rationing, queuing, mending and making-do, and exasperated by the importation of unfamiliar food (snoek, a South African fish) from non-dollar markets, tended to discount the good things done by the Labour Ministers, for example, the 1948 Milk (Special Designations) Bill, ensuring clean tuberculin-tested or pasteurised milk, which had been aimed for since the 1920s. [103] Labour women were impatient and restless with their dependence on rationing. This was a short, uneasy parliament which ended in the late summer of 1951.

From 1951-1955 a Tory government had the task of appeasing disgruntled housewives, and the LPWO conferences constantly stressed the high cost of living, the hygiene of food, the shortage of household linen, the rationing of clothes and the need for working-class housing. It is

noticeable that the Chief Woman Officer composited resolutions on the same subject and insisted that they were 'in harmony' with Labour Party policy. [104] In 1954 leaders were depending on Women's Section delegates to devise new methods of representation and changes in organising staff.

At this time the Labour Party was beset by internal strife, for it was split vertically between two sets of leaders and followers. 'At every level there was conflict — from shadow cabinet through the national executive committee and conference, to individual constituency parties and trade unions'. [105] This could have furnished further grounds for Labour women's impatience with their dependence on the Party. Indication of this strife at the LPWO conferences came from a cryptic statement at Harrogate in 1955 by Arthur Greenwood, who, speaking 'as a mere man', pleaded for unity and quoted his father who had said, 'It was not the left wing or the right wing which counted, but the flight of the bird'. [106]

The flight of the bird was not balanced in time for the 1955 election when the Tory government was returned. Not surprisingly, the Chair of the 1956 LPWO conference in London emphasised the result of four and a half years of Tory rule — a higher than 23 per cent rise in the cost of living.[107]

Serious subjects were hurried through at the 33rd WLL conference in 1956, because this was the Golden Jubilee of their organisation and the delegates wanted to celebrate it with international guests, and Labour leaders from the men's party. James Middleton was present as the first assistant secretary to Ramsay MacDonald. Beatrice Webb described him as fair-minded and gentle-natured. [108] He was also sympathetic to the labour women's goals. He acted as Labour Party historian at this conference, to the delight of the older members who had returned, and for the interest of newly-joined members.

Hugh Gaitskell maintained that there had been more social reform in the last fifty years than in the previous five hundred years. He mentioned numbers of committees in numerous constituencies which were chaired by women, and claimed that the Labour Party was sustained by unknown masses. Other work remembered by Annie Townley, one of the team of organisers appointed after 1918 for the south-west of England was, she said, 'primary school work':

> It was the beginning of training women who had no idea at all about minutes and correspondence, or how to take the chair, and

> who would not dream of going on the council — 'Don't ask me to do anything like that; don't ask me to speak; don't ask me to do this, that or the other.' But then they realised that they could do it! [109]

This final quotation reveals the poverty of education for girls in the first half of the twentieth century, at least girls of the working class . The dependence on women could have been improved by teaching girls about civics in school, so that they could, if they wished, go further in political or governmental studies. Then they could have combined with men for both to be effective political workers, complementing each others' talents. There needs to be one recognised forum where both sexes participate, not a remote hierarchical 'talking shop' to which few pay attention. Women have to work in politics as *women*, because so many social problems are connected with the relationship between the sexes. Labour women seemed to have a more harmonious relationship with some politicians than did women of other parties. The number of women in parliament who have been members of the Labour Party has usually been the highest of any party. With the kind of preliminary practice that the LPWO had encouraged, women could handle autonomy competently, and much preferred it to dependence.

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CHAPTER 6

WOMEN IN POLITICS

The founders of the Women's Labour League created a presence which had not previously existed in British society. They brought into being an organisation of women who were vigilant about the imbalance and injustice in the way they were governed, and wished to combat this. The mass of producers, including women workers, would need to work together to oppose the capitalist system. It was necessary to rouse working-class women to fight for themselves. They must be alerted to their rights first. Such a struggle could not be waged by one class alone, so public-spirited middle-class women trained lower classes of women to use political methods to gain more equality. Their faith in socialism and democracy helped them to do this.

In this chapter I argue that first the consciousness of the rank-and-file women was raised by the collective support of the Women's Sections. Competent middle-class leaders supplied the necessary knowledge for political action. Finally, Labour women MPs willing to work through the WLL satisfied the Labour women's esteem for parliamentary methods.

The politicising of working-class and lower middle-class women by the WLL was beneficial to British society. Women's attention was directed to new and achievable goals for their children in education. Women were now encouraged to act as agents of change in their community, and their activities added a new influence which eventually helped to cause a more attentive attitude to women's political demands. 'Women in Politics' includes women in other than political parties, and not only women's political action after enfranchisement, but also the ways in which they used political tactics before a minority of women were given the vote in 1918.

Politics most commonly refers to the specialised machinery of government, together with the administrative structure of the state and the organisation of parliament. It can also mean the negotiation of rights and values and the exercise of power in human relationships. Women have exercised power through kinship and familial situations over many years, but only a few have been noticeably active in governmental politics until this century. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century women

became increasingly restive about their exclusion from formal politics. In 1877 Arabella Shore, a Victorian 'new' woman, wrote:

> We cannot separate domestic politics from social conditions of life. If then we are told that we have nothing to do with politics, we can but answer that politics have a great deal to do with us.

She went on to claim that even though the Victorian home was regarded as woman's natural sphere, in it she had no legal power and hardly any legal rights. [1]

However, women were not passive about their status and in the remaining years of the century, middle-class women formed auxiliaries to the Conservative and Liberal parties in the 1880s, although these had little influence on major political decisions. [2] Soon political parties with different aspirations were formed and women were present at their inaugural meetings. These were, for instance, the Social Democratic Federation in 1881, and the Independent Labour Party in 1893. These were later joined by smaller Marxist groupings which believed in a more radical socialism. [3]

Working-class women and children, at least near the town of Burnley in Lancashire, attended the SDF meetings, for Burnley was the birth-place of the SDF. Ethel Carnie, a Burnley weaver and a working-class poet, wrote that as a child she was taken to SDF meetings by her father. [4] As well as working-class women, the SDF was generously helped by Frances, the Countess of Warwick, who had been converted to socialism by Robert Blatchford and Will Thorne. [5] Already socialism was attracting women of different classes. This expansion in women's permissible political activity was accompanied by laws by which their social and matrimonial rights were recognised. A Matrimonial Causes Act of 1878 empowered magistrates to grant orders of non-cohabitation, maintenance and custody of children, after a husband had been found guilty of wife assault. [6] In 1885 the Criminal Law Amendment Act for the first time made trafficking in women a criminal offence and raised the age of consent from thirteen to sixteen and that of abduction from sixteen to eighteen, thereby protecting young women. [7] Three Contagious Diseases Acts were repealed in 1886, which saved British women from a system of regulating vice that penalised women only and encouraged the idea of a

single standard of virtue for both men and women. This also eased the passage of other Acts concerning women's rights. [8]

Another Act which protected women workers was the Truck Act (1896), which required employers to display a list of all regulations depicting workshop fines and penalties. [9] Usually these Acts had not been achieved without the efforts of both single, concerned women and organisations of women. Organisations such as the Women's Industrial Council and the Women's Trade Union League investigated the conditions of the workplace for women workers, and lobbied for improved rights there.

Some middle-class women who were interested in women's work were ambivalent about protective Factory Acts. Millicent Fawcett opposed them, as did her supportive husband in Parliament, where he produced feminist arguments against the 1873 Act. This Act advocated the reduction of the legal number of hours women could work from 60 to 54 a week, but Fawcett's opposition caused it to fail. [10] Feminist arguments pointed out that protective legislation reduced women's earnings, and also their chances of obtaining employment. Working men approved of protective legislation for women, because women workers were then less likely to be rivals for their jobs.

Social reformers such as the young Beatrice Webb, Clementina Black, Gertrude Tuckwell and Margaret MacDonald supported the extension of the Factory Acts in the late 1890s, but in 1894 the *Englishwoman's Review* had an article about protective legislation which stated unequivocally that women must have some money of their own to give them dignity and self-respect. It argued that rich men know this, and insist on marriage settlements for their daughters (as Clement Attlee's father had done for his daughters). [11] Also, even poor women need money of their own and seek opportunities to earn small additions to the family income which they can then control. 'A shilling you earn yourself is worth two given by a man.' [12]

Working-class women often desperately needed work, but the socialist regard for complete freedom was for them, as Mary Macarthur pointed out at the 1910 conference, only a choice between starvation and slavery. [13] The battle about protective legislation continued even beyond the period of this thesis. Both opponents and supporters of it would argue convincingly for their case and keep the issue on the agenda. So, even

before women were enfranchised, they were acting politically to bring about change in factory and social legislation.

One such political woman was Emmeline Pankhurst who was a member of the National Administrative Council of the ILP, the year after she founded the Women's Social and Political Union in 1903. [14] She had hoped that the Labour Party would support their efforts to get votes for women, but later decided not to be dependent on any political party. The Pankhursts were convinced that the way to legal rights was to obtain the vote.

In order to get votes for women, a Bill had been before parliament on 37 occasions between 1870 and 1914. [15] Margaret MacDonald was born in 1870 and throughout her lifetime the vote for women was withheld. As the wife of the leader who had formed the Labour Party in order to give the working-classes a political voice, Margaret MacDonald wanted working-class wives to be active in public work. She wrote that, 'as husbands entering upon public work had had their minds broadened and ambitions quickened', she wanted wives to enter the field of 'wide and fertile social politics'. She also wanted women to work in companionship with men, but 'women would have to be mustered alone first'. [16]

Margaret MacDonald was a suitable mentor for working-class women. She could relate to them without condescension. She had sought for a 'good purpose in life', and teaching working-class women to work politically in a league seemed to supply this purpose — all the more so if eventually women used their votes to elect the Labour Party. Mrs. Bosanquet said, 'What she [Margaret] liked best was meeting people in their own homes, and carrying out plans for assisting them.' [17] This she did both shrewdly and sympathetically. In thus knowing the problems of working-class women at first hand she was able to identify their needs. But she was not a super-woman, and the demands of her husband's political career and the responsibility of rearing five children put a limit on her work for the League.

The MacDonalds, as ILP members, were socialists inside the Labour Party. The ILP was the individual members' section of the Labour Party before 1918, and supported female franchise, unlike other factions who wanted adult franchise first. The ILP also had an anti-war policy which influenced whole communities — for example the town of Nelson, where Selina Cooper lived, was strongly anti-war in 1914. This stance was also

that of Keir Hardie, leader of the first Labour MPs in 1905, and would be a strong incentive for women who hated war to stay with the ILP.

Women canvassed for candidates like Victor Grayson, an independent socialist. Also they were active in the ILP in Yorkshire where Tom Maguire's socialism continued to appeal to women, because of 'the hostility to Grundyism; the warm espousal of sex equality, the rich internationalism'. [18] It also pleased women that Isabella Ford was on the National Administration Council of the ILP thus expressing visibly the socialist belief in sex equality. Ellen Wilkinson joined the ILP in 1907 when she was sixteen. Her biographer says she joined because she recognised and wished to counter 'social evils' and desired to enter 'the magic sphere of politics'. [19]

The ILP was a strong section of the Labour Party up to 1914, and because it was a provincial and local party it was not intimidating to working-class women. Katherine Bruce Glasier argued that Isabella and Bessie Ford's influence on Yorkshire labour leaders helped to create an atmosphere favourable to women's equal rights. [20] Joseph Clayton, too, recognised in his history of the socialist movement that women in the ILP were not just helpers of men but co-leaders. [21] Women's Sections were a vital reform and men and women working together was not an impossible ideal, but an every-day business.

Middle-class women were mainly the leaders of the WLL, some from the ILP and some from the Fabian Women's Group (FWG), which was founded with the main object of helping working-class women to achieve economic independence. These early leaders were apprehensive about the WLL being diverted and divided by the suffrage campaign, and Mary Macarthur at the second conference said that if members were keen on emancipation they could join one or other of the several existing societies engaged in seeking it. But, she added,

> It would be a calamity to allow a split to take place in the League over this matter, while there remained so much other important and urgent work for them to do. [22]

The urgent work was indicated by the leaflets which were already circulating, about the feeding of school children, health, education and labour laws for women. The latter was the most urgent and important

work for Macarthur. In spite of her plea, women who wanted female suffrage first did leave the League and did not return until 1913. [23]

As discussed in Chapter 2, the 1912 Labour Party Conference passed a resolution which said they would not support any franchise bill which excluded women. Labour men planned a large conference of the Labour Party, the ILP and the Fabians in favour of 'adult suffrage first' at the Albert Hall in February 1912. In order to combat this, Labour women convened a huge meeting of working women in March 1912, which 27 WLL members attended. A strong resolution claimed that giving women the vote was the only means of giving the workers of every class their share in the government of the country, and in the reform of industrial and social conditions. [24] Labour party men, and women of the National Union of Suffrage Societies, then formed an alliance to canvass for the return to parliament of Labour men who supported votes for women. At the same time Marion Phillips emphasised the League's regard for adult suffrage — the Labour Party's official policy.

Cross-class feminism united women fighting for their right to vote and tended to antagonise many working-class men. Only a proportion of male trade unionists supported women's suffrage, for many were convinced that votes for women based on property would enfranchise only affluent, conservative and liberal women. In spite of men's disapproval, by 1914 there were 53,000 women suffragists in the NUWSS.[25] This was overt and well-organised political action which definitely engaged working-class women. Though true socialists aimed faithfully for adult suffrage first, according to their basic belief in equality, feminists wanted female suffrage first, realising the immaturity of women in local and parliamentary politics. The openness of their tactics ensured that women could not be left out of any more suffrage bills.

When the First World War began, suffrage agitation ceased and the NUWSS divided into pro-war and anti-war factions. Millicent Fawcett had believed Britain should stay out of the war, but when war was declared she supported it and worked for the inclusion of women on war committees and for women's level of pay. [26] Pacifists among the members of the NUWSS disapproved of Fawcett's policy and resigned because they opposed the war. [27] Two phoenixes rose from the ashes of the NUWSS — the National Union for Equal Citizenship (NUSEC) and an organisation which later was absorbed into the Women's International League for

Peace and Freedom (WILPF). The latter was the more colourful, was highly regarded and is still active.

Up to the Armistice women had been in politics visibly, if unofficially. After the Representation of the People Act (1918) even women who did not own, or pay rent on a dwelling (the required qualification), received the vote if they had joined the auxiliary, war-time services, and had attained the age of thirty. [28] Other emancipatory measures quickly followed. Women were at once eligible to be elected to parliament, and the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act opened jury service, magistracy, universities and the legal profession to women, and also 'qualified' entry to some higher posts of the civil service. [29] Municipal franchise was also extended to women on the same terms as men. The quiet attainment of the vote for women revealed sisterly alliance across classes, but at the price of perturbing trade unions which had accumulated substantial funds which they were reluctant to share.

The vote gave women presence and authority, and ended apathy and indifference. It gave women in organisations and trade unions more status. It represented admittance to parliament. How ironical that just as women's citizenship was recognised, the Women's Labour League became the Women's Organisation of the Labour Party! The latter claimed it was socialist, yet did not allow the women an equal, independent voice.

WOMEN'S SECTIONS

Marion Phillips was appointed as Chief Woman Officer — a new position. In March 1918 she spoke at two large conferences in Scotland explaining the Labour Party's new constitution and the formation of new Women's Sections. Already she was modelling her activities on the men's party, for Arthur Henderson too travelled the country, 'selling' the new Labour Party constitution. There was little discussion of political ideology. McKibbin later designated the party's socialism as 'the fig-leaf of labourism' and 'a reformist treachery', and even MacDonald called it 'just an election agent's document'. [30]

Women's Sections now became more formalised. There could be one section or collective for a whole constituency, or one in each ward. It depended on the number of individual Labour women members who wanted to be involved in ongoing action in that area. The Women's Sections were the basic unit of the LPWO, the source of the 'shock troops',

the 'rank-and-file', the 'grass roots', the 'cannon fodder'. All these epithets have been used to describe the busy army of women, both working-class and middle-class, in Women's Sections.

The alliance across classes was necessary for those who believed in socialism, because the Labour Party was a mass party. In 1919 Lenin had written:

> The power of the working people is necessary for a change to be wrought in this situation [capitalism]; for then the main task of politics will consist of matters directly affecting the fate of the working people themselves. Here, too the participation of women workers is essential, — not only of party members and politically conscious women, but also of the non-party women and those who are least politically conscious. [31]

Working-class women would come to small group meetings in houses, where they were persuaded that they could act effectively to relieve the oppression of their working life. The success of Women's Sections in the first twelve years depended on the availability of competent women willing to be leaders. These were often present in the big cities, where, as mentioned, the skill and persuasiveness of organised mass canvassing was taught and practised.

In Walworth, in 1921, Anne Somers (organiser for London) wrote that 'It was not too much to say that this election was won on the doorstep'. She tried to claim that the most important duty of the party members was canvassing. [32] But elections occur at fairly long intervals, giving rise to 'the rain-dance ritual of campaigning'. [33] Arguably, the detailed administrative work of the sections was also important. The women wanted to form policy, and as the sections were ancillary and autonomous in the early years, they taught each other political skills. Often women found themselves involved simultaneously in different projects, such as lobbying for school meals and in the same day monitoring food prices.

Working-class women needed to be taught some of the skills required, such as the monitoring of postal votes or how to register as a voter. By about 1925, the Labour Party published small booklets priced at two pence, entitled *Women's Sections — Their Constitution and Activities*. Each section was expected to finance its own activities as well

as raising money for the Labour Party. On joining a Women's Section one became a member of the Labour Party, and had the right to attend meetings. Two delegates from the section could attend the general committee of the local party.

Women who led the first provincial Women's Sections were, almost certainly, often those from Congregational and Baptist congregations who had been enticed away from religion in the Edwardian years by the large, indoor, propaganda meetings arranged by the ILP on Sunday nights, when, instead of a sermon, a lay person gave a secular (or sometimes even a political) talk. [34] Women organised and financed the sections using methods learnt in organising a Sunday school. Hobsbawm writes that 60 per cent of the first substantial group of Labour MPs in 1906 claimed to have come from a non-conformist background, as did their womenfolk. [35] Their British socialism was similar to their religion in its emphasis on the brotherhood of man. The brotherhood of man could also accommodate woman in areas like the north-east where the ILP was strong, and industrial, social and economic life were closely connected. By 1907 there were 76 active ILP branches in Durham and Northumberland.[36] These first small, busy Women's Sections changed when the Labour Party operated under a new constitution after 1918. In the early 1920s the individual members' section of the Labour Party did not grow rapidly, but owing to the exertions of the Chief Woman Officer, Marion Phillips, the Women's Sections did.

The 1923 Labour Party Annual Conference Report listed 12 constituencies in which the Women's Section had 200 members. Woolwich, a London suburb, had 1,008 members, Barrow 900, and Blackburn, Watford and York had 500 each. Gloucester could muster 400, and the rest all counted more than 200 members each. This collective strength was useful in distributing propaganda, collecting questionnaires, and mounting rallies and/or demonstrations, whenever these were appropriate. The Labour Party Women's Organisation (LPWO) could, when necessary, call on its own 'reserve army of women'.

Beatrice Webb also encouraged the formation of Women's Sections in the mining villages around Seaham (Sidney's constituency). The Webbs lectured in every village on difficult subjects in miners' halls, and there were 11 Women's Sections in the area by 1923. [37] This was a notable achievement, for Beatrice Webb wrote that the miners' wives had little leisure and not much sleep on the 3-shift system.

Labour and socialist politics were also strong in north-west England, and women from the north east went to week-end schools in the Lake District where they practised canvassing. In the late 1920s Lord Fenner Brockway, a Labour peer, visited Great Harwood, a small town which lost its cotton trade with India in the depression. In spite of the poverty there, the local Trades and Labour Council praised the activities of the Women's Section, which raised funds for local government elections in three wards and demanded better facilities at Labour Exchanges. In 1931, to contest four wards, the women raised the sum of £27 11s 0d, and the local Labour Party and the Women's Section assisted in several efforts to clear the cost — a task which the abnormal times made difficult. [38]

A good section was one that involved every member, for the Labour Party would need thousands of workers for socialism. There was the excitement of getting a Labour candidate in at a by-election. In 1932 Arthur Greenwood was elected with the help of the women, who knocked on 300 doors. [39] All this was voluntary work, and entailed enormous commitment in time and energy from women who already had a full-time job with home and children.

As early as September 1919, women realised that the diverse Women's Sections needed some form of guidance and supervision. Delegates from Norfolk, Suffolk and Cambridge met and Marion Phillips came to address the large meeting. She spoke of the great new body of women voters in whose power it was to sway an election, and who should be fully informed as to what the Party stood for. She spoke of the need to organise and co-ordinate the work of women in the party, and submitted a resolution 'That this conference agrees to form a Women's Advisory Committee for Norfolk, Suffolk and Cambridgeshire, and to elect a Provisional Committee who will draw up rules for submission to a further conference'. [40]

In time, most of the Women's Sections in the country were grouped under similar advisory councils. From the Annual Report of the Durham County Labour Women's Advisory Council we learn that in 1924-5 it had affiliated 164 Women's Sections. Advisory Councils arranged one-day spring and summer conferences for women's sections, with guest speakers. It gave financial grants to promote 'Speakers' Classes' for the study of local government, which was easier for activist, political women to enter than parliamentary government. It also gave 'scholarships' (awarded by examination) to enable women to attend a residential

summer school to further their knowledge of Labour politics. The Women's Sections of Durham County were world news in 1924 for the way they rallied to the annual gala, an assembly similar to the annual Durham miners' gala. On 8 July 1949 nearly 7,000 women attended the gala to hear Aneurin Bevan speak about the newly-launched National Health Service. [41]

Women thus working in familiar localities were encouraged to become members of Boards of Guardians, Borough Councils or committees to do with health, education or housing, so that they could disseminate Labour ideas, and perhaps influence social change.

What did women themselves think of the Women's Sections? In 1948 a young mother wrote an article saying that 'her section had taught her to take an interest in the world and in matters of current interest'. She cited housing, coal and fuel problems and the United Nations. [42] Mabel Crout, Chair of the Conference Arrangements Committee in 1936, claimed that the sections had 'always been prominent in the work of peace propaganda in the socialist endeavour to civilise international relationships'. [43] However, in 1935 a much stricter Chief Woman Officer, Mary Sutherland, had roundly criticised the Women's Sections, saying,

> They do not suggest any central purpose towards which the main activities of the section are directed. This year there is to be a general election, yet there is no evidence of any effort to study party policy.[44]

In the next issue of *Labour Woman*, there was a programme competition on 'Your section and its work', and entries were invited. The most instructive comment about working in groups was made when a subscriber to *Labour Woman* wrote, 'The great thing about the Women's Section is it teaches you to work with folk you don't like'. [45] Who were these folk? Women of a different class or women with abrasive personalities?

By 1924 the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) was trying to establish its own Women's Sections. The CPGB had been formed in August 1920 from an assembly of tiny left-wing groups, amenable ones, willing to coalesce in a stormy time, in order to combat capitalist aggression. [46] At this time there was much good will towards Russia, and a desire among the British working-class for Russia's socialism to succeed.

The CPGB urged the workers to fight against capitalism, and took up the leadership of women in the unemployment movement. Communist women in Britain included Dora Montefiore, Helen Crawfurd and Ellen Wilkinson. [47] They tried to form Women's Sections, but were not at first successful. However, after 1924, Beth Turner made the Communist Party's women's conference a going concern. [48] But a majority of Communist women did not like the Women's Sections, and preferred to work in equality with men. For many of them involvement in a Women's Section was a retrograde step. [49] But, as Bruley writes, 'Just as capitalism required a subordinate sex to service its male workers, the CPGB needed a subordinate sex to service its revolution'. [50]

Communist women were thus confined to the domestic sphere, while communist men tried to infiltrate the unions and gain recruits for their party. Communism appealed to the left faction of the Labour Party, but the official Labour Party leaders wanted no connection with them, and continually rejected Communist affiliation.

The WLL first mentioned Russia at the 1918 conference, when the CWO reported that the Soviet of Petrograd had invited a representative 'to greet the revolution', but they had been unable to obtain a passport. [51] There had been a benevolent attitude towards Russia then, but after a visit to Russia by Labour delegates in 1920, when Margaret Bondfield and Ethel Snowden represented Labour women, the Labour Party decided that Russia was a dictatorship with whose communist internationalism it could not agree. [52] However, the British Communist Party women were here to stay, and were women in politics with whom Labour women leaders would need to confer.

LABOUR WOMEN LEADERS

The national executive committee of the Labour Party had four places for women, elected by the men's conference. The women chosen in 1924 were Ethel Bentham, Florence Harrison Bell, Susan Lawrence and Ethel Snowden. They were all lively, emancipated women. Ethel Bentham, a socialist, resolved to become a doctor 'as the best means of being able to affect the lives of the poor'. [53] Susan Lawrence was a convert from conservatism, and Harrison Bell had been a school mistress who first joined the ILP, then became the secretary of the Newcastle LRC. [54] These three women led NEC opposition to Arthur Henderson remaining

secretary in 1924. [55] Some trade unionist men felt uneasy in the presence of these competent political women. But to newly-joined young women they were examples of successful Labour women politicians whom they could emulate.

Arthur Henderson had developed into a leader from a working-class base, and his good relationship with Marion Phillips was probably due to her recruiting work in the early twenties, for then the Women's Sections grew prodigiously. [56] Henderson would be gratified at such expansion, for he was 'really the only Labour man who considers the welfare of the party as a whole'. [57] In the following years Arthur Henderson was on 'very easy terms with Marion Phillips, a typical continental phenomenon — an independent professional woman!'. [58]

In the early 1920s Henderson considered that the Labour Party lacked intellectuals, so he welcomed the middle-class professional and salaried men, 'socialist by class interest', who preferred the Labour Party to other parties. [59] For the first minority Labour government in 1924 MacDonald sought Cabinet members from outside the Labour Party, but had in his government the first three Labour women MPs. Two of them were intellectuals. Labour prejudice denied them Cabinet status for they might limit the success of the first Labour government.

They were Margaret Bondfield, around since 1899, when she had been the only woman delegate at the Trades Union Congress, Susan Lawrence, a wealthy conservative lawyer, attracted to the WLL by her desire for social justice for women, and Dorothy Jewson of Norwich. [60] The latter was an ILP member, a feminist, and an opponent of protective legislation. Their impact in the minority Labour government was muted, because it reigned only for nine months. But Margaret Bondfield went on to become the first female Minister of Labour in the 1929 Labour government, a challenging appointment in the economic climate at that time. Her reputation suffered when she signed the Blanesburgh Report which reduced unemployment benefits to sections of the workers in 1927.[61]

The whole nation was shaken by the General Strike of 1926, followed by the miners' lock-out. Susan Bruley maintains that many women were politicised by these related events. She writes of subversive news sheets being delivered during the strike from a baby's pram, with a baby in it. [62] While lesser women were delivering news sheets Marion Phillips organised a Women's Committee for the Relief of Miners' wives

and Children. At the request of A. J. Cook of the Miners' Federation and with the help of many women's sections, a sum of over £300,000 was collected which went to sustain the miners' families during the prolonged lock-out. Well-known Labour women were associated with this venture, such as Ellen Wilkinson MP, Ethel Bentham, Barbara Ayrton-Gould (a former suffragette) and Susan Lawrence. [63]

The Women's Sections were good fund-raisers. By 1928 they had also increased the funds of the Bid for Victory Fund by 24 per cent, surpassing the 22 per cent raised by the trade unions. This fund was suggested to counter the repressive Trade Unions and Trade Disputes Act of 1927. [64] At the 1927 conference a delegate asked why Russian women were not present when they had helped the miners last year? Marion Phillips replied that the Labour Party conference had decided that it could not accept communists inside the party. At this conference a Miss Bond tried to speak, was challenged as a communist from the floor and banished to the gallery. [65]

Throughout the late 1920s there was turmoil at the conferences, probably stemming from the frustration the women felt because of their secondary position. Although they fought back valiantly they could not dent the adamant attitude of the Labour Party. First there was the question of dispensing birth control advice on request to married women who attended a Maternity and Child Welfare Centre. This was refused, because the National Executive Committee of the Labour Party had rejected contraception as a political issue.The women blamed Henderson for coming to their conference and influencing the vote so that contraceptive information was suppressed. [66]

There was also the inconclusive dispute about protective legislation. In 1930 women requested that the women's separate conference be abandoned. Then at a private session in 1930 the leaders declared that only 5 per cent of the Women's Sections were prepared to pay a regular sum to a National fund to help the election expenses of working-class Parliamentary candidates, therefore the scheme was not feasible. [67] No leader was prepared to undertake the organisation of this project, perhaps because of the unequal economic status of working-class women, which of course worked against their autonomy. Lastly there was the attitude of ILP delegates, who argued persistently for a socialist way of reducing unemployment, and, because they were not listened to, decided to leave the LPWO in 1932.

These acrimonious debates were pursued in an atmosphere of gloom, for there was continuing unemployment, and in 1931 the world economic crisis caused a severe depression. As stated the Labour government was ousted and its leader became the head of a conservative coalition government. The Labour Party was split and those who joined the coalition government were expelled. No Labour women MPs were in this government which was dominated by conservatives.

The LPWO could do little during the 1930s except produce a series of thoughtful reports and discussions on how the people ought to be governed. Like the men they were mesmerised by the tradition of excellent debate associated with the Westminster system. Were they then able to do anything of value politically? I think they were, for the leaders followed programmes which imparted knowledge and therefore power to the delegates. The early WLL had aimed to help working-class wives acquire political knowledge, and they did so by teaching them first the elementary deeds of electioneering. Women leaders wrote simple instructions about how to do the work of the League. Marion Phillips wrote many such leaflets, cheaply printed at the cost of one penny. Leaflet No.9, entitled *The Women's Labour League and the Trade Unions*, was written by Mary Macarthur and asked practical questions. 'Do the girls and women in your district submit to fines and deductions from wages? HELP THEM TO FORM A TRADE UNION!'.

Marion Phillips and Grace Taverner wrote lectures to be given to Women's Sections on *Women's Work in the Labour Party* with charts designed by Mrs. Andrews, the working-class organiser from Wales already mentioned. Lecture No. 1 dealt with the duties of a secretary and proceeded to the duties of a literature secretary, the treasurer, the committee, deputations, debates, conferences and delegates, public meetings, canvassing and how to hold an annual business meeting. Mrs. Andrew's charts provided diagrams for those who had difficulty with the printed word.

Margaret MacDonald had been pleased, as an MP's wife, to have access to parliamentary bills. Now educated women explained them to the members. Sometimes deputations went to the House of Commons. The WLL included working-class women when they had a distinctive point of view to put, as when Marion Phillips persuaded the Coal Industrial Commission to hear three miners' wives from different areas give evidence about living conditions in May 1919. The working-class woman

began to become visible, and her views listened to on various committees. The League protested if women were left out — protests which were sometimes rebuffed, as when Sir Robert Horne replied that the Committee on Unemployed Women was made up of MPs and members of the Treasury and the Labour Ministry. [68]

The LPWO learnt how to petition, send memoranda, and how to pressure for legitimate claims that had been overlooked, for example, in pressuring for houses for single people in 1956, they emphasised that not all singles were old. They joined in organised demonstrations against the rise in the cost of living, and used instant action when possible, such as sending a telegram to the House of Commons while an issue was being debated. They did this in 1937 to protest about an inadequate Factories Bill that was about to be promulgated. [69] There was also the passing, for propaganda purposes, of resolutions which had no chance of being acted upon at the time. Such a ploy was used to draw attention to poor wages and seasonal work at seaside resorts, and carried because it drew Tory attention to that problem. [70]

An American survey of working-class women claims that they are not 'joiners'. Many of them come from an isolated, lonely position and it is difficult for them to organise collective action. The most deprived are usually the womenfolk of unskilled men. To invite them directly proved to be the most effective method of persuading them to join an organisation. [71] Face-to-face encounters on the doorstep must sometimes have persuaded such women to join, because they were not passive, but isolated and poor. Some women were inspired to join by the sincerity of a particular speaker. Katharine Bruce Glasier recruited some women by her faith in socialism. Ellen Wilkinson claimed that she joined the ILP after hearing Glasier speak, and, as mentioned, Hannah Mitchell was also one of Glasier's disciples. [72]

Katharine Glasier was the innovator of the pit-head baths campaign. She wrote pamphlets about the need for them, and compared conditions for German coal miners with those in Britain where only 3 per cent of miners had access to pit-head baths. [73] She demonstrated that women in politics were concerned for the welfare of society as a whole, as well as that of women and children. The WLL conference was a forum for its sister organisations, the Women's Trade Union League and the Women's Cooperative Guild. Both regularly sent delegates to the annual

conference, though the latter hesitated to get too involved in Labour politics.

Margaret Llewelyn Davies, the WCG president, approached parliament rather than the WLL when she wanted a social reform. For example, in 1913 Margaret Bondfield, as chair of the Guild's Central Committee, was the major force in the attempt to modify the existing scheme for the payment of the maternity benefit. The government allowed a free vote and the Guild's hasty lobbying (organised by Llewelyn Davies) was vindicated when an amendment making it possible for the husband's signature to be accepted only if authorised by the wife was carried by 21 votes. [74] As the WCG was a much older organisation, the WLL must have learnt from its strategies.

Leaders from the women's trade unions were sometimes invited to chair the Labour women's conference. Mary Macarthur presided in 1910, Margaret Bondfield in 1921 and Anne Loughlin in 1935. They were respectively leaders of the National Federation of Women Workers (NFWW), the Shop Assistants' Union (SAU) and the National Union of Tailors and Garment Makers (NUTGM). All were eager to expand the membership of their union, but women workers were not so eager to join. There was a subtle denigration of trade unions as being somehow not respectable. Nurses and office workers were reluctant to join, sometimes because of snobbery. Also working men seemed antagonistic to women in unions, though Barbara Drake writes that men in the early 1920s were indifferent to women's unionisation rather than antagonistic. [75]

Women's trade union membership declined from 1,343,000 in 1921 to 731,000 in 1933, a decline which was partly accounted for by what former Communist Margaret McCarthy designates as 'the Baldwin government's central legal onslaught on trade unions in 1927'. [76] This was the passing of the Trades Disputes and Trades Unions Act (The Blacklegs' Charter), which made strikes illegal, took trade union funds to pay for civil damage and forbade picketing. Civil Service Unions were banned from affiliation with the TUC or the Labour Party. At the 1928 LPWO annual conference, in order to counter this move, the women pledged their help to the Bid for Power Fund. Each women's section would have a quota to collect to reach the £10,000 target. Even during these lean years the trade union leaders kept up the interest in trade unions at the conferences. In the protective legislation squabble in 1930 Anne Loughlin said that unorganised women really needed all the legislation they could get. [77]

Anne Godwin was one of the assistant secretaries of the Association of Women Clerks and Secretaries (AWCS). She had a trained intellectual toughness like Ellen Wilkinson and Dorothy Elliott, who were also graduates. Anne Godwin represented the British trade union movement at the International Labour Office at Geneva, and became a member of the committee which drafted the first convention that advocated equal pay — the famous ILO Convention 100. [78]

Anne Godwin believed that a working woman's place was in a trade union, and pointed out that of 3,500,000 women workers only 500,000 were unionised. In factory, shop, and office, trade unionism was not 'a man's affair', though the men had had one hundred years' lead. She suggested that NO BLACKLEG DAUGHTERS PERMITTED might be a useful slogan for Labour Party and Cooperative households. [79]

These women trade union leaders were feminist in the sense that they constantly encouraged women workers to demand their rights. They also would have liked working-class consensus. They are to be admired because they pursued over years the unrewarding task of trying to persuade women workers to act collectively to raise their own wages.

Such publicity is symbolic of the determination of lesser leaders to continue the work which Marion Phillips had pursued — to recruit and to teach working-class women the principles of socialism.

WOMEN IN PARLIAMENT

When the Labour Party was reorganised in 1918 the Annual Report praised the 'first, national, self-governing, political organisation of women workers'. [80] The statement confirmed that the men's leaders had judged the WLL's work to be useful, and able to be absorbed in and financed by the Labour Party. It was now ready to welcome women MPs backed up and supported by the mass of individual women members in the new Labour Party Women's Organisation. The title LPWO was a less inspiring rallying call than the Women's Labour League had been to the original pioneers.

Even those who had fought for women's suffrage had not believed that the Representation of the People Act (1918) would be so quickly followed by the right to stand for parliament. Mary Macarthur, of the Women's Trade Union League, had been adopted as prospective candidate for the Labour Party four months before, and the ILP had Margaret Bondfield and Ethel Snowden ready in case of need. But the others had to

be selected hurriedly. Ruth Adams writes that: 'There were seventeen candidates in all, one Conservative, four Labour, four Liberal and eight Independents.' [81]

As has been mentioned, only one woman was elected, and she did not take her seat. Mary Macarthur used her married name (Mrs. W.C. Anderson) on the ballot paper, and it has been suggested that this confused the women workers who might have voted for her as a well-known trade union organiser. Soon there were also two 'male equivalents', that is, two widows who inherited their husband's seats. [82]

In the 1923 election, the Duchess of Atholl, whom Mary Hamilton described as an 'OBE type — the sort of woman who did good work in the war', became the first woman MP for Scotland. Lady Terrington, a rich woman in her thirties, was also elected. [83] Three Labour women who were middle-aged and single were returned. Margaret Bondfield, daughter of a Somersetshire lace-maker, and a trade union secretary at the age of 24, we know as a renowned Minister of Labour. Susan Lawrence's sense of social justice guided her to the Labour Party, and to her association with Mary Macarthur whom she assisted in the work of organising women to join the Women's Trade Union League and the National Federation of Women Workers. In 1910 Lawrence had become the first Labour woman on the London County Council. [84] The third Labour woman MP was Dorothy Jewson, a former suffragette and ILP member for Norwich. Women MPs often came from a politicised family whose name was well-known and so helped them to be elected. They were mainly confident women who deliberately chose to invade this patriarchal institution.

Virginia Woolf wrote in 1938:

> Behind us lies the patriarchal system; the private house with its nullity, its hypocrisy, its servility. Before us lies the public world, the professional system, with its possessiveness, its jealousy, its pugnacity, its greed. [85]

Mrs. Baldwin, wife of the Conservative Prime Minister of the 1924 Parliament which followed the first minority Labour government, recognised from long familiarity the patriarchy when she claimed that 'The House of Commons was essentially a man's institution, evolved through centuries to deal with men's affairs in a man's way'. [86] She was not expecting this status quo to change. She regarded this institution as

impregnable, whereas socialist feminists in the Labour Party thought that even this entrenched institution could be made to change. As did Ellen Wilkinson, who wrote in 1931 that

> In a country which calls itself a democracy it is scandalous that an unelected, revising chamber can be tolerated in which the Conservative Party has such a permanent and overwhelming authority. [87]

Socialists in the LPWO persistently stressed the principles of democracy which working-class women needed to understand. Socialist women did not want the status quo to continue. They taught different concepts which had more regard for social justice than for profit-making. Women elected to the House of Commons were usually anxious to appear to act for all constituents equally, not only for women. Dora Russell criticised this attitude, for women were needed in parliament because they were *women* and not men and could truly identify with women's problems. If they argued that they represented all their constituents, and that special championship of women's causes was out of place, she said that all they were doing was maintaining the dominance of men's values.[88] 'Those qualities which women at their best have displayed within the family are needed in the body politic', concluded Russell. [89] Thus she reiterated what Margaret MacDonald wrote in 1906, and what many people believed, when in 1952 Clement Attlee asked the delegates 'to be diligent in teaching the Socialist gospel which related to the nation and the world — principles which are carried out in a good family'. [90] This was a line of argument that seemed to fit with Christianity and therefore still had a lingering appeal to working-class women socialists.

Good families are concerned for their children's education, and socialists had faith in education which is revealed in their slogan 'From nursery school to university', and in their aspirations even during the First World War. Trevor Wilson writes of H. A. L. Fisher, who, after he was appointed Minister of Education in the First World War, set out on a propaganda campaign through Lancashire, Wales and Southern England. The working men who were his audiences (dockers, miners, railway men) were markedly enthusiastic about the wider opportunities which the new plan for education might open for their children. [91] Beatrice Webb, too, writes of the 'bookish miner' who believes in education. [92] It is not then

surprising that at least three of the young daughters of these miners grew up to become Labour members of parliament. Three younger members of the 1945 parliament then represented a different kind of left-wing feminist. Alice Bacon, Margaret Herbison and Jennie Lee were miners' daughters who became scholarship girls and school teachers. Alice Bacon committed the Labour Party to the development of comprehensive schools at the 1955 conference. [93]

During the first fifty years of the Labour Party 39 Labour women entered parliament, and many of them made a name for themselves. One of the most energetic of the Labour women MPs was Ellen Wilkinson, a diminutive redhead, who became an MP in the 1924 parliament and was at times the sole Labour woman MP in a Conservative or Coalition parliament. Wilkinson had entered parliament through the trade union sector, for she was the national woman organiser of the National Union of Distributive and Allied Workers (NUDAW). [94] She earned fame (and criticism) by marching with the hungry unemployed from Jarrow to London in 1936 as Jarrow's MP. [95]

Often women MPs indicated their interests in their maiden speech. Ellen Wilkinson delivered a vigorous, forthright speech, identified her major interests, and earned wide commendation, because it bore so clearly the hall-mark of first-hand experience. She displayed her feminist sympathies when she deplored the government's failure to extend the franchise to women under thirty, because women with no vote are neglected. She also criticised new proposals affecting working women and pointed out that the whole tendency of society was to neglect the interests of those who had no vote. [96]

Ellen Wilkinson exemplifies the young, enthusiastic, hard-working, ambitious woman MP — one of the three types of women MPs recognised by historian Vicky Randall. Another is a 'male equivalent', that is she has acquired political office through a relationship to a political man. She usually has traditional assumptions about women's political role, and is unlikely to spark off a revolution. The third type of female politician enters politics later, is not ambitious, and has no background of employment in the professions. She is either traditional in her actions, or works for women's rights. [97] From 1918 to 1928 all the Labour women MPs differed slightly from such a typology; they were all from politicised families — families in which a high level of political interest and activism is accepted, in which children are socialised into an activist, political role.

Marion Phillips must be included among the Labour women MPs. The Durham County Labour Women's Advisory Council invited her to stand for parliament and proposed to supply £70 per annum for her expenses. [98] This proposal was made in 1924-5 and she was elected to the 1929 parliament as MP for Sunderland, along with D. N. Pritt. Marion Phillips then began the double task of administering the League and watching the interests of her north-eastern constituents. One commentator writes that she still put the WLL first and her constituency second, though she travelled to Sunderland on many weekends. The 1929 government came to an abrupt end in 1931 due to the world economic crisis, and in the subsequent election Marion Phillips lost her seat. She died in January 1932 having written her last editorial for *Labour Woman* from her hospital bed.

Arthur Henderson's tribute to her was, 'The Women's Movement is the monument of her life.' [99] Susan Lawrence defined Marion Phillips' motivation when she said, 'I know of no person who could be kindled to a greater flame and anger by the sight of wrong and oppression'. [100] The LPWO did not disintegrate because of the loss of its leader. There was only a slight delay before Barbara Ayrton Gould pulled the Women's Movement together and encouraged the members to join in the campaign to enrol a million Labour Party members. The presence of other potential leaders ensured that the Labour Party Women's Organisation carried on its challenging and ever-varying work to its Golden Jubilee and beyond.

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CONCLUSION

In 1899 Charlotte Despard, soon to be a member of the first WLL Executive, advocated that 'women and Labour should unite against the patriarchal capitalist system'. [1] This seemed feasible because recruits to the WLL were relatives of men already employed in, and aware of, the capitalist system and its shortcomings, and the most radical men and women were eager for change, believing that equality would not be achieved until the workers were in charge of the means of production and distribution.

The WLL operated through years of unusual turbulence which began after the new Labour Party entered parliament in 1906. From 1911 to 1914 there was a period of intense industrial strife, mainly caused by Britain's decline as the 'workshop of the world'. Strikes occurred in many branches of industry, and one of the WLL's first self-imposed tasks was to care for the children of strikers. There followed the First World War with the deaths of over a million men in trench warfare. The inter-war years were marked by poverty and depression, and the threat of fascism in Europe. The Second World War led to the atom bomb being developed, followed in 1954 by the hydrogen bomb and the Communist/USA rivalry. The whole period was unusually disordered and attempts at social reform were repeatedly postponed.

The crises had seemed endlessly recurring but the WLL had not disintegrated. It had been involved in the consequences of these diverse happenings. One historian has written that women were expected to change their concerns in every decade of this half century. [2] They moved into war work, back into domesticity, into war service and then back to child rearing. The same degree of adaptability was not required of men.

The WLL leaders had trained women of different classes to abandon their dependence and submission to become part of a political affiliate to the Labour Party. There is an early text on *The Working Woman In Politics* written by Lisbeth Simm which throws light on what the WLL expected of its members. The WLL heartily approved of the home as *one* of woman's places, but was willing to consider 'recognising outside duties'. Simm claimed that the WLL was the only organisation in the Labour Movement that would give political education to women so that they could take their place as equals alongside men. 'Given equal opportunity of enlightenment, the views of both men and women are

naturally so different that both must be considered before a sane conclusion can be arrived at', she wrote.

She pointed out that men benefited by the unpaid labour of housewives, as did 'the employing class' and went on 'We need the working woman in politics today, because through politics every sphere of life is governed and affected'. She stressed the importance of mothers monitoring their children's education, but asserted that the community also should care for children. Practical as always, she advocated that women rid themselves of ancient superstitions regarding woman's 'proper sphere' and suggested communal housekeeping 'so that the energy and thought thus set free may be used for an altogether higher standard of human life'. Finally she advised Labour women: 'first to combine, second to educate and agitate, and third to administrate'. [3]

Lisbeth Simm had been appointed by the WLL to be organiser of Women's Sections in north-east England. Margaret MacDonald had taught her that 'socialism was communal consciousness as a protector of individual life and liberty'. [4] Simm's paper on *The Working Woman in Politics* indicates what the women should have done, incorporating some socialist ideas and some suggestions for the working woman to reduce the weight of her oppression. Unfortunately the WLL leaders chose to emulate the men's actions too closely. They also placed too much importance on the parliamentary scene and the time-consuming debating and oratory, but when they could, they used direct action, such as doorstep contact, protests about the cost of living, demonstrations of solidarity, and an ongoing reiteration of socialist beliefs.

That they were effective when they acted this way is vouched for by Winifred Holtby who claimed 'that the uneducated instinct ... can be developed into a powerful sense of public responsibility has been shown by the brief history of women's influence in politics'. [5] Her book on *Women and a changing Civilisation* was published in 1934 and she shows that the position of women then was still not satisfactory — that there would continue to be conflict between men and women until true economic equality was the general rule.

Economic equality was a distant goal in the thirties when poverty was rife and when the members had to work within a stringent budget. In the north eastern mining villages women's meetings were held despite the lack of funds. 'I still remember,' wrote Margaret Gibb, 'the Jarrow meetings of women. A huge hall just packed, jammed with women and

they were all paying one penny a week into the Labour Party. There was no question of twelve shillings per annum — a penny a week'. [6]

Assumptions were made about women which were unreal. Jane Lewis writes that they were regarded as inferior workers up to the 1920s and 1930s. [7] Winifred Holtby wrote that 'women take refuge in housekeeping and make it last'. [8] Because their lives had such little recreation many women found hope and inspiration in the promise of socialism, but others still thought that performance of their domestic duties was their 'proper work'. Gender hierarchy was threatened by women's public activity, because children must respect adults, non-workers must defer to workers and in many working-class families fathers were the ultimate authority.

The WLL could call on 'unoccupied' women to do the tedious electioneering work. The majority of the rank-and-file members were full-time housewives with no money to spare. They came to political meetings for company and diversion. The main object was political support for the Labour Party, and political education. A monthly letter from the Advisory Committee might suggest a variety of activities which included socialising as well as socialism. The women, conscious of their lack of experience and political naivete, organised conferences, and weekend and week-long 'schools'. In the north-east, industrial, social and economic life were closely connected and it was easy to organise people politically. There was mutual help between miners and Women's Sections. Women joined in the miners' annual gala in Wharton Park, Durham city, earning the gift of a Chairman's silver chain from Sam Watson, a miner's leader, for their good political work. [9] The north-east was a very real stronghold for the Independent Labour Party, with a well co-ordinated organisation.

Michael Savage writes about the situation in the north-west:

> Across the country, in Preston, Lancashire, organisation was crucial to the development of the neighbourhood-based Labour Party. From the mere 5,500 members ... in 1918, to 70,000 women members by 1921, 120,000 by 1923 and 200,000 by 1925. There is increasing evidence that the awakened political consciousness of the women is more pronounced on the side of Labour than of any other political force in the country. [10]

Women had recruited other women, and this alone enhanced the stature of the Labour Party. The women's annual conferences brought delegates and visitors. Only delegates were allowed to address the conference, for visitors sometimes included unemployed Communist women who came to lobby and demonstrate.

Delegates included industrial women workers, teachers, doctors, regional women organisers, mothers who did all their own housework and child care, women clerks and inspectors — all the women whose services count, meeting together to decide the next year's work. [11] After 1928 there was a big influx of young women newly enfranchised.

The early conferences were fairly relaxed, but towards the end of the 1920s the women had become more militant, because socialism was not being promoted. There were ILP women trying to coerce Labour Party women leaders to be more assertive, complaining that they were being blocked from becoming parliamentary candidates, and causing strife. [12] Conferences revealed all kinds of inequalities of class and gender.

Conferences were public displays of the WLL's effectiveness. During the thirties they could do little except draw attention to international happenings, and protest about the injustices perpetrated by Public Assistance committees. The women's production of reports on the future were welcome and necessary, but they also needed to convince working-class voters of Labour's capability. The Communist Party was more dynamic than the Labour Party. In 1937, surprisingly, Labour Party membership peaked at 447,000, [13] a useful number soon to be dispersed by threats of war.

Conservative governments often ignored Labour women's demands. [14] Lucy Middleton wrote that 'The WLL on the whole concentrated more on needs than on rights. Theirs was a practical rather than a theoretical approach.' [15] An example of a practical approach was when middle-class women tried to stop the employment of school children in agriculture, because of both the danger of accidents, and the loss of education.

Cross-class antagonism often flared up on such questions. Working-class women tended to be preoccupied with immediate problems, such as needing more money, and were inclined to seize an opportunity for immediate benefit rather than to consider future disadvantage. On the whole at the conferences antagonism and agreement were roughly balanced. Doubtless there were mutterings about 'those on the platform'

but there were also warm and affectionate friendships. Selina Cooper had an easy relationship with aristocrats such as Lady St. Helier, [16] and Mrs. Cawthorne corresponded with Margaret MacDonald, and would meet her at the 1907 conference. [17]

Often at conferences basic socialist beliefs were reinforced by discussion. The most passionate belief in the 1930s was in lasting peace. The women kept up continuous, constructive work for peace up to the eve of the Second World War. That the Peace Ballot of 1936 in which eleven million people voted for peace was disparaged in the House of Commons, was blamed on 'the other class'. [18] Communist women had joined the Women's Cooperative Guild (though they could not hold office) in order to unite with other women against war and fascism. In these years (1936 to 1939) they argued that all women were against war and fascism. [19] Socialist women believed in teaching the interdependence of the world to children, and in playing down nationalism. WLL delegates had regularly attended Labour and Socialist international conferences over the years, before the rise of fascism, but such conferences were not being held in the later 1930s, for socialists and communists were being persecuted in Germany.

Equality is an enduring socialist ideal. A.A.H. Findlay, Chair of the General Council of the Trade Union Congress, went to the 1936 WLL conference to say he believed in a Labour movement in which men and women alike enjoyed equal freedom and equal responsibility. But it is a paradox that while paying lip-service to equality, there were certain areas in which it was anathema. For instance, Labour Party men denied equal pay to women even when the Labour Party was in government, and when they were in Opposition the women were told to wait for a Labour government. [20] In 1952 all women in the common classes of the civil service were granted equal pay, but universal equal pay was reluctantly implemented by 1975 with many anomalies. Equality is the most gradual of socialist creeds, yet it is desired by all those in the secondary realm of the labour force, by all those diminished by exploitation.

Another concept important to socialism is democracy. Democracy has to be explained in political education. It is to do with the voice of the people which, particularly in a socialist community, must not be silenced. A mistake which is easy to make when administering an organisation is to centralise power. Democracy is a harder way to rule because one has to work for consensus, and to defend practices with which others disagree.

Marion Phillips, after a time, began to administer the WLL in an undemocratic way. She did not always consult the provincial branch leaders before implementing a policy. She was probably the best woman to be in charge of the WLL, better qualified and more experienced than others, but socialism fought for democracy, and therefore, socialism favours counsel and consultation at all levels, and needs to be bolstered up by political organisation and education. Some of the working-class women in the WLL had been socialists for thirty years. The obituaries at the conferences recorded their names. Also, in failing to consult provincial leaders there was a tendency towards a closed administration when a democratic body should practise openness and objectivity.

Other leaders besides Phillips could convey and explain concepts to those who found them difficult. Glasier, Colman, and Barbara Ayrton Gould were skilled and tolerant women who taught socialist ideas.from their suffragette days. [21] This was what Beatrice Webb admired about the Labour women — 'the unusual friendliness, the absence of any constraints between the different sections of women who have joined'. [22]

The WLL though can be criticised for not practising democracy in its administration of the organisation. Sometimes it neglected the teaching of the 'absolutely root ideas without which socialism cannot survive'. [23] Also it fell into the trap of attending more closely to structural details than ideological ones. Susan Bruley regarded the WLL as 'a vast bureaucratic monolith'. Nevertheless, in the 1950s it could claim, like the Labour Party, that 'we kept all our promises'. [24]

The women had fulfilled their five 'methods' — by working locally and nationally to help Labour candidates, which after 1918, was to the benefit of female Labour candidates also. [25] They had trained working-class women to lead discussions, supervise a canvassing team, conduct a political meeting and letter-box propaganda. A proportion of women were confident enough in themselves to be elected to educational, Poor Law, and town and district councils. Labour women in the north had assisted in gaining female franchise by constitutional methods, and finally all women had been made aware of, and contributed to, the improvement of conditions in the work-place for women workers.

Working-class women had perceived that they were more knowledgeable than the average politician about the health and nutrition of children, about the kind of retirement that old people should have, and

about the type of housing desired by the workers. Middle-class women, appalled by the poverty of the lower classes, worked to alleviate it.

Unlike many women's organisations which ceased to function for lack of recruits, the WLL was able to attract younger women continually over the years as the latter recognised the injustices of capitalism. To increase the confidence and the political knowledge of thousands of underprivileged women at the cost of hours of unpaid, voluntary work was a worthy achievement even if it was not a perfect one. The teaching of socialist values should have remained the dominant aim. Instead, perfecting the electoral machine began to assume more importance.

The Women's Organisation did not achieve the strong political influence it would have liked because there was a majority of men in heavy industry, mining, building and sea-faring who rejected women in politics, and preferred them to pursue their ' natural' functions of child bearing and rearing. These men provided much of the finance for the Labour party and had powerful influence. Perhaps their minds could have been changed by the constant reiteration of socialist ideas and ideals. G. D. H. Cole (and other theorists) thought that an important reason for the limited achievement of the Labour Party was that the inspired teaching of socialism was allowed to die down. [26] Women had been propagandists from the beginning. Perhaps too much had been expected of them, and too little notice taken of their inspired efforts.

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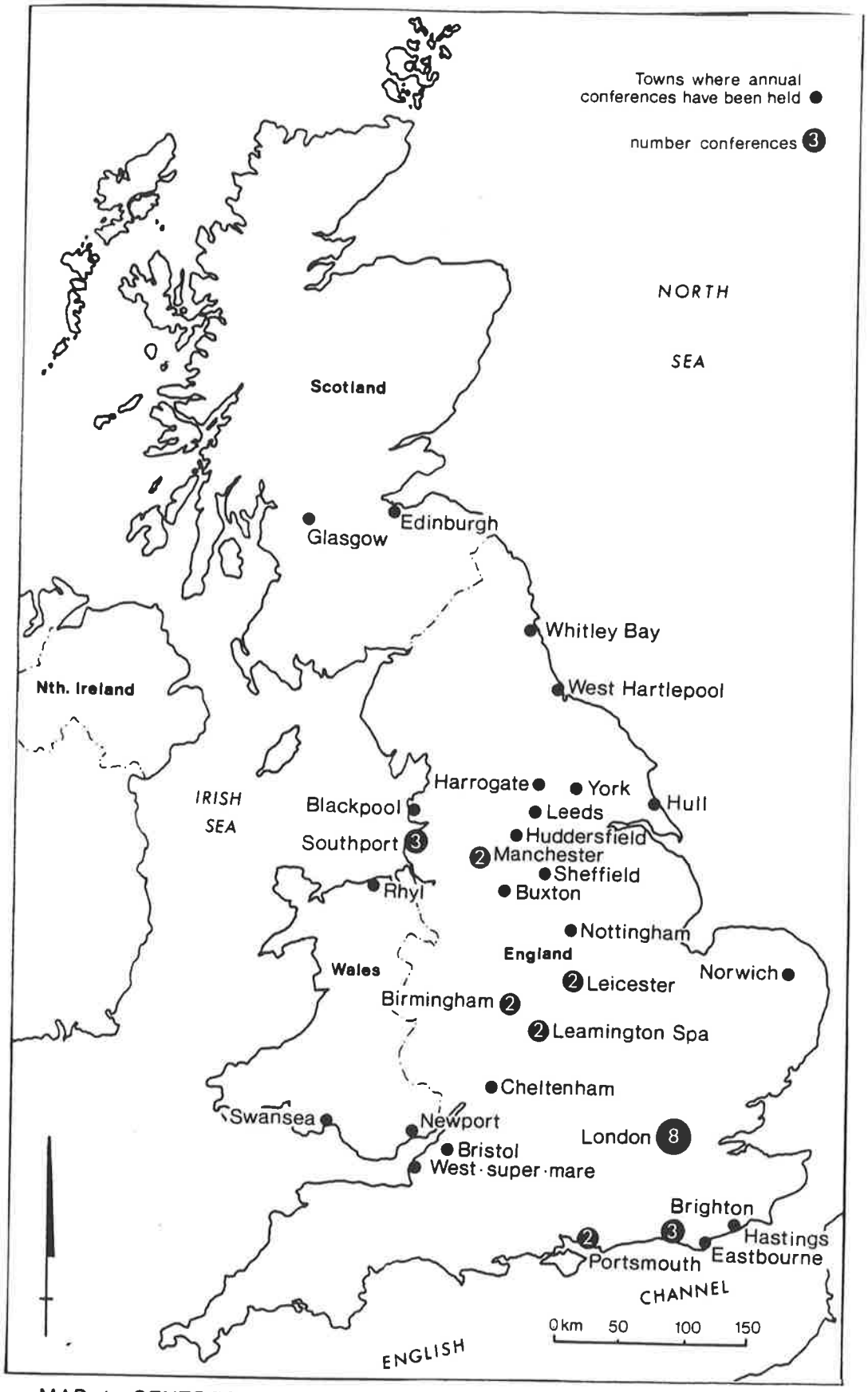


MAP 1: CENTRES WHERE L.P.W.O. CONFERENCES WERE HELD.

Source: Chris Crothers, Geography Department, University of Adelaide.

2 THE NUMBER OF WOMEN PRESENT AT LABOUR CONFERENCES TO 1932

The number of women is depicted as a fraction of the number of men. 1932 is the year when ILP women disaffiliated.

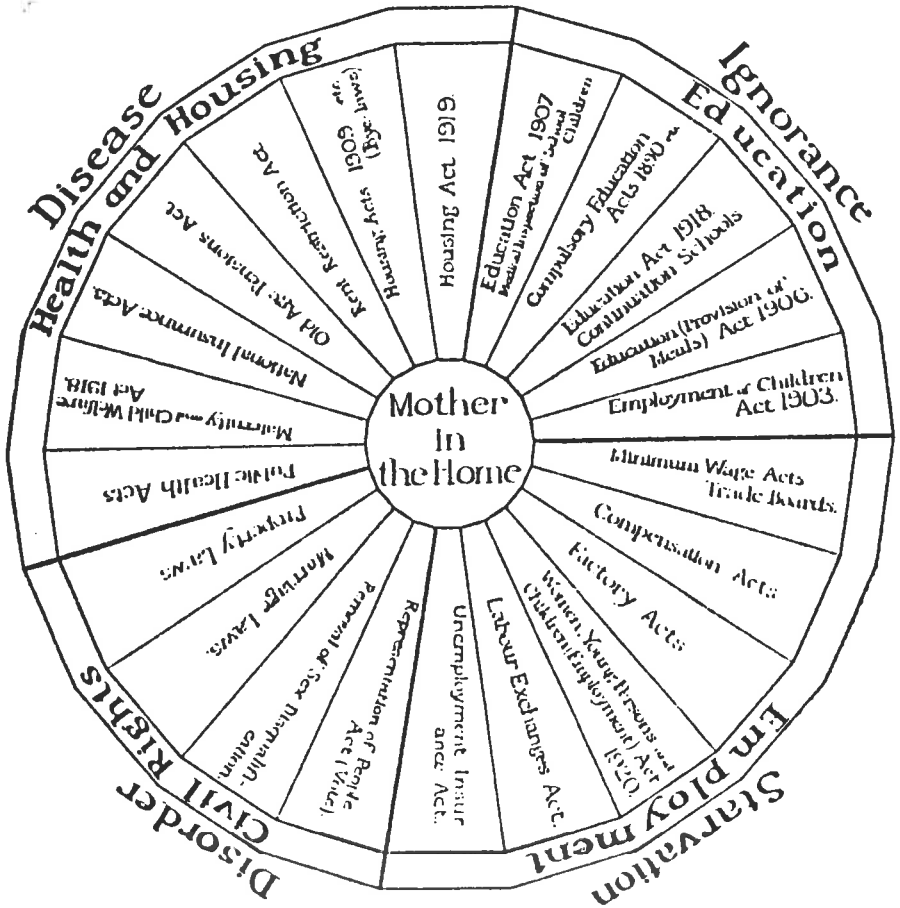
Place	Year	Number
London	1906	5/363
Belfast	1907	0
Hull	1908	5/404
Portsmouth	1909	6/399
Newport	1910	3/448
Leicester	1911	7/460
Birmingham	1912	7/474
London	1913	14/516
Glasgow	1914	12/551
Bristol	1916	12/608
Manchester	1917	21/752
Nottingham	1918	44/879 - Many NFWW delegates attended.
Southport	1919	64/954
Scarborough	1920	68/1109
Brighton	1921	43/872
Edinburgh	1922	33/820
London	1923	60/939 more women. General Election in December
London	1924	66/1059 The first Labour government in office.
Liverpool	1925	62/1032
Margate	1926	78/1042
Blackpool	1927	76/1011
Birmingham	1928	69/971
Brighton	1929	81/967
Llandudno	1930	49/725
Scarborough	1931	50/716
Leicester	1932	52/621

In 1925 women were pressing for working-class women to be on Maternity and Child Welfare Committees.

In 1929 there were only 3 women on the NECLP instead of 4. The three women were J. L. Adamson, Ethel Bentham and Barbara Ayrton Gould.

The highest number of women ever to attend a Labour Party conference was 108/1, 314 in 1956.

Chart I.
The Mother in the Home.
What Government does for Her.



Outside the circle are the dangers against which Government is meant to defend us.

CHARTS AND EXPLANATIONS

The object of these Charts is to serve as the basis of lectures. Each member of the class should have the pamphlet in her hand, and if there is a blackboard, the leader should sketch the Chart on that. Further information on the subjects included in the Chart may be obtained from the books of which a list is given later, and these should be consulted by the leader. Each Chart may be used either for one lecture, or in greater detail can be used for a series of lectures. In the latter case, an introductory lecture should explain the general meaning of the Chart and later lectures should deal with its different sections.

CHART I

This Chart shows the importance of politics to the Mother in the Home. It deals with the whole work of government from her point of view. There she is in the centre. What has government to do with her? How does it affect her?

1. Note that "government" here means the principle of government, not "The Government," which means the particular Government in power at any one time.

2. The object of government is to protect the people from four great dangers:—Disease, Ignorance, Starvation and Disorder.

3. In order to protect the people from these dangers, Government should attempt to make them secure by legislation which shall promote:—

(i) Good Health and Good Environment. The latter means chiefly good housing.

(ii) Education.

(iii) Employment or Production of all commodities that are needed either for ourselves or to exchange for others which we require.

(iv) Civil Rights; that is, Individual Freedom and justice between all.

4. All of these matters are very important to the mother in the home, and affect her life and the life of her family very greatly. She must therefore concern herself in the passing of laws. That means that she must interest herself in elections so as to send the right people to Parliament to pass the right kind of laws in order to protect her and her family from the four great dangers.

5. The chief laws dealing with the four subjects are given on the Chart. The leader of the class should show what these do now and how they could be improved.

Source: Marion Phillips and Grace Taverner (eds.), *Women's Work in the Labour Party.* (Library of Wales), Pamph. May 1911.

SUNDERLAND

Dr. Marion Phillips, J.P.

Senior Member 1929-1931.

Denis Nowell Pritt, K.C.

VOTE FOR THE LABOUR CANDIDATES

POLLING DAY—TUESDAY, OCTOBER 27TH, 1931.

Source: Northumberland Record Office.

5 ELLEN WILKINSON DURING THE JARROW HUNGER MARCH.

Ellen Wilkinson with Alderman Symonds (right) during the 1936 Jarrow March.