

Women and the Co-operative Movement100 YEARS OF CAMPAIGNING BY THE GUILD

by

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"Sometimes my husband rather resented the teachings of the Guild ... it made women think too much of themselves" said Mrs. Layton in "Life as We Have Known It" published by the Co-operative Women's Guild in 1931. Mrs. Layton, born in 1855, was one of the generation of working class women to whom the Guild meant so much. She was one of 14 children, "which made my mother a perfect slave, either expecting a baby or with one at the breast". For despite the views of early Co-operators and Utopian Socialists, who believed in a transformation within the family and between the sexes as the basis for a new society, most working class men in the late nineteenth century shared the Victorian middle-class ideal of the wife as the "angel in the house". The woman's place was definitely in the home, and more precisely in the kitchen and bedroom, looking after the needs of her husband and bearing his children.

This attitude was one facet of the general retreat from socialist idealism between

the 1850's and 1880's when working men developed defensive institutions such as Unions and of course Co-operative societies, which left behind the mass politics of the earlier part of the century which had included women, but who could not take part in the new institutions because the way of life imposed on them by the patriarchal attitude of their husbands did not allow them participation.

Lifting the Curtain of Marriage

Although working class women could not take on the useless and decorative role imposed on the middle class "angel in the house", they nevertheless seemed at this time to have accepted for themselves an image of home centredness and inferiority, which when combined with endless pregnancies, ignorance about sex and contraception and widespread abortion made working class women "perfect slaves" like Mrs. Layton's mother.

The great achievement of the Guild, with its publication of such unique historical documents as "Maternity - Letters from Working Women - 1915" is that, as Margaret Llewelyn Davies, General Secretary 1889-1927 said, "it lifted the curtain which on marriage had fallen on a woman's life. The nation felt no responsibility for her personal welfare or the conditions under which she performed her great tasks. Without money of her own, with no right even to her housekeeping savings, without adequate protection against a husband's possible cruelty, with no legal position as a mother, and with the conditions of maternity totally neglected, married women in the home had existed apart, voiceless and unseen".

Through the Guild women gained the knowledge and confidence to fight against all this and much more.

To the Left of the Labour Movement

Under its inspired leadership, the Guild forged strong links with the Trades Unions and wider Labour movement, but was always well to the left of both the Labour and Co-operative movements. Examples are the Guild's courageous stand on divorce law reform 1910-1915 which resulted in the cutting off of its grant from the Co-op. Union which did not want to upset Catholics, and the Guild Congress vote of 1923 in favour of birth control clinics, when the Labour Party was still very nervous about the issue.

Perhaps the greatest achievement of the Guild during the inter-war years was the Peace Campaign and the White Poppy, so that Peace became a central issue uniting the Co-op. Movement. Also during these years Guildswomen were among the first women JP's and were represented in many areas of public life such as maternity and child welfare committees, school boards, Poor Law Committees and local councils.

The Co-operative Movement itself during the inter-war years could be called a "Womans Movement" - guildswomen were the main participants in Co-op. schools and conferences and cultural groups; many went on to Co-operative education committees; they distributed Co-operative papers such as the "News" and "Womans Outlook"; and they always helped at socials and other events. They were a most loyal band of Co-op. shoppers, constantly

organising events to promote CWS brand goods and visiting CWS factories to learn more about the production side. The Guild was also active in a campaign to improve working conditions in Co-op. stores and for equal pay for men and women Co-operative employees. However, women were still under-represented in the higher decision-making bodies of the movement.

Loss of Momentum

After these boom years the Second World War contributed greatly to the gradual decline of the Guild with members' difficulty in getting meeting places, war work for women and so on. And after the war, with the implementation of the Health Service and other welfare services for which it had fought over the years, the Guild lost some of its momentum. Also the Labour movement split on the Peace issue, which also-affected the Guild. The Guild made valiant efforts to halt the decline and continued to campaign on consumer issues and other services such as transport and a huge "cost of living" campaign was undertaken 1953-56. Branches were encouraged to switch from afternoon to evening meetings to bring in working women, many branches tended to entrench themselves and fall back on "formalism".

Changes in the patterns of Co-operative retailing, the loss of the "divi", and the economic difficulties faced by Co-operative education departments further contributed towards the decline in Guild membership, and with it of course, a great weakening of Co-operative democracy. From a peak of membership of 60,000 at the beginning of the 1930's,

membership has dropped to 15,000 in Centenary year.

Prospects for the Future?

Having taken this brief look at the main peaks and troughs of Guild history, what are the implications for the future? First, it is obvious that the Guild can survive only if it carves out a definite role for itself in the changed social climate of its "second Century". Perhaps it should concentrate far more on specific campaigns, because this was how it achieved great things on behalf of women in the past, and Margaret Llewelyn Davies herself warned of the danger of "spreading the net too wide" in the "Women with the Basket" (1927). She also foresaw the dangers inherent in "size and success". Miss Davies, not a married woman herself - indeed she was only able to devote her life to the Guild because she wasn't married - saw the Guild maintaining its place as a married woman's movement, but felt the Guild needed to be on guard against becoming conservative. Other generalist mass organisations such as the Churches and the Labour Party also appear to have lost their traditional role, so Guildswomen should not feel too badly if this has also happened to their organisation.

Secondly, the very successes of the Guild, such as the practical improvements in the lives of working class women that the Guild achieved may be precisely those conditions which contribute nowadays towards the oppression of working class women - e.g. women's lack of control over maternity services which are dominated by male professionals who re-inforce

a patriarchal view of women's place in society. This is the sort of issue which divides the Guild from the contemporary feminist movement. As always the Guild is attempting to tackle a problem - the Guild programme theme for Centenary year is the highly appropriate one of "Women and Health", which will take a critical look at women's lack of control over their own health and medical services.

Thirdly, it is obvious that the Guild's faith in the Co-operative Movements' power to bring about social change under capitalism through trade was misplaced. Also, the Guild's divorce reform campaign showed the difficulty of trying to combine ideals and trade. The sale of South African goods is a similar problem today, and will be debated at Guild Congress 1983.

Guild and Movement

Lastly, what are the implications for the Guild with the move to 25 regional societies? The very success of the Co-operative movement in the past was due to its constant reinforcement in every aspect of the lives of its members, - they shopped at the local society, they read Co-operative papers, their social life took place at Co-operative events and so Guildswomen especially felt themselves to be part of a movement that was really working towards a new social order. A huge regional society, with no Co-operative shop within easy reach, with the difficulty of getting to members' meetings because of the lack of public transport, when membership means little more than a public relations event every so often - is it any wonder that Guildswomen may feel that all that they are to

be asked to do by the Co-operative Societies of the future is to "come and buy"?

We have now come full circle from the day which marked the Guild's beginning in 1883 when Mrs. Acland wrote in the Co-op. News: What are men urged to do when a meeting is held to start a Co-operative Society? Come, help, vote. What are women urged to do? Come and buy!