

The Women's Industrial Conference

Washington, D. C., January 18 to 21

THE employment of women has a broader significance to the nation than purely industrial problems," said President Coolidge in a letter of greeting to the Women's Industrial Conference, composed of 291 delegates from 243 organizations, including the Taylor Society, who met in Washington, D. C., January 18 to 21, on call of the Women's Bureau of the Department of Labor. "It is a social problem, and as such it needs the attention and interest of the country as a whole. Women can never escape the responsibility of home and children, and the working woman as a mother and potential mother challenges universal interest." Though society necessarily looks to the management of industry as mainly responsible for the conduct of industry," nevertheless women's work concerns everybody because of their relation to homes and children.

This theme—the effect of women's employment on their children—was elaborated in the address of the Secretary of Labor, James J. Davis, who, speaking on Women Workers and the American Home, enumerated the strains of modern industry, "with its clattering equipment, with its use of substances dangerous to health, with its high-speed machinery, its demand for rapid production," and called for more adequate measures to improve these conditions. "We are apt to overlook the one most important factor," he said, "the welfare of those who come after us."

At the other extreme from these views were the vociferous demands of the delegates of the National Woman's Party for "equal opportunity" for women as individuals, not as potential mothers, and, as a means to equality with men, the elimination of all labor laws which do not apply to men as well as women. Standing between them was the group of 27 women representing trade unions, the large majority of whom have themselves worked in factories. They brought to the conference the firm foundation of practical experience. They, too, desired equal opportunity, but they were also in favor of laws to shorten hours, prohibit night work, and improve working conditions as a reinforcement of the efforts of trade unions.

These cross-currents of opinion, treated in the public press as a "newsy" conflict between women,

were the distinctive characteristic of the conference, though the votes showed that an overwhelming majority of delegates stood with the group of women in industry in their views on labor legislation. The outcome was a request to the Women's Bureau to make a comprehensive study of special laws now regulating the employment of women and the effect of these laws.

The reason for the conflict and, by implication, a suggestion for a way out through a more comprehensive view was given by Miss Mary Anderson, director of the Women's Bureau, in her opening remarks, when she said, "In the working woman are focussed some of the most fundamental industrial issues. To employers, she is a factor in their labor supply. To feminists, she is a factor in the woman question. To labor, she is a critical element in the complex labor struggle. Too often each of these groups tries to settle each issue in its own way, and with reference to no other interest but its own. These problems cannot be justly or successfully dealt with either as woman's problem alone, or as labor problems alone, but must be recognized as involving the elements of both, in a combination which makes them uniquely difficult. They must be approached, therefore, not on the basis of theory alone, but with knowledge of economic facts and a balanced sense of the values at stake, especially the human values to the woman worker herself and to society as a whole."

To give opportunity for this kind of balanced approach the conference was called, in order "to bring before the women of the country current facts about women in industry, to make possible an interchange of experience and ideas between employers, workers, and the general public, and to develop policies for broader opportunity and more profitable employment for women under modern industrial conditions." All three groups were represented among both delegates and speakers. Each of the six sessions, excluding the opening night and the final dinner, was devoted to a specific though comprehensive group of problems, including the Development and Expansion of Industry, in the light of its social significance for the employer, the worker, and society; Problems of Industrial Relations; Social Problems; Health Problems; and a Symposium, extending over two sessions, assigning responsibility to the Woman Worker, the Consumer, Business, the Church, the

State Government, and the National Government. On motion of the trade union women, who believed it just that a hearing should be given to the opponents of labor legislation for women, an extra evening session was arranged for a discussion of the necessity for labor laws, with an equal number of speakers from each side.

In the session on Health Problems, new hazards to women in industry were described by Dr. Alice Hamilton, Professor of Industrial Medicine in Harvard Medical School. "Since the war there has been a great change in the solvents which are used in industry," she said. "This means that we have a new situation in rubber factories and in factories using varnish, lacquer, shellac, and all other coatings. . . . It is still true that the poisonous trades in the United States employ a very much larger number of men than of women and that the latter are rarely exposed to as great a degree as are the men. But it is also true that the number of women subject to the danger of industrial poisoning is much greater than it was before the war."

Dr. Hamilton cited slight improvements in the lead trades in the past eight years but pointed out that much remained to be done, notably in the pottery trade where the protection given to the workers is less adequate in the United States than in Great Britain, Holland, or Germany.

William Green, president of the American Federation of Labor, stated that the Federation is developing a united effort of national and international unions for the better organization of women in trade unions. "The unions, he said, are capable of "expansion for cooperation between workers and management in working out better methods and economies in production." But lacking organization, "Women workers have been an exploited group," and "it is evident we must rely upon legislation to safeguard a considerable proportion of these workers."

The share of employers in improvements already made in conditions of work for women might have been described by the President of the National Association of Manufacturers, John E. Edgerton. Unfortunately his choice of the dangers of communism as his main theme left enlightened management in the United States without a spokesman. "I have offered no expert or other pertinent testimony on specific problems," said he, "preferring rather

to point out and identify the remote sources of most of these problems, believing that the quickest and easiest solution to all of them is, to quarantine against foreign influences, particularly Russian." He warned the delegates that one Madame Kollantai, hitherto apparently quite unknown to any delegate, was "exercising a very large if not a dominating influence upon at least some of the major activities of at least some of your organizations."

The need of a balance of power between employer and employee in adjusting human relationships was emphasized by Agnes Nestor, delegate of the International Glove Workers' Union. "Trying to adjust human relationships in industry is beyond the power of any one employer to deal with by himself; he is too human and too much a partisan in the bargain he is trying to make. . . . The affairs in the shop are often referred to as the employer's business; it is, so far as the ownership of the industry is concerned, but it is much beyond that; it is one party giving employment, and the other party selling his or her labor and skill. It then passes into the realm of affairs of two important parties to a bargain for the conduct of production in industry; for the employer it means producing products for sale on the market, and for the worker it affects his very life. What he shall earn and the hours he shall work determine his standard of living and whether he shall have health and leisure to enjoy life. The human welfare of large groups of individuals is too precious to be trusted in the hands of any one individual, no matter how well meaning he may be. Industry has grown beyond individual dealing. The employer has become removed from his individual workman so that collective action is needed. In our complicated industrial life of today it is the only intelligent way to meet the problem of industrial relations."

William Leiserson, speaking on the Philosophy of Industrial Relations, traced the progress of study of labor questions from abstract speculation on "the labor problem" to detailed analysis of specific labor problems, and the shift in interest from conditions—particularly evils and abuses—to the relationships between employers, wage-earners, and public communities. Attention now is directed toward developing "methods by which these industrial relations may be organized, administered, and kept