Conscription for Women

by

Elizabeth Robins, 1917

The Sue Thomas Bibliography entry within the Miscellaneous Articles section is:

194. "Conscription for Women." *Contemporary Review* 61 (Apr. 1917), pp. 478-485.

See end page for source of this imaged text.

Notes: Robins may have breached the so-called truce that one of the leading women's suffrage organizations, the WSPU, declared when the war broke out, in lobbying for the rights of women to vote. (Yet many other feminist leaders were Pacifists like Sylvia Pankhurst, or they objected to Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst's support of the war policy of the government.) Robins had spent the early part of 1916 in the US. Before that, she volunteered at Endell Street Hospital, organizing a library for soldiers recovering from war injuries. Wendy Moore, in her book on the Endell Street Hospital, *No Man's Land: The Trailblazing Women Who Ran Britain's Most Extraordinary Military Hospital During World War I,* uses Robins' diary to detail some of the flavor of the military hospital's 1915 origins. Moore mentions that there was an official blackout of press coverage of Zepplin raids and cites Robins diary entry to describe the eerie effects of witnessing a Zepplin dropping its bombs in September 1915 (Moore, pp. 137-8).

It is clear that Robins here objects to employers who took advantage of women laborers. Her stress that conscription of the unrepresented was "indistinguishable from slavery" (p. 485) demonstrates her feminist advocacy. --JEG

CONSCRIPTION FOR WOMEN.

ONE of the dangers that confronts a country engaged in war lies in the fact that even non-combatants are apt to forget that exigency work may leave vital questions of future welfare not only untouched, but clean out of mind. Being out of mind, these questions are presently out of hand. Matters manageable enough if taken in time, grow with neglect into the more formidable and costly kind of problem. The Emergency Work must be done. But there must be vision in the Watch Towers, or labour and sacrifice may be vain.

Many of the old windows opening upon the life of the people are closed in these days, and, so to say, "Zeppelin-curtained." Life is carried on under the extinguisher of two sorts of censorship, official and unofficial. The last is perhaps the most effective. It operates (in addition to other ways) through a thousand editors and spokesmen, in the guise of a very natural conviction that on the serious side of affairs people are interested in nothing but the war. As a result, other considerations, even those which shall be bearing fruit when the Great War is a fading memory, are set aside. This is more the tendency among women, because they are less in touch with public affairs, are largely unorganised, and are working in great numbers at new tasks, or under new conditions, as well as harder than ever before.

The value to the State of eliciting opinion, the danger to the community in the repression of opinion, were never greater than now. Even the untrained man or woman, not too wearied by emergency work, and having access to posts of observation, may save painful collision, and costly wreckage, by a timely warning.

The trained observer, such as Miss Mary MacArthur, does incalculable service to the country, as well as to working girls and women, by giving the public an idea of how certain work, its rewards, its immediate conditions, and its future dangers, appear to those most closely concerned with it. The world in general—above all, the world at Westminster—has too little opportunity of knowing how these matters are looked upon by women. Kindred knowledge is, more fortunately, not easy to overlook when it concerns men's work, or the wider issues affecting it. No one

concerned to know lacked information as to the attitude of men's trade unions on the subject of conscription, for infinite trouble was taken to elicit and to shape that opinion.

On the other hand, by a thousand signs we see how little is known of the working woman's attitude towards compulsory service for women. If this were not so we should have in the Press some stronger reflection of her objection and of its grounds. We should not have the *Times* engaged at column's length in preparing the way for Universal National Service, setting out the advantage of Registration for all purposes, and inquiring towards the close with a bland impartial air: "Would the Englishman's inherent objection "to being registered, docketed, and numbered prove fatal to such a "scheme?" That writer is evidently quite guiltless of any knowledge either of the greater "objection" felt by a large class of Englishwomen, or their far graver grounds for such objection. Neither can their grounds have any place in the minds of those ladies who write to the papers begging that they may be "called "up."

Our ears have been filled with praises of women's eagerness to be enlisted for War Work—an eagerness not confined (as many working women are apt to think) to the middle class. If the desire to do "war work" has carried thousands of educated women into hospitals and munition works, the same impulse, heightened in many cases by the lure of wages beyond their wildest dreams, has carried into such work so many domestic servants as to affect housekeeping all over the land. A natural impatience with their idleness is shown by those would-be war workers of training and capacity, who wait weary months after registering at Labour Exchanges; or who, after qualifying for farm work, learned of the difficulties encountered by the Agricultural Committees in getting farmers to give women a trial.

Conscription, it is urged, will automatically enlist these would-be helpers. Though unconscious of the bull perpetrated in the proposal to conscript volunteers, those who urge conscription have on their side the undoubted fact that a systematic organisation of women would reveal a new reservoir of national energy—available, however, in the highest measure only if the volunteers are selected and supervised by qualified women. Another argument in favour of conscription is that it would range women *officially* with the national forces, and thus bring women of necessity into a category less easy, some think, to ignore.

The delusion of hope cherished on this ground arises from the ever-present temptation of the more educated, more articulate woman, to consider herself as fitted to judge and to speak for her entire sex. She forgets that she represents a very small fraction of

womankind, and from the industrial employers' point of view, a wholly negligible fraction, *unless he can use her as a bait.* For what purpose? Solely to land the bigger fish: the women of the great working class.

It is well for us to know that the people most important to enlist (from the point of view of industry), those who know most about the matter as it affects the mass, regard the suggestion of conscripting women with a passionate aversion. Grave trouble is in store for those who, ignorant of, or heedless of this fact, or failing to apprehend its gravity, shall undertake the coercion of working women. No one who remembers the slow steps, the long and patient preparation by which conscription of men (for military purposes solely) was approached in this country, will deny that compulsion is inconvenient enough when employed by men upon their own sex. Few, if any, men have the least idea of the bitterness that would be engendered and the troubles that would arise upon an attempt on the part of men to force conscription upon the other sex. This is no impeachment of the loyalty of British women, or the good intentions of British men. It is a restatement of the axiom that you cannot safely legislate for people whose conditions you don't know.

There has for some time, now, been a disposition not only to praise women, but to get the most out of them. To treat them, therefore, reasonably well. The more significant, then, were those discussions in Parliament, which revealed amongst other facts, that not only was a great munitions firm altering the eight hour shift for girls to twelve hours, but had the audacity to ask Government sanction for the change. With what sorry confidence must employers trust to legislators' incapacity to represent the immediate interests of the girls, or the future interests of the race!

The *Times* quotes expert opinion as saying:

> "At the very lowest calculation there are over 100,000 women working on munitions of various kinds, who are not yet granted a living wage. Some of the trades in which the workers are subject to the leaving clauses of the Munitions Act, but have no order fixing their rates, are:—
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> "All electrical engineering trades, which include all telegraphic and cable accessories, electric light, dynamos, and motor work, Marconi work, brass foundries; bolt and nut and screw trades; rope and cable makers; saws and files; all rubber trades; soap and chemicals; the brick trade; and all work at the Potteries."

The debate in the House of Commons elicited the fact that

> "in a controlled firm in Southampton a Government award decreed that a woman of eighteen might begin at 2d. an hour, and if her work was satisfactory might, after a year, receive 2¾d. an hour, a problematic war bonus of 2s. being paid only on certain conditions.

> Owing to the Government award being in the ambiguous form of 'if the work is satisfactory,' it was at the discretion of the employer to withhold the extra farthings if he chose. In November last 120 girls applied for their leaving certificates, as Southampton is one of the six cities of England where the cost of living is highest. The Chairman of the Tribunal stopped the case until a settlement could be come to, but no award has been made yet, and the original scandalous rates continue. The foremen are Spaniards and Italians, who adopt a very harsh attitude towards the girls."

Dr. Tchaykovsky tells of women employed wholly or partially on Government work, who are paid for

> "*Safety Fuses.*—11s. a week, now raised to 13s. by arbitration.
> "*Linen Cloth.*—Government award of 2¾d. per hour to certain day workers.
> "*Electric Firm.*—Day rates commencing at 2d. an hour, rising after a year's satisfactory service to 2¾d. an hour.
> "*N.B.*—52 hours' week at 2d. an hour, 8s. 8d.; 52 hours' week at 3d. an hour, 13s.
> "The War Emergency Workers' National Committee reported that there are, 'notwithstanding all the Government's declarations, still thousands of adult women on Government orders, and many of them legally forbidden to leave their employment, earning less than 3d. an hour, or 15s. a week; the trade boards have not yet revised their scale of wages anything like in proportion to the rise in cost of living.'"

This in the face of the accepted fact, emphasised, as Dr. Tchaykovsky reminds us, in the *Times* of September 25th, that:

> "The provision of proper meals for the workers is an indispensable condition for the maintenance of output on which our fighting forces depend not only for victory but for their very lives."

Again reverting to our *Times*, we read on December 23rd, in relation to the Munitions Amendment Act of 1915, that

> "Section 7, *as most people know* [!], makes it impossible for any woman to leave work in a controlled establishment without a leaving certificate. If she does, no employer can give her work for six weeks. As leaving certificates are constantly refused to women on wages as low as 10s., their case is very hard if they have the offer of better work in their neighbourhood. They cannot afford to remain out of work for six weeks."

Apologists may urge that, however trying these conditions, they are purely temporary, a concomitant of war, destined to disappear with the coming of Peace.

To believe that is to be blind and deaf. If from this quarter and that comes praise of women's work, come whispers also of the fixed intention to keep these armies of docile workers at their post. If on fairer terms, who can believe that these fairer terms will

be accorded without a struggle, when the worker is no longer at a premium, and the work no longer held to be vital to the nation?

No special facilities are required to grasp the significance of such accounts (the Press has teemed with them) as that which appeared in the *Daily News* of November 15th last, under the heading *Women Shell Makers.*

> "The most noticeable feature of the armament works—by which I mean the great establishments normally engaged in producing weapons—in both of the districts with which I am now dealing, is the employment of women. In one they have been employed, to some extent, for years, but the number has now been greatly increased; as I mentioned above, there are some 6,000 of them.
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> "The manager, who is justly proud of his khaki feminine troop, and knows exactly what every girl is doing, showed me one who had increased [her output] from 30 to 130, another from 40 to 150, and so on.
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> "The automatic increase of output thus achieved by practice alone has an important bearing on the product of newly-organised resources, if it is allowed to operate freely, as it is with women. I saw a girl doing a particular operation on a lathe which had been previously worked by a skilled man; she was turning 150 per shift, against his 30. The champion of the factory is a girl who is machining the copper bands on shells; her 'record' is 1,014 in a ten-hour shift, or, say, 101 per hour. And each shell has to be lifted into position and lifted out again. The weight raised in an hour can be easily calculated. These are Scottish girls.
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> "All managers and foremen in these war workshops prefer women to men, not because they are 'cheaper'—for they are not, in the sense usually meant, and it would make no difference to the manager if they were—but because they do their best to help and put no artificial obstacles in the way of the highest results."

Mere unintelligence would expect employers to forgo, in the future and at other tasks, workers of this description.

A significant conversation took place not long ago between a woman merely "looking round" and the manager of one of the munition factories, he, full of those approvals to which working women are growing accustomed, showing with conscious pride the improved conditions and the generous manner in which the Welfare recommendations were being carried out. "I was opposed "to all this at first," be admitted. "And you are not now?" "Certainly not. *It pays.*" "How can it?" said the woman, thinking of the cost of building and furnishing a Rest Room, and improved conveniences of divers sorts—"how can all this pay "for so short a time?" "But it isn't for a short time," the manager said. "We see now that girls are all right." He told the sort of work which in peace time would supersede munition-making. It could all be done by girls. They learned new processes easily. And girls were so easily managed!

Where docility, unwatched, unfriended, may land women, we do not have to "wait and see." If we did, some light could be shed by the experienced head of a great Women's Employment concern. She was called on the other day by a lady gardener: "Why don't "you send me any more students?" "Not to be had. All making "munitions." But she held that, like Bopeep's sheep, they would "all come back." So many had been back already. Health temporarily broken down. "We must go and get well, and then, our "old work—please find us posts."

What of those girls who are not given their discharge in time?

These are not matters of which men can judge. They will be victimised by the plausible, and will not know how to distinguish.

But Docility will serve the hard taskmaster only so long as the docile-born are not fired and led by the freer spirits. British Docility will in time learn the Australian and New Zealand lesson.

Meanwhile, we must not lose sight of the fact that the war has not created, but merely accelerated the influx of women into industries formerly carried on solely by men. How little this is understood may be read in the trade union resolutions that leak into print, even in these congested days. Working men fear this flood of new labour. In this fear they take the sure way to render the new labour formidable by shutting it out of the great Unions, and leaving it no choice but to be cheap. They cannot yet see that the only formidable women-labour is the unorganised labour.

Men of the Amalgamated Society of Carpenters and Joiners, who, by a majority of 4,799, voted this January against the admission of women to their society, and the scores of similar resolutions by other bodies, leave out of sight the terrible [!] proficiency of the new woman worker, her growing popularity with employers, and the danger, if her organisation is discouraged, of employers forcing her into undercutting men after the war.

Those working men are, indeed, innocent who think that all the agreements ever made with employers or with Governments, (or made with however honest intention) to revert to pre-war conditions, will save the working man from bearing his part in the law of Progress. The stream does not flow back.

A wiser form of protest was registered at the 16th Annual Conference of the Labour Party, by that highly intelligent group, the Amalgamated Society of Engineers who recognise that, owing to industrial changes, it may not be practicable to secure in all cases absolute and literal restoration of every trade union custom. The Engineers are prepared to regard the restoration of any custom as a matter of negotiation, if good reason can be shown for regarding restoration as impossible on account of changes which must be in their nature permanent.

Of this nature is the participation by women in much of the work hitherto done solely by men. Men's unions should take action on the dangerous fact that women alone are as yet too underpaid, too untrained in corporate action, to safeguard themselves *and their brothers.*

For that is what it comes to! The results of this sort of industrial injustice cannot be segregated. They spread, they invade, they overwhelm. No one can plead for women without at the same time pleading for men. When men realise that injustice to women is a menace to men, they will look more carefully into it; or (taking the wiser way, which is also the shortest cut) they will ask qualified women to help them to prescribe for the common evil. When the fact has been fully grasped that women are in industry to stay, men will not only make the best of what they now, taking the short view, consider a bad job—they will, however unwillingly, be agents in making a good job of the co-operation of the sexes.

Though the war is not responsible for the widespread tendency of women to invade new fields, the war has enormously increased the part played by Parliamentary and other interference with the conditions of their industry. We do not for a moment say that such interference is consciously inhuman. Its inhuman results arise from the same cause as inspires the male trade union discrimination against women: Ignorance of what is at stake.

To consider this fact closely is to understand the intensity of the working women's aversion from the idea of conscription. In final summary, the danger they see in the proposal seems to arise from three quarters.

First, that same *docility of women.* A docility which under the infinitely less dangerous conditions of the past has been so traded upon.*

Second, *Lack of Organisation.* Unorganised women will be compelled to keep hours which have overtaxed the strongest men, and will submit to other conditions against which men have appealed to their powerful unions and been sustained in striking. Lacking a highly organised and well-financed trade union backing, women will find themselves defenceless. They will have to work under conditions laid down by male employers, and be refused discharge except under crushing penalty. Inevitably, the thinkers among working women are enemies of conscription by a power that will not act against the interests of the rich—a power that will not coerce brewers and distillers for the country's good—a power which (through ignorance

* In view of the new powers exercised by Parliament and delegated so lightly, see the *Woman's Trade Union Review,* July and October 16th, and debates in the House of Commons on Women in Munitions, March 28th, 29th, and 30th, and during April, 1916.

rather than ruthlessness) is ready to coerce the future mothers of the race to the undoing of the nation.

Third, and crowning objection to the conscription of woman: *Lack of direct representation.* Her hours, her pay, are bargained for between three bodies: Employer's Associations, Men's Unions, and the Board of Trade. In not one of these is there a woman, nor any representative chosen by women. If a measure of conscription is brought forward, and women resist it to the point of depriving the measure of usefulness, they will not do this either out of fractiousness, or lack of patriotism. They will adopt that course because there are long heads among their leaders; and those leaders know that so unavoidably pernicious is the conscription of the unrepresented that its operation is indistinguishable from Slavery. The door above which that word is written opens upon Horror. Not to be set out in these pages are the grounded fears affecting the discrimination already threatened, as between men and women suffering from the same disease.

Let any legislator but take the trouble to sound these deeps, and he will not lightly advocate conscripting an unrepresented class *of the other sex.* For whatever may be said in favour of Democracy agreeing to conscript men who have a voice in the decision, there can be no palliation of the outrage of conscripting an entire sex which is forcibly prevented from having the smallest share in making so momentous a decision.

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