

WOMAN'S SUFFRAGE AND WOMEN'S WAGES.

I

IT is often said that women need votes in order to enable them to obtain better treatment in the labour market. It is even argued that by means of the franchise women would be in a position to increase their average wage, till it was equal to the average wage of men.

Thus, in a pamphlet published by the Forward Printing and Publishing Company ("The Case for Woman's Suffrage "by Thomas Johnston), it is stated that " economic power follows political power. That is to say, any class which is underpaid and oppressed requires to have political power - in this case the vote - before it has the remotest hope of becoming well paid and free."

This pamphlet is circulated broadcast as an inducement to women to support the " vote for women " agitation, and the same argument is employed by the suffragist agitators in their meetings or at street-corners. "Higher wages" is the promise held out to factory girls to induce them to listen to the oratory of the suffragist missionaries.

Yet, as a fact, wages are dependent on quite other considerations than those of political status, and the vote has nothing to do) with the fluctuations of the labour market or the proportion which the working class is able to secure for themselves out of the profits of the employers,

1. Look in the first place at the labour market for men. Has the

vote enabled men to get all they want in the way of wages? We have only to study what is now taking place in the North of England, in Lancashire, and on the Tyne to realise that men, possessing the vote, have nevertheless been obliged to accept a reduction in wages, because the economic conditions - in other words, the relation of demand to supply - in the trades affected, no longer allowed the employers to pay wages at the same rate as heretofore

Or take the case of the sweated industries. In the pamphlet referred to above, it is suggested that if women had the vote they would be able to mend the evils of the sweating system. In the attic of a house off the Commercial Road is living at this moment a couple, a man and his wife, who work from early morning till late night attaching the soles of ladies' dress shoes to the uppers. Twenty years ago they could earn 60s. a week at the work; to-day they earn 14s. a week when there is work for them to do, but during the off season the man can do nothing and the woman goes out charring. The man has a vote. Why, if the vote could improve his wage, does he not use it for that purpose? This is not in isolated case. There are plenty like him, or even worse off. Does the possession of the vote help them? Agricultural labourers had the vote for nearly a quarter of a century, yet their average wage is still from 16s. to 19s. a week. In many parts of the country it is much lower. Yet these men have the vote. Why does it not improve their wages?

These are simple illustrations of the common mistake which connects the possession of the vote with the rate of wages; and it would be possible, of course, to give a great many more.

On the other hand, look at the striking rise in the average wage of domestic servants! The vote has clearly had nothing to do with it, for domestic servants have no votes.

2. No! - The improvement in wages since the passing of the Reform Bill has been due to quite other causes than the possession of the suffrage.

First and foremost among the causes which have on the whole tended to improve wages has been the education of the worker in methods of combination. **Trade-unionism, co-operative and other associations** have given the workers a strength, collectively, which they could never have had individually. It is true that the right to co-operation of this kind, the protection of co-operative funds, and so forth, have been won from Parliament, but these rights are equally available for women workers, who therefore cannot require the franchise to secure them.

Secondly, we must largely attribute the improved condition of the workers to the immense increase in the means of communication and transport. This has involved an increase in the **competitive demand for labour**, because the worker is no longer tied, by lack of means of getting about, to the place where he was born, or started work.

3. **As to the difference between the wages of men and women**, that, again, has nothing to do with the vote.

Some of the reasons which keep women's wages lower than men's wages are as follows:

(a) **Woman workers are not as a rule organised.** They do not belong to trade unions, and they lack the strength which only comes of combination.

(b) **Women are physically weaker** and, speaking generally, less effective as workers than men.

(c) Men as a rule depend entirely upon the wages received for the work which they perform, and they devote their whole energies to it. Therefore it tends to be necessary for employers to pay them a fair living wage. **Women**, on the other hand - or, at least, very

large numbers of them - **are partially supported by husbands, parents, or other individuals**, whilst a large proportion of them cannot devote their whole time to their work. The competition of these women tends to keep down the wages even of those who wish to support themselves entirely by their work and to give their whole time to it.

4. In those educated professions where the salaries of men and women are unequal, as in teaching and journalism, it must be remembered that the numerical excess of women on the one hand, and the greater number of skilled occupations of all sorts open to men as men, and always competing for their services, on the other, tend to raise the salaries of men and depress those of women. The steady progress of education, and growth of competence among women, will tend, one may hope, to diminish the inequality, but it can never wholly disappear, because it depends ultimately on the physical differences between the two sexes.

Lastly, the following may be suggested as some of the possible means of remedying what is wrong in the existing situation.

(1) **Combination**, in trades unions, or by whatever term combination may be known. By such organisation, women workers in the textile trades in the North of England have already secured fairer wages and conditions of labour. In the great Weavers' Union there are 65,000 women and 35,000 men. The women are paid at precisely the same standard rates as the men; but as they are not physically able to do the heavier kinds of work, their earnings are somewhat less.

(2) **The fixing of minimum rates of wages** in particular trades by properly established boards.

(3) **The increase of voluntary co-operative undertakings** on the part of the workers.

(4) **Emigration**, or the more even distribution of the female throughout the Empire. Women who are underpaid and overcrowded at home are often urgently wanted in the colonies and could at once secure, if willing workers, a happier and easier life there.

Summing up what has been said:

(1) **It is a fact** that while the men of the working class have no doubt been able to improve the Conditions of Labour (as to hours, safety sanitation, &c.), both for men and women, by the exercise of the vote, **wages have been determined**, not by the vote, but by **economic causes in the first place, and in the second, by combination among the workers.**

(2) **It is a fact** that women's wages rose between 1866 and 1891 by a greater percentage than the average wage of all employed.

(3) **It is a fact** that women have shared in the progress of the last sixty years, and that when they are still miserably paid the non-possession of the vote has nothing to do with it.

(4) **It is a fact that** whole classes of poorly-paid men workers have not succeeded in improving their wages, although they have long possessed the vote.

(5) **It is a fact** - of Nature - that women as producers of wealth are not equal to men; and the greater industrial efficiency of men, as compared with women, is a difficulty in the way of equal remuneration that no franchise could get rid of.

It is, therefore, NOT A FACT THAT THE POSSESSION OF THE VOTE WOULD ENABLE WOMEN TO OBTAIN THE - SAME WAGES AS MEN.

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