

FEMALE LABOR AROUSES HOSTILITY

Union Leader Asserts That Men Workers Regard Substitutions as Exploitation of the Weaker Sex, Unnecessary as Yet and Tending to Cause Industrial Unrest

By RICHARD BARRY.

A CONFLICT that was peacefully adjusting itself before the war has been churned into fresh fury. It is the ancient contest between male and female labor. Most often silent, it now threatens to become vitriolic. Many regard it as the powder magazine of the present labor world, one that an unforeseen match may explode into a national calamity.

Only those with an ear close to the ground hear the rumblings of the coming storm. The restraints of patriotic appeal have held in leash an ever-mounting resentment in the ranks of labor, organized and unorganized, and as yet this has found only a superficial expression. But there exist signposts which point the easy road to trouble.

Is it true that America, like Europe, is to have feminized industry? If so, will man resign his present place without a fight? If he does fight, what form will the contest take?

These and related questions were asked of James M. Lynch, a labor leader in close touch with all union ranks, at present a member of the New York State Industrial Commission.

"The problem is extremely grave," said he. "How grave it would be hard to say without being accused of being an alarmist. To make the case concrete and give you a graphic idea of what I mean, let me confine myself for the moment to one or two casual personal impressions. The other day, for instance, coming down on the train from Buffalo, I saw a section gang composed entirely of women in overalls. They were working, I was told, for a dollar and a half a day. Now, the basic pay rate for common labor for men in this State is 30 cents an hour, and there the women are working for less than 20 cents an hour, while the employment offices are filled with men unable to find work.

"Or take a big airplane factory up State, one that advertises each day for men and receives more than 500 applicants a day, from whom it seldom chooses more than fifty, and usually only twenty or thirty. It is choosing women wherever possible, at 20 cents an hour, when the least men will take is 30 cents. Let your mind dwell for a moment on the thoughts and feelings of those unsuccessful male applicants. How do they stand on the problem of women in industry? And if they are compelled to go long without work, while they see women being ever increasingly employed at half to two-thirds the wage accepted as a minimum for men, do you think it a healthy sign for the immediate future?

"Get down to our own city of New York. I have been paying my nickels for some time to women street car conductors. The Interborough, through its officials, have announced that they cannot get men and are compelled to employ women. However, there are two big employment offices, one in Brooklyn managed by the State, and one in Manhattan managed by the city. Both are constantly filled with male applicants for work, yet neither has ever received an application from the Interborough for men. How do you think a man will feel who, unable to find a job, boards a car and is obliged to hand his nickel to a woman? That is the problem in a nutshell. There is dynamite in it."

It must be recalled that the New York transit companies have announced a policy of paying their new women employes the same wages paid to men in similar jobs, but Mr. Lynch was firmly of the opinion that in most lines of industry the women substitutes were drawing lower pay than men in whose places they had been substituted.

"Do you believe that employers are

begging the issue when they assert there is a shortage of labor?" was asked.

"No. The war has undoubtedly made labor conditions chaotic. There undoubtedly have been shortages in certain places and in certain lines. But these chaotic conditions have been seized quickly and adroitly by employers to substitute women for men."

"Why?"

"Chiefly because they are economically defenseless, and therefore cheaper. Also they are easier to handle, in the beginning, for they are not organized like men. There is no use of mincing words on this subject. The thing amounts simply to one thing—the exploitation of women, without the least consideration either for the rights of labor, the rights of women, or the rights of society. It will antagonize and demoralize male labor, and it may even result in open revolt; it will defeminize women and render them unfit for anything but a second place in industry and eventually incompetent for that; more serious than either of these contingencies, it will sap the structure of society by rendering women unfit to be mothers."

"Even if all this proves to be true, will it not be stochically accepted as one of the unavoidable results of war?"

"No. Not when the facts are known. That may be true in Europe, but not in America. We are still suffering from both ignorance and hysteria concerning the war and what it demands. No genuine American desires anything but a vigorous and efficient prosecution of the war, so long as we are in it. But employers are taking advantage of the general public impression that, because of the draft and other war demands on the man power of the nation, women must be impressed into work formerly done by men. To be charitable, they are anticipating. We have not reached that point yet. We may never reach it, but the employers who are reaching out for women in this wholesale manner are taking no chances. Their advantage is at hand and they are using it."

"You say that the American problem is different from the European. How?"

"It is totally different from Continental Europe—France, for instance. In France for more than three years there has been a life and death struggle in which every available man has been rushed to the front. There was not the slightest doubt about the necessity for women's stepping into the men's places. In England the need was less striking, still imperative. Out of twenty million males, England has taken five million, or 25 per cent., for war purposes. Therefore, no one can doubt that there has been a genuine need for women in industry in England. But in the United States, as Secretary of Labor Wilson pointed out only a few days ago, there would be taken for war purposes during the first year of the war only 3 per cent. of the male strength of the nation, (or approximately 1,500,000 men,) and it is a curious fact that there has been

for years in this country an average, in season and out of season, of 3 per cent. of the male population out of work. In other words, the war so far has taken only a number of men equal to the number formerly out of work.

"Therefore, it seems to me that our problem is to put the unemployed men to work, not to seize the defenseless women, and impress them into industrial pursuits for which neither nature nor training has fitted them, thus demoralizing our entire labor and social structure."

"How is the trade union feeling on this matter?"

"Trade unions, as a rule, have always admitted women to their ranks. The



Photo by Campbell Studios.

James M. Lynch, Labor Leader and Industrial Commissioner, Who Contends That There Is Not Yet a Just Reason for Women to Take Men's Places in This Country.

union to which I belong, for instance, the Typographical, was the first to admit women and some of our best members are women. The men's attitude has always been one of protection, at once of their own rights and of the rights of women. We do not believe that women, as a general thing, ever desire or are fitted to do the work of men, but we recognize the exception to the rule, and provide for it. However, we do demand from women that they live up to the same requirements, as to apprenticeship and otherwise, as the men. We have never had any trouble with our woman members. They are loyal unionists, and you will find that they will stand with us in any contest that may arise from the indiscriminate employment of women."

"Will not the unions relax some of their stringent rules in the present emergency?"

"They already have, to a certain limited extent, and, as occasion requires, they will do so still more. They may, for instance, increase the number of apprentices allowed in certain trades, or lessen the time demanded for the serving of apprenticeships. All those adjustments are legitimate under war conditions. And undoubtedly women will come into the unions in larger numbers than they have previously."

"That is not the issue, which is not so serious for organized as for unorganized, or partially organized, labor. I cannot imagine that in a well-organized trade like the Typographical Union, any employer would undertake wholesale releasings of men and their substitution by women. It is in the partially or unorganized groups of labor, like the New York City street car conductors, that advantage is taken of the situation. If you will remember, at the time of our last street car strike here in New York, it was discovered that the motormen would not go out because they had some affiliation with the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers. Now the companies are employing women street car conductors, but have you heard of a motorwoman? And do you imagine that the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers would for a moment endure the training and employment of women to drive street cars in this city?"

"No, the menace is not directly on the trade unions, but indirectly. The unions

will wisely and patriotically conform to the requirements of war conditions, but they will never fail to respond sympathetically to any imposition generally on labor, whether it be organized or not.

"You may have noted this reaction of organized labor recently at the time of the deportations in Bisbee, Ariz. The employers alleged the sufferers were I. W. Ws. When an investigation revealed that they were not I. W. Ws., nor affiliated in any degree with the I. W. W., an instant protest arose from all the ranks of organized labor. A similar protest is likely to occur if the indiscriminate employment of women goes on as it has the last few months."

"Organized labor has a very close relation in feeling to all labor, and it regards an injustice on the unorganized ranks almost as jealously as it does on its own ranks. It is quite evident why this is so, for, in addition to the mere humanitarianism of the sympathy, an entirely selfish feeling enters into the calculation. A union man sees fellow laborers in an adjoining trade not so well protected by a powerful union as he is, perhaps, and so let out and supplanted by women workers. However sympathetic he may be, his first thought is bound to come: 'I may be the next.' And he casts about for some way to protest."

"But is that quite true? Are men being actually let out and supplanted by women?"

"There are a few instances, I believe, but it amounts to the same thing when you have male and female applicants for the same job, and the woman chosen over the man because she will work for a third or a half less. Laboring men are not so stupid that they do not see what this will mean eventually. It will mean that before long the men will be obliged to lower their wages to compete with the women. Then where will we be? The time will come when a man and his wife will be laboring side by side, both together earning only as much as the man now earns alone."

"In certain parts of the South today, in the textile industry, you will find whole families working in factories, side by side, mother, father, and children, and the entire family is able to earn only enough to support itself. The entire laboring community of America is headed in that direction unless a stop is put to the indiscriminate and unregulated employing of women in industry."

"Will not the recent order of the President creating a new bureau within the Department of Labor to handle all these problems either put a stop to this or else give it the fiat of the Government and so obviate any successful resistance?"

"The machinery to be created within the Labor Department will especially investigate all problems related to this one of the employment of women; it will sift rumors and false claims from the truth and act as a check on present tendencies. It will also place before the organized labor of the country the real facts of the situation as it is and seek and secure its co-operation in any measure that may be recommended."

"Will that not lead ultimately to the increasing employment of women in industry?"

"Very likely, and especially so if the war continues and two to five million men are employed in war purposes. Male labor will not oppose this if it be properly controlled and adjudicated. What it will oppose is the exploitation of women in industry to their own detriment as well as to the demoralization of male laborers. Practically all of this discrimination and unrest will automatically disappear when the principle of 'the same pay for the same job' is universally recognized and applied."