

Women and the Co-operative MovementTHE WOMEN'S GUILD AND CO-OPERATION

by

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The Co-operative Women's Guild originated in 1883 as the Women's League for the Spread of Co-operation. After a hesitant start, the Guild soon developed into a flourishing and well managed organisation. Its membership peaked in 1939 at over 87,000, but thereafter the trend was generally downward so that by 1981 the total had fallen to just below 14,000. Membership has suffered as the Guild has found it increasingly difficult to cope with the social and economic changes of the post-war years. The trend towards married women's employment has restricted attendance at afternoon meetings, while more home-centred family life has also undermined recruitment. Changes in the organisation of retail trade, and the reduction in the number of Co-operative Societies and shops have combined to weaken further the Guild's ability to recruit new members. Yet, as a glance at Guild Congress resolutions indicates, guildswomen have retained that sense of social commitment which characterised its founding members.

Aims - and Changes in them

The League's aims, which were published in the Co-operative News in May 1883, indicate

its close association with nineteenth century Co-operation.

1. To spread the advantages of Co-operation.
2. To stimulate among those who know its advantages a greater interest in the principles of Co-operation.
3. To stir up and keep alive in ourselves, in our neighbours, and especially in the rising generation, a more earnest appreciation of the value of Co-operation to ourselves, to our children, and to the nation.

The League was the brainchild of Mary Lawrenson, a school teacher from Woolwich in South-East London, and Alice Acland, the first editor of the "Women's Corner" in the Co-operative News. Mrs. Lawrenson saw the League as a consumers' organisation designed to ensure that the goods on sale in Co-operative stores were of good quality and competitively priced. She was also interested in developing small scale producers' Co-operatives, though this idea received little support from her fellow pioneers. Mrs. Acland's involvement with the League was also motivated by a strong commitment to the values of nineteenth century Co-operation, though from the first she placed much emphasis upon the wider social and intellectual benefit which women would derive from collective association. From an initial preoccupation with home management and Co-operative shopping, the League, which in 1884 changed its name to the Women's Co-operative Guild, became increasingly concerned in the 1890s with a broad range of economic, social and political issues, from the remuneration and conditions of work of Co-operative employees

to the operation of the Poor Law. Indeed by 1914 the Guild had moved from a small organisation, with parochial interests, to a highly effective and nationally respected voice in support of the interests of working class women.

The Role of Margaret Llewelyn Davies

The broadening of the Guild's policy concerns and its development as a reformist body may be attributed in large measure to Margaret Llewelyn Davies, its General Secretary from 1889-1921. Miss Llewelyn Davies was strongly influenced by her family background which was one of social commitment and attachment to the values of Christian Socialism. One practical manifestation of this was the Guild's support for the experimental Co-operative store in Sunderland which opened in 1902 with the specific aim of taking Co-operation to poor families. In addition to the normal retail activity, the store, helped by Guild members, was also designed to serve a social function similar to that of Toynbee Hall in London.

Apart from her idealism, Miss Llewelyn Davies was also a highly practical individual. One of her first tasks as General Secretary was to sub-divide the Guild organisation into sections and districts in order to cope with the administrative problems which arose from expanding membership. By the time of her retirement in 1921 Miss Llewelyn Davies had played the leading role in establishing the Guild's administrative framework and policy concerns which have endured to the present day. G.D.H. Cole was surely correct when he wrote in 1944 that: 'In terms of personal

quality and in disinterested idealism, Margaret Llewelyn Davies is, to my thinking, by far the greatest woman who has been actively identified with the British Co-operative Movement. From the moment when she assumed control of the affairs of the Co-operative Women's Guild it began to become a really powerful progressive force.'

The Aims of the Campaigns -

The Guild is perhaps best known for its campaign for improved state assistance for maternity and infant care. During the first two decades of the twentieth century the Guild's Central Committee orchestrated a variety of pressure group activities in support of maternity benefits and improved facilities for expectant mothers and infants. Similar issues have continued to absorb the Guild's attention for in recent times demands have been made for family allowances for the first child, improved school dental health services, rehabilitation for parents who illtreat their children, and unrestricted visiting of children in hospital. Yet the Guild's involvement and successes in this area of social welfare should not obscure its work in other fields, including divorce law reform, unemployment benefit, housing and the promotion of international peace and friendship.

The Guild's campaign strategy, particularly in relation to family welfare and the peace movement of the 1930s, has been characterised by imagination and determination, sometimes in the face of severe opposition from within the Co-operative movement and beyond. Indeed, in its early years the Guild encountered strong

anti-feminist resentment which threatened to restrict not only its policy initiatives but also its very existence. One of the Guild's greatest achievements in its formative years was to give many thousands of women the courage and, through its education programme, the ability to challenge male hegemony. The feminist movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was largely dominated by middle class organisations, but the Guild provided a genuine vehicle for personal development and expression of views of working class women.

- And the Style

The Guild's early campaign style was less colourful than that of the Women's Social and Political Union, but it was far more sophisticated and effective, and included lobbying MPs and Ministers, speaking at public gatherings and organising petitions. Guildswomen became involved in central and local administration, from election to town councils to membership of government standing committees. Perhaps the Guild's most original campaign tactic involved the collection and publication of their members' personal experiences. The publication in 1915 of Maternity: letter from Working Women created widespread public interest, both in Britain and abroad, and two editions were sold out within months of their appearance. The book presented a moving account of working class women exhausted by excessive toil and a succession of pregnancies, and remains to this day an impressive testimony of working class female resilience in the face of severe domestic exploitation.

The Future?

During the first one hundred years of its existence the Guild has pursued many radical and sometimes unpopular policies. Its campaign for a reform of the divorce laws resulted for a time in the loss of the Co-operative Union grant. One of the ironies of its present position is that the realisation of its principal welfare objectives has undermined its *raison d'etre*. The Guild flourished when the obstacles to female emancipation appeared most daunting. Yet it would be inappropriate for the Guild to wither away since there are many examples of sexual inequality of relevance to its traditions and interests. The Guild inspired the foundation in 1921 of the International Co-operative Women's Guild and there remain issues of world importance for guilds-women to debate. The Guild retains a special place within the Labour movement, but it must overcome the related problems of declining membership and inadequate funding before it can reassert its past authority. However, whether or not this is achieved should not detract from the Guild's place in history as a major force in support of a liberal and more enlightened society.

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