

# Organising Women in WWI

10:30-3:15 Saturday 21 March 2015

Bantock House Museum

Finchfield Road, Wolverhampton, WV3 9LQ



2015 is the centenary of the formation of the Women's Institute Movement in Britain and the publication of the Maternity Letters by the Women's Co-Operative Guild. This Conference commemorates these events by focusing on women who organised themselves and others during WW1. This Conference is organised by: The Midlands Region of the Women's History Network, The Legacies of War and Peace WWI Engagement Centre and sponsored by the Economic History Society. Fee £10 to include lunch. Bursaries for students and heritage workers- to book contact [j.lomas96@btinternet.com](mailto:j.lomas96@btinternet.com)



## 10:45 Welcome and Introduction to the Conference

11:00 'Striking Women': labour unrest amongst First World War female workers  
Chris Day and Vicky Iglkowski -The National Archives  
*Victoria.Iglkowski@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk*

On September 30th 1916 "between 2,000 and 3,000 of the women employees of the Lancaster National Projectile Factory struck work as a protest against the dismissal of a girl. The girl had been dismissed because of misbehaviour with a male employee, who, however, had been allowed to remain in the factory." The Ministry of Labour reported they "anticipate the possibility of further trouble" (The National Archives, MUN 2/27). There is a broadly accepted historical narrative surrounding the First World War that trade unions' and women's organisation activities subsided. But strikes solely by women workers are far from uncommon in Ministry of Munitions digests – posing a problem to the widely accepted narrative of women's labour in the First World War.

Using collections held at The National Archives this talk will utilise the records of the Ministry of Labour and Ministry of Munitions to explore the trajectory of women's strikes between 1915 and 1917. Despite the legislation under DORA in the First World War, trade unions did manage to agitate for strike action. However, National Archives records also document a significant number of intriguing, small scale, self-organised strikes by female workers over issues as diverse as pay disputes, the dislike of a foreman, the change of a tea time, or the wearing of trousers by women outside their work place.

In an apparently patriotic climate, what motivated women to strike? This paper will argue that women workers had an increased understanding of their labour rights, within the structures of arbitration tribunals and government announcements on equal pay. The paper will further ask what women gained by striking and how did these workers organise, across both small and large scale disputes? In the process exploring the realities of women's war time industrial action and the legitimacy of the government edict of 'equal pay for equal work'.

## 11:30 Demanding their place in the sun: women and trade unionism during the First World War in Britain

Dr Cathy Hunt - Coventry University - *bsx306@coventry.ac.uk*

The aims of this paper are twofold. First, it draws attention to the experiences of women trade union members in Britain during the First World War. Focusing on two general trade unions that invested considerable resources into wartime campaigns to recruit women from the munitions industries - the all-female National Federation of Women Workers and the mixed sex Workers' Union - it examines ways in which union organisation sought to impact on women workers' daily lives. As well as presenting an opportunity to cut through enduring myths about the excesses of women's wartime pay, the paper reminds us that there was no such thing as a typical trade unionist. It considers the varied makeup of a factory or local branch, which might include experienced activists from the shop floor as well as new and hesitant members seeking assurances that their subscriptions would bring them real gains within an organisation capable of obtaining lasting change in their workplaces.

Secondly, the paper considers the women whose job it was to encourage workers to join and remain in the union. It was a job demanding considerable skills not just of persuasion but of negotiation and endurance, dealing daily with paternalistic factory bosses, government officials seeking ways to keep labour costs down and with male craft workers fearful of a future that might allow women a permanent foothold in their industries. Women's stories are illustrated with biographical detail and this, as in the first part of the paper, points to diversity rather than uniformity by examining the

experiences and expectations of both paid and unpaid union officials. For some, the job represented continuity with work started long before the outbreak of war and for others the chance to leave behind the factory production line and engage in new work within the labour movement.

#### 12:00 Women's Agricultural Education and Research

Carrie de Silva Harper Adams University - [cdesilva@harper-adams.ac.uk](mailto:cdesilva@harper-adams.ac.uk)

This paper explores two themes of women's agricultural education during WWI. Firstly, the practical education of rural women in the Women's Institutes, the WI having had its British roots in the Agricultural Organisation Society and being under the administration and funding of the Board of Agriculture in its early years. Secondly, the education of women for independent employment through Agricultural College courses, which were considerably developed during WWI, closely aligned to the development of the Women's Land Army. Consideration will be given to whether the educational developments were the result of coherent policies answering national need, the sector's response to a growing wider movement for technical education and the education of women or were, rather, a function of the drive and ambition (whether personal or with a vision for the opportunities of others) of a small number of influential and energetic individuals. In order to address this, the role of key women in the development of the Women's Institute and the Women's Land Army in WWI including Dr Grace Hadow (1875-1940), Dame Meriel Talbot (1866-1956), Margaret 'Madge' Watt (1868-1948) and Lady Gertrude 'Trudi' Denman (1884-1954) will be considered.

#### 12:30 Lunch and chance to look around the Museum

#### 1:30 "Mothers first!" - the Women's Co-operative Guild and state maternity care, 1914 to 1918

Ruth Cohen - Independent researcher - [ruth.cohen@phonecoop.coop](mailto:ruth.cohen@phonecoop.coop)

The Women's Co-operative Guild (WCG) is most often remembered for its poignant collection of personal testimony, "*Maternity: letters from working women*", first published in 1915 and rediscovered in the 1970s. This paper is about its campaign for maternity care, for which the letters were originally collected, and which has received little attention in its own right.

The paper will introduce the WCG, by 1914 a unique national organisation with over 32,000 members, mostly married women from better off sections of the working class. Led by a dynamic General Secretary, middle class feminist and socialist Margaret Llewelyn Davies, it had a democratic decision-making structure, and campaigned locally and nationally on a whole range of issues affecting working class women.

After exploring why and how Margaret collected the maternity letters, and what we know about the women who wrote them, the paper will discuss their influence on proposals for state maternity services which she and a colleague drew up for the WCG in 1914. It will summarise the wartime campaign, focusing especially on national lobbying and publicity work by Margaret and other prominent Guildswomen. Allying with like-minded groups, they persuaded central government to promote maternity services. They also contributed to a shift in opinion about how to combat Britain's high level of infant mortality, a hot topic during the war: away from simply blaming poor mothers' inadequate baby care, and towards recognising the impact of poverty, insanitary housing and lack of access to medical and practical help.

In public and policy debates of the time, it was middle class women who often spoke on behalf of, or about, their working class sisters. The paper will also touch on the complexity of this issue in relation to Margaret's work in the WCG, and to her collection and use of the maternity letters.

**2:00 Miss Sophie Carey and the National Food Fund**

Dr Katherine Storr - Independent Scholar - [Katherine@stork.wanadoo.co.uk](mailto:Katherine@stork.wanadoo.co.uk)

Food is a weapon of war and in the First World War Britain was vulnerable due to its reliance on imports. It was recognised that there would be shortages and that some people, especially the poor, or those who suffered as a result of the war, might go hungry. The arrival of Belgian Refugees in early August made the situation urgent. The *National Food Fund* focussed on alleviating this particular distress. It was founded by Miss Sophie Carey, a member of the Women's Emergency Corps and daughter of a Lincolnshire vicar.

Funds for various causes proliferated. Goods-in-kind were collected and distributed as well as money. However, fund-raising created the possibility of dishonesty, theft and fraud so that official control was needed and resulted in the passing of the War Charities Act in August 1916. Whether Sophie Carey was guilty of malpractice is uncertain but the funds with which her name was associated were the subject of many enquiries and allegations. Miss Carey and two colleagues were pushed out of the Fund as early as the middle of October, going on to found, or support other war-related Funds. However the National Food Fund continued to work successfully to the end of the war. This paper examines these events in an attempt to uncover what was happening and why.

**2:30 The Soldiers' and Sailors' Families' Association, County Dublin Division, August–November 1914: a case study**

Dr Paul Huddie -Queens University,Belfas - [paulhuddie01@gmail.com](mailto:paulhuddie01@gmail.com)

Much has been written about the home front elements of the Great War since 2008, especially in Ireland. Such work has encompassed a large amount of research and focus on the organisation of people on the home front as part of the total war, especially the organisation of women. This has included the roles of women of all ages, religious denominations, political affiliations and classes from all parts of the island of Ireland in the foundation, staffing, organisation and funding of medical, clothing and good-will factories, depots, funds and organisations. However as in Britain, in spite of this advancement there still exists a substantial and indeed definitive lack of references to and analysis of servicemen's families and the charities which supported them. One such charity was the Soldiers' and Sailors' Families' Association and it is particularly worthy of note, at least in the context of this conference, due to the fact that from its foundation it was principally an organisation of women for women.

This paper will present the preliminary findings of a study of that philanthropic military charity in Ireland during the Great War. It aims to highlight the effects of mobilisation on the Dublin Division of the association and the city's military families, the problems which it caused and how the Dublin committee responded to the same. It is hoped that through this analysis of a particular Division of a particular District of a particular Branch of the SSFA that not only will a better understanding be formed of what was principally an organisation of women, but also of the broader association's inner workings and the people who composed it and the charity's response to the war as a whole.

**3:00 Brief Round—Up Discussion before Conference Ends at 3:15**