

MY FIRST STRIKE---1909.

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## 1909. MY FIRST STRIKE.

Looking back, I've often wondered if I was the youngest trade union representative ever. In 1909, at the age of 15 I began work in a North London printing firm, to work with other girls on envelope folding machines recently imported from Germany. They were so rapid that the firm's other employees had refused to transfer from machines they were used to.

They were scared, but we greenhorns knew nothing of this, and as work was so scarce we were only too glad to accept a job, especially when 'good prospects' were promised. We started at the magnificent sum of four shillings a week.

With a shilling rise on each birthday my wages had risen to six shillings when I was 17. Our request for further increases was refused three times, so we decided to strike, although we had no idea what this would mean.

When the firm's compositors heard what had happened they contacted their Union, asking for help to be sent to us, although we were not members of any trade union. Unaware of this we stood dejectedly outside the factory the next morning.

About nine o'clock a tall young woman turned the corner. She was Miss Mary Macarthur, who, we learned later had already done much for sweated women workers. We cheered up when she explained that she had come to help us, and listened attentively to her instructions, which, she promised, would mean a quick return to work.

Our firm were Government contractors, and if our conditions became known to the authorities, they would probably lose their orders.

She left us after promising to continue to help us behind the scenes, as she was in touch with our compositors by phone.

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1950. MY FIRST STRIKE.

During the day the firm's representative appeared three times, and tried to persuade us to return, but acting on Miss Macarthur's instructions, we refused to go in until an agreement had been drawn up to satisfy our demands.

On the last occasion he assured us that it was ready to be signed inside the factory, but on reaching our department we were ordered to start work at once. We refused, but had to wait several hours before the document arrived. Obviously it had not been ready. We had won the 50% increase in wages we had asked for, and a promise of consideration of all conditions in the future.

Naturally we were elated and started our machines immediately, although, by to-day's standards, our wages were still miserably low.

Mine had risen to nine shillings a week.

When we had fully recovered from the surprise of our success, we formed a branch of the National Federation of Women Workers, and I was elected to represent my colleagues. Our committee met regularly to discuss any complaints. As the youngest member I said little because I realised I had much to learn if I was to of real use to them.

A few months later I was invited to visit Lord Rothschild's estate at Wendover, near Tring in Hertfordshire, with about two hundred trade union representatives.

We were met at the station by the most heterogeneous assortment of vehicles I've ever seen, from small dog carts to hold a couple, to large brakes which could take twenty or more.

When we reached the magnificent gates we still had to go a long way through the beautiful park before we reached the huge marquee prepared for our reception.

1909. MY FIRST STRIKE.

Inside, long trestle tables were laden with a greater variety of delicious food than I had ever seen. I had never known what it was to have more food than I could eat.

The estate staff became waiters for the occasion, and made sure that we ate and drank our fill. What a feast it was.

During the afternoon we strolled around the delightful grounds, meeting trade union delegates from many trades, and I was the youngest.

All too soon the time came for our departure, and we boarded the vehicles to take us to the railway station, as the staff lined up to wave us goodbye, after one of the happiest days in my life.

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Unfortunately the firm never honoured their promise to improve our conditions, and it became necessary to remind them by drastic methods, when our requests were refused again and again

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I was so inspired by Miss Mary Macarthur that I followed her career closely. She was born in 1880, and became her father's bookkeeper in his Glasgow drapery establishment. She was interested in Trade Unions, but unsympathetic towards them until she went to a meeting to write a skit on the proceedings. She went to scoff, but was converted to the worker's cause. From then she devoted all her spare time to helping them, and then became a full time official. When I met her in 1911, she had already accomplished much.

Later that year she married Will Anderson, M.P. (Chairman of the Independent Labour Party), and continued her great work. Unfortunately they both died soon after the First World War, and the workers lost two great champions of their cause.

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Before George Woodcock (Vic Feather's predecessor) retired, he told me that it was highly probable that I was the youngest T.U. representative ever, although there are no official records.

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FROM PAPER BLANKETS TO CENTRAL HEATING.

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FROM PAPER BLANKETS TO CENTRAL HEATING.

Have you ever been so cold that you could not sleep? I have.

Just after the Boer War there was a long period of Unemployment, but there were no benefits available ~~xxxxxxxx~~. Parish Relief was only granted after everything possible had been sold or pawned.

For many years my father had no regular job, and relatives helped as much as possible, but as food became scarcer the blankets were pawned. It was summer then and we hoped to get them back for the winter, but we never did.

At that time there were hunger marches when the unemployed carried collecting boxes in which the general public were asked to drop contributions. They were usually led by a few men playing tin whistles, and a drum, making as much noise as possible to announce their coming.

The men were mostly from the building trade, and other labouring classes

As my father had been a 'white collar worker', he was not allowed to join them, nor did he wish to, because it would have reduced his chances of getting the type of work he was used to.

This increased his difficulties in another direction because, with no money coming in, his clothes grew shabbier and could not be replaced.

Conditions worsened as each winter approached, and as a result of undernourishment we felt the cold more and more. On my way to school each morning I went to the local church hall for a cup of black unpalatable cocoa and a thick slice of bread and margarine. After morning school I went there again for a bowl of soup and a chunk of bread. The unpleasant memory of that soup with thick fat floating around has remained with me ever since.

To save light and fuel we went to bed early but I could not sleep as I tossed and turned, trying to get warm. When Dad heard me sobbing he realised how cold I was, and put an old coat over me.

I woke later to find he had removed the coat, as he and mother needed it on their bed, and he was putting sheets of paper between my thin sheet and the threadbare quilt.

## FROM PAPER BLANKETS TO CENTRAL HEATING.

I tried to get to sleep but the crackling of the paper kept me awake. However I got used to it and felt the benefit the next night. These paper blankets cost nothing because we found them among waste everywhere.

I had been in the 'Scholarship' class for some time, and my teachers and I had high hopes that I would soon leave to attend the High School, but this became impossible because Dad could not sign the agreement for me to remain until I was sixteen. Instead I sat for the Labour Exam, which permitted me to leave at 13 and start work.

This was a terrible <sup>disappointment</sup> to Dad and me, because he had suffered similarly when he was 12, and his father was blinded at his work.

So I faced life without Paper Qualifications, and have suffered from Frustration on many occasions. I have had to accept lower paid posts, because it was naturally presumed that I had not the necessary ability for the higher paid positions. Nevertheless I have often taught others, who have then been promoted above me.

Bronchitis and other chest ailments were very prevalent then, and a popular remedy was a sheet of brown paper, smeared with tallow, worn next to the skin. It smelt horrible, but that was a mere detail. After it had served its purpose and eased the sufferer, it was not thrown away, but used as a firelighter, and very successfully too.

Sheets of paper also worn between thin petticoats and dresses, and under men's and boy's shirts, to keep out the biting wind, but as they tore easily often had to be replaced.

The stern necessity to practise strict economy in my early life taught me to make the most of my resources, and became second nature, so that I have always avoided waste.

Girls with whom I worked often thought that I was, in some way better off than they.

FROM PAPER BLANKETS TO CENTRAL HEATING.

Some of their families had been poor, but not so poor as mine.

They laughed at my 'hoarding', but the laugh was on me when I contrived another 'new' frock from two old ones, or covered an old hat with material I'd saved.

Over the years, at evening classes, I've learned many things which enabled me to save money. Now, in my Retirement, I'm able to budget to much better advantage than many O.A.P's.

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During the last war I was bombed three times, and after many years on Housing Lists (because I was a single woman) I was eventually offered a centrally heated flatlet. At first I was afraid that it would be too expensive, but thrifty habits developed from sheer necessity, made it possible for me to accept.

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Now, at 78 and registered partially-sighted I have my own room in a Home for Elderly Ladies. I also have Osteo-Arthritis which prevents me going out often, but I'm happy because I have many interests.

When I came here 2½ years ago from another part of London, I realised that I must make a new start, if I hoped to be happy.

So I joined the local Baptist Church. Now I'm conveyed to and from services by the friends I've made there.

I also enjoy my Radio and Library books.

In addition I'm able by knitting and needlework to help various charities, so I'm never idle, and am very happy.

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