

SPOKESMAN PAMPHLETS

No. 1	A Strategy for the Left	Laurie Aarons	5p
No. 2	The 'Cultural Revolution' in China	Isaac Deutscher	10p
No. 3	The Draft Programme	Communist Party of Australia	7½p
No. 4	Vietnam: Three Documents of the NLF	Gabriel Kolko	7½p
No. 5	Two Essays on Cambodia	Noam Chomsky	20p
No. 6	Bureaucracy and Technocracy in the Socialist Countries	Serge Mallet	10p
No. 7	The Crisis in the Czechoslovak Communist Party	Interview with Czech Communist	10p
No. 8	The Action Programme	Communist Party of Czechoslovakia	15p
No. 9	Oil, Oppression and Resistance in Iraq	Interview by Chris Farley	10p
No. 10	Socialism Lives in Czechoslovakia	Czech Socialist Movement	2½p
No. 11	Trade Unionists: We Can Defeat the Tory Bill!	Ken Coates, John Hughes, Stan Orme, M.P., Ernie Roberts, Tony Topham, Bob Wright,	5p
No. 12	War Crimes in Vietnam	Jean-Paul Sartre and Vladimir Dedijer	7½p
No. 13	The Struggle for Quebec	John Fekete Victor Rabinovitch Bonnie Campbell	30p
No. 14	Power and Humanism	Lucien Goldmann	15p
No. 15	The Students and the Revolution	Rudi Dutschke	5p
No. 16	Defend Democracy	Spokesman Editorial Board	5p
No. 17	Women's Liberation and the New Politics	Sheila Rowbotham	12p
No. 18	An Open Letter to the TUC	Bill Jones and others	2½p
No. 19	The Solution is Workers' Control	Ernie Roberts	5p
No. 20	Oil & Imperialism in East Asia	Malcolm Caldwell	27p
No. 21	The Myth of Motherhood	Lee Comer	8p
No. 22	Cambodia Today	Interview with Prince Sihanouk	10p
No. 23	Behind the Dole Queue	Trade Union Research Group	5p

A limited number of copies of back issues of THE SPOKESMAN and some numbers of the LONDON BULLETIN are still available at 40p a copy.

Obtainable from BRPF Publications, Bertrand Russell House, 45 Gamble Street, Forest Road West, Nottingham NG7 4ET

Womens' Liberation in Labour History

A Case Study from Nottingham

by Jo O'Brien



WOMENS' LIBERATION IN LABOUR HISTORY A Case Study from Nottingham

by Jo O'Brien

In this pamphlet we are discussing the economic, social and political roles of women and children in working class life in Nottingham and elsewhere in the nineteenth century.

There has been some recognition of the way in which women and children were integral to the proletariat, and that they suffered working conditions as appalling as those of men. But there has not been an attempt to follow this through to their participation in the area of class conflict. Historians, of course, are influenced by present day assumptions about women and children. They do not expect to find female participation and leadership in Labour History, so they do not find it. I am not claiming that women and children played exactly the same role as men in working class activity. That would be too simplistic. What I am suggesting is that the contradictions inside nineteenth century working class life were enormous. On the one level there was the predominant social philosophy of male dominance. On the other level, there was an economic situation in which all the members of the family were essential breadwinners, and all members of the family were directly involved in class exploitation and conflict in their daily work. In present day thinking about Labour History, these contradictions are ignored. Even taking into account the strength of male leadership in the nineteenth century, isn't it rather fantastical to imagine that when the whole of a class experienced the same embittering working conditions, only one third of that class (the male third) translated its frustrations into political activity and desire for change?

Published by The Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation,
Bertrand Russell House, Gamble Street, Forest Road West,
Nottingham NG7 4ET for *The Spokesman*.

Printed by The Russell Press Ltd., Nottingham. (TU) 1/72

We know of the major role of women in the Bread Riots that were scattered through the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century of Nottingham history. It is acceptable for women to act over food prices because this accords with the idea that they are, and always have been, domestic centred. We do not hear of the female trade unionists in that town, the women who formed the large Nottingham Female Political Union in 1838 to support Chartism and the numerous female political associations that were scattered all over the country at the time. Such activity does not agree with common assumptions about the a-political nature of women. The men, of course, were the accepted political leaders. How else could it be in our society. But there was a vital female participation in working class struggles that has been ignored because of the failure to recognise the contradictions that were basic to the lives of these people.

To begin with, the labour force of both the major industries of Nottingham, hosiery and lace, was not an adult male one. Every member of the working class family, regardless of age, would be employed in either one or the other. The man was not the family breadwinner. Each member would contribute financially, and each contribution was essential to keep the family from starvation. The roles of wife, husband and children inside the family must have been more complex than they are today, and there must have been a much stronger mutual understanding of the nature of their daily lives. If the dominance of the man was socially recognised, it certainly was not an economic fact.

In the lace industry most of the machines were worked in factories rather than houses. Basically, the men would work the machines, the women wound the thread, and the children threaded the machines. Mrs. Tonna, in her book, *The Wrongs of*

Women 1844, described the processes. "The work is carried on very frequently twenty out of twenty four hours . . . Two sets of men or lads are used in such cases, each party taking five to six hours at once, called a shift, and thus everyone has ten to twelve hours work per diem . . . Winding is done by young women, requires great care, and from the delicacy of the material used, and the continued fixing of the eyes on the metal to which it must be adjusted, the sight is strained, weakened and permanently injured." But employed also in the lace business were large numbers of women who worked in the warehouses, at lace dressing, mending and folding, and who at home worked at drawing, scalloping and embroidering the lace. The conditions of the children in the lace factories were savage; those of the women out-workers deplorable. They had to eat, they had to do it. Mrs. Tonna adds, "Running, hemming, pearling as well as mending are done by the needle and may be said to employ nearly the whole female population of the places where the business is carried on." The lace industry was centred in the actual town and drew many women from the surrounding areas, so that in 1841 there were 4,018 more women than men in Nottingham.

The second Report from the Children Employment Commission 1843 gives the following description of the daily life of a Mrs. Houghton, a Nottingham lace worker. "Mrs. Houghton is a lace drawer. She has four children, Harriet eight, Anne six, Mary four and Eliza two. She begins generally at six a.m. in the summer, seven in the winter; in the former she goes on till dark, in the latter till ten p.m. The two biggest children work with the witness these hours, Mary beginning at the same time in the morning, but she leaves off about eight p.m. . . . There is a mass of evidence all tending to prove that thirteen or fourteen hours is the ordinary work of these very young children . . .

Many mothers have told me that their hearts ache to send their children to work at such an early age, but they are compelled to do it to get bread for their families." When the Nottingham lace trade suffered a collapse in 1837, a relief fund had to support 22,000 people out of the 50,000 inhabitants, so dependent were Nottingham workers on lace. Even though the men worked the machines, they would actually be a very small proportion of the labour force, for the census of 1844 revealed that in all the branches of the lace industry in Great Britain there were 15,876 women over twenty, 6,040 girls under twenty, to compare with only 5,373 men and 1,082 boys.

In the main industry, hosiery, both men and women worked machines, and women and children were occupied in the essential tasks such as seaming and footing. The Report of the Frame Work Knitters Commission explains how essential the work of the wife and child was to the men who made drawers and shirts at home. They did the winding and stitching. If they had not done this he would have had to have paid someone else to do it before the finished article could be returned to the master hosier. In the case of shirts and drawers, then, the finished product was that of the whole family. If the women did not work in this way, and did not operate a machine, then they took in hosiery work such as seaming. Master hosier John Hayward described the employment of women in hosiery in the Nottingham area to the Commission in the following words "Many females are employed in the half hose branch seaming who are all of them wives of the workmen . . . The hours of work are from between six and seven in the morning till ten or eleven. The masters are very particular and the work is sent back if not well done."

The women and young people, of course,

frequently worked a machine and Hayward mentions "Many women and young persons work Messrs Brettles frames in the cotton works . . . There are many women working frames in Lambley . . . In Southwell and neighbourhood many women work on the frames. They are generally of the families of frame work knitters . . . In Alfreton nearly half the knitters frames are composed of women and young persons." Felkin, in his "History of the Machine Wrought Hosiery and Lace Manufacturers" describes visiting a female frame work knitter in Leicester in 1844. He "found a female at work between nine and ten at night; her husband and two journey men at work above her head up the step ladder over the kitchen place she was occupying. Her age she gave to be fifty three. She had the appearance of being seventy; there were bones, sinews and skin, but no appearance of flesh. She had been the mother of fifteen children, ten of whom, male and female, her husband and herself had bred up to be stockings. From sickness in a morning she could not work before her breakfast of tea, but laboured at night till ten o'clock and her clear earnings were about two and six pence weekly."

So, the economic organisation of the family was as follows: the husband was not the breadwinner, he was only one of the breadwinners. In the case of the lace workers, the man may have worked the machine, but his wife and children worked hours just as long as his, in conditions as arduous and for wages which were absolutely necessary to keep the family from starving. In the case of the drawer and shirt makers, the family was the actual productive unit, each member having a necessary function in relation to the finished article. Among the other framework knitters, the woman was as likely to work a machine as the man; the children worked the same hours as their parents, and again it was the collective financial contribution that kept the

family alive. The labour force in many major industries in England at the time was not predominately an adult male one. For instance, in the cotton industry in 1835, there were 50,675 men, 53,410 women, 53,843 youths, and 24,164 children. Not only were women and children integral to the proletariat — in times of male unemployment they were the proletariat.

We have established that women were integral to the proletariat. Now we must consider their role in relation to class conflict. We forget that women had the habit of organising. The Records of the Borough of Nottingham contain references such as this — “1801 Feb. 22nd. The articles of the Friendly Society of Females held at the house of John Seymour known by the sign of the Seven Stars in Cartergate is enrolled amongst the records of this Session Jan 14th 1813, establishing of the Female Friendly Society at the Black Horse, Story St.” We know that they were members of trades unions, for a report on the proceedings of the public meeting held on Monday 31st March 1834 in regard to a sentence of transportation passed on six members of trades unions at Dorchester, reads as follows: “Previous to the breaking up of the meeting a large body of female unionists, who had met in Nottingham that afternoon for the purpose of petitioning the Queen to intercede on behalf of the unfortunate men at Dorchester came out to the Forest and were greeted with three hearty cheers from their brethren in Union, with whom they afterwards walked in procession to the market place where after singing a portion of a hymn the whole assemblage quietly dispersed.” There was for a short time a lacemakers union and in 1840 four hundred female outworkers struck, but without success. The importance of women and children in the frame work knitting industry must have been understood by the men for in Feb

1843 at a meeting of frame work knitters delegates in Nottingham there was a proposal to begin a national union in which women and children were to be members. The women of Derby and Nottingham appear to have had a national reputation for militancy, for the Grand Lodge of Operative Bonnet Makers passed a resolution in 1834 on female workers which read as follows: “it is highly desirable that every effort should be made to induce them to follow the example already so nobly shown to their sex by the females of Derby, Nottingham and other places and that consequently we should offer them every encouragement and assistance to form themselves into lodges for the protection of their industry.”

But female militancy had long been a national situation. White, in the *History Gazeteer* 1832, says that 1819 “was a year of great national distress and disaffection. Reform meetings were held in all the principal towns and in Lancashire Female Reform Societies were formed.” The Chartists General Convention had a continuous correspondence from the Bath Female Political Union. The Convention sent out questionnaires to Chartists all over the country, asking among other things, about their political societies. These are some of the answers: “Bradford, a working mans association with 517 male members and 324 female members: Farfar, one male Political Union, one Female Political Union; Brechin, one male political union, one female.” In the journal *The Union*, 1842–1843, which contained a series of articles on women in the working class, we are given a proper understanding of the role of working women in class confrontation. On the strikes in Lancashire, Staffs and Yorkshire we read “It is a singular fact that women were, in many instances, the directors of the strike — women held their meetings, sent their delegates and drew up their terms — and women accompanied the turn outs in

immense numbers, in all their marchings and counter marchings throughout the manufacturing districts. Of the immense number of operatives which marched from Lancashire into Yorkshire, at the beginning of the strike, amounting to from fifteen to twenty thousand persons, a large proportion were women, mothers of families, who travelled on foot, many of them a distance of fifty miles, urging the men to perseverance in the wild work they had undertaken to do. At Halifax these women headed the mob, on some occasions seizing the soldiers bayonets and turning them aside with the words "We want not bayonets but bread." They shared in all the dangers of their male companions and seemed to be influenced by a far greater ferocity. An eye witness states that they manifested a "savageness" of language and demeanour on the occasion which till then he scarcely believed to have an existence in this Christian country. Another ominous feature of the late disturbances was the public meetings of female operatives at which the women proposed resolutions and made speeches, after the manner of their masculine co-labourers. One of these remarkable meetings of factory women was held at Macclesfield and was announced "in aid of our husbands, sons and brothers in their struggle to support their wages." The meeting was announced for six o'clock on Monday morning, and at the hour appointed an immense number of women had assembled. They were addressed by several female speakers as "sister operatives" and "sister slaves". The speaking was fierce though not more so than might have been expected from famished women; but there was also a truth and feeling in it." It has been suggested that the nature of working class agitation at certain periods in the Lancashire cotton industry was defined by the role of women and children in the labour force and in the family. But there has been a tendency to talk of the influence

of the role of women and children on working class agitation as if they were separate from this agitation.

Quite naturally it was the women who were involved in any confrontations related to the price of food. The *Nottingham Date Book* gives the example of September 11th 1812 "The disturbance began by several women in Turncalf Alley sticking a half penny loaf on the top of a fishing rod after having streaked it with red ochre and tied around it a shred of black cloth, emblematic, it was said of "bleeding famine decked in sackcloth." By the elevation of this and the aid of three hand bells, two carried by women and one by a boy, a considerable crowd of people, chiefly women, soon congregated together. The promiscuous assemblage first proceeded to the house at the same time extracting a promise that he would at once reduce the price of flour 6d per stone. The example was contagious. Mobs instantly set to work in every part of the town. One of the assailing divisions bore a woman in a chair who gave the word of command and was dignified with the title of "Lady Ludd". And when, in 1837 the lace trade was suffering one of many depressions, we are told "The workmen's wives and children congregated in the streets and levied contributions upon the provision shops to a considerable extent. The police had much trouble in restoring peace." This kind of action by women has long been recognised, but it does tend to emphasise the women as "home centred" or "family centred". I feel that if we are not satisfied with such a stereotype we can find as many examples of other kinds of action by them. In June 1779 there was fury in Nottingham over the failure of legislative interference on the condition of the frame work knitters. "The Market Place became the rallying place for the malcontents and at about ten at night their anger burst forth into open violence. The women and boys com-

menced the work by rushing up the numerous yards into Parliament St., where they broke every pane of glass in the house of Mr. James, an extensive hosier. From thence they went to the premises of another Mr. James, in Bearward Lane, and inflicted a similar act of vengeance." (*The Nottingham Date Book*). This open act of class resentment or defiance is echoed in an occurrence of October 1823. The Deputy Mayor of Nottingham read the Riot Act in an incident which appears to be centred around the withdrawal of two frames from a knitter by the owner of the frames. A waggon drawn by women accompanied the frames into Nottingham and both the frames and the waggon were decorated with paper potatoes, no doubt to symbolise the starvation that the withdrawal of the frames meant for the knitter and the general condition of the community.

It is in the Chartist period that we can most easily trace the political activity of working women. The Chartist newspaper the *Northern Star* contains in 1838 regular reports on female Radical Associations, political unions, a meeting of women in Birmingham convened by Thomas Clutton Salt to draw women into the Chartist movement "There could not have been less than twelve thousand women there." and a long letter originally published in Glasgow, June 1838 addressed to the women of Scotland by "a plain working woman, a weaver of Glasgow." who was "delighted to see the women of Glasgow and many other places taking up the cause of Radicalism and the cause of truth." Chartism provided a centre of organisation for the women of Nottingham and the *Nottingham Review*, October 20th 1838 reports the founding of the Nottingham Political Union. "A meeting of females pursuant to public notice was held on Monday evening last for the purpose of forming a political union of females to cooperate with the Birmingham Female Political

Union and to aid their husbands, brothers etc. in their present arduous struggle to establish the Peoples Charter. Mrs. Butler having been called to the chair, the following resolutions were passed.

1. That it is the opinion of this meeting that representation ought to be coextensive with taxation and that all consumers and producers in this country, are tax payers so they ought all to be represented.
2. That the Peoples Charter contains principles well adapted to the sentiments of the first resolution and that this meeting do now form itself into a female political union to aid in establishing the Peoples Charter.

The meeting was electrified by the able and energetic address of Mrs. Oakland."

Saint Monday, the practice of not working on Monday, but holding any political meeting on the day instead, was still observed in the major industries of Nottingham. That this meeting was held on Monday indicates that those attending would be working women.

The second meeting of the Female Political Union is reported as follows "the second meeting of this body was held in the Hope and Anchor.

Resolved:

That the distress of the working class as arising from the low price of labour and the high price of food is the result of an unjust system of legislation and that the best method to prevent its continuance is to give every man a voice in making the laws by which he is governed.

The meeting, which was crowded almost to suffocation, great numbers being unable to get

admittance, was addressed by some friends from the Working Mens Association."

At a Chartist meeting in Nottingham on November 5th 1838, there was a huge parade of four thousand people, led by the Female Political Union who had their own banner. The Union itself was led by Mary Ann Abbott, who appears throughout the Chartist period in news reports as the organiser of the Chartist Chapel Sunday School, and as fund raiser for the movement.

On December 8th 1838 the *Northern Star* printed a long letter to the Women of England from the Nottingham Female Political Union which bitterly talked of the millions of people "sickened and wearied of an existence embittered to the last moment by cruelty, misrule and oppression." They warned the working women of England against the treacherous middle classes who "must ever be considered in the light of false friends and of no moment whatsoever to the people." It was for the women, they said, to deal with the "shopocracy", withdrawing trade from those who were not "friendly to the cause of the people." Finally, they called on all women to be prepared for the "great and deadly struggle that must take place ere our tyrant oppressors yield to reason and justice. 'Tis better to die by the sword than by famine and we shall glory in seeing every working man of England selling his coat to buy sword or a rifle to be prepared for the event. Under these circumstances we again repeat, urge on your husbands, fathers, brothers, friends and neighbours and be prepared and ready for the conflict, urge upon them the necessity of calm reflection and duty to be sober, frugal, patriotic and to consider themselves bound by the sacred ties of Nature to protect and shield their wives and children from that system of cruelty and starvation now stalking through the land alike degrading the legislature

and the religion of the country. Trusting sisters and countrywomen that you will respond to us in your kindest and most patriotic sympathies and services in the cause of our common country in every legal manner possible.

We remain your dearest friends and sisters
The Nottingham Female Political Union

A people without a history is a dispossessed people. Do women know anything about their recent history? Are they aware that female hands ripped coal, dug roads, worked looms? That female will and courage helped to push the working class towards whatever decencies of life it has now? Women have no more sense of their own history than the American Negro had before the Black liberation movement challenged the lie of Negro non-history. And here is the really important parallel. The Negro sought his own history when he began to seek for his own present and his own future. Women are questioning the historical lie about themselves. It means that they want their own present and future too.