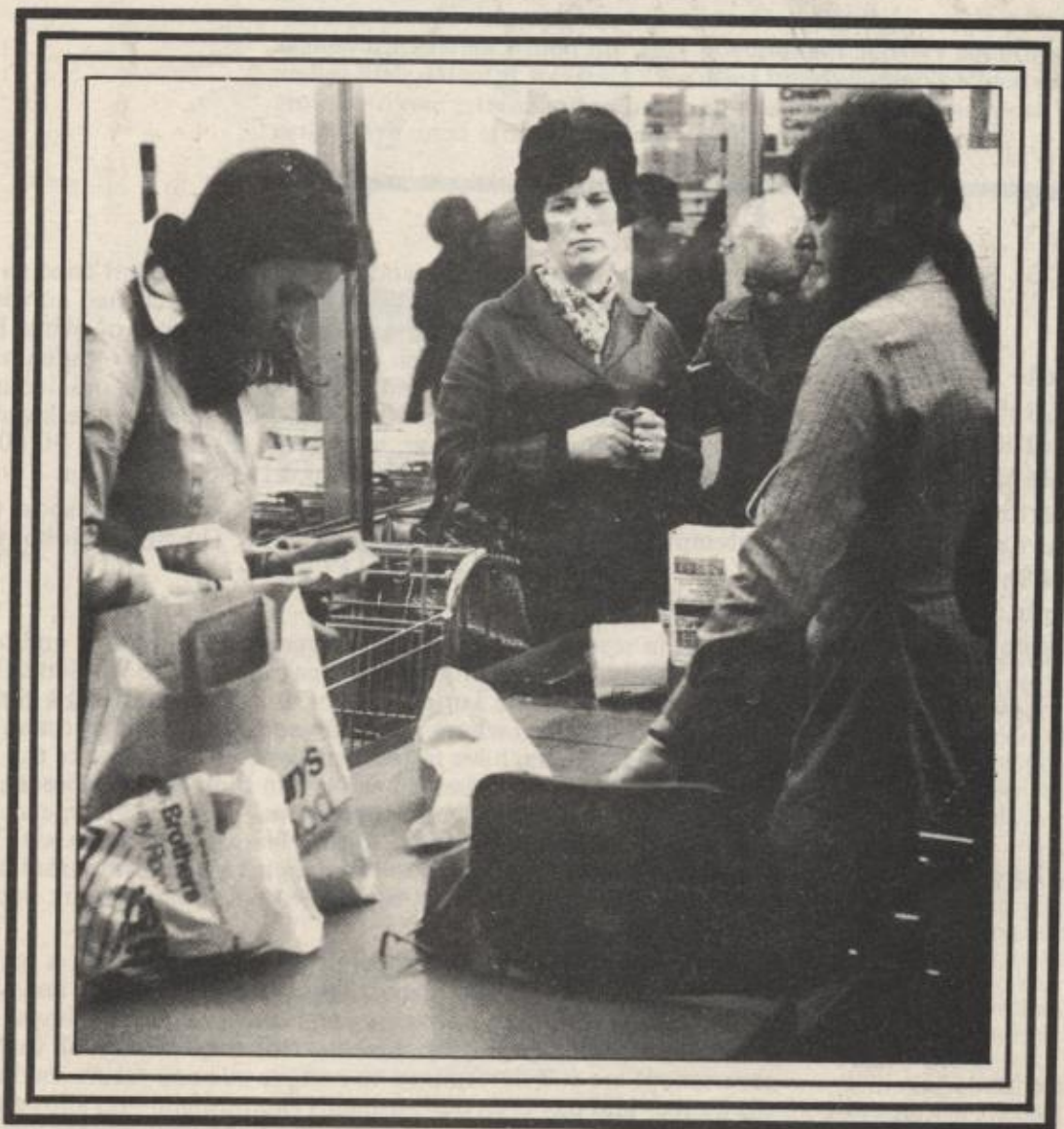


# Womens Voice



**'If it wasn't for the way rents  
and prices are shooting up,  
I wouldn't have to work  
in a dump like this!'**



**number 6 5p**

# Womens Voice 6

## Produced by International Socialist Women

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MAY/JUNE 1973

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### Editorial

The press, the television news and the Tory government tried to play down May Day—tried to tell us that most 'sensible' workers had no wish to demonstrate disgust for Tory attacks on our standard of living. But on Tuesday 1 May, millions of men, women and children—trade unionists, tenants, pensioners, students and school kids marched and demonstrated in towns and counties throughout Britain. London saw the biggest, most united march since the last war, with between 20,000 and 30,000 people. In Glasgow there were 12,000, Liverpool 15,000 and so on.

Workers from the Daily Mail machine chapel came out to show their contempt for their paper's Monday headline 'The Strike Nobody Wants'.

#### Women Speak Up

Speakers in several towns included women trade unionists and tenants leaders, and in Hemel Hempstead a speaker from the Women's Equal Rights Group stressed that the Tories' present policies are putting a great strain on women. In a situation where wages are controlled, and prices and rents are rising rapidly, women have to perform contortions to make the money spin out. They have to resist the demands from their kids for sweets, toys and extra pocket money to cover higher prices. They have to spend more time shopping in a desperate attempt to find 'bargains'. Women with babies are forced out to work, and have to leave their kids in often unsuitable conditions. At the same time they are denied equal pay at work because rises towards it are frozen.

Where a woman can't get out to work the only alternative is real poverty or more overtime by her husband. This leaves her isolated and alone at home with the problems of making ends meet, and with almost total responsibility for bringing up the kids. Not content with all this, the government are still determined to remove our one secure income—family allowance—and pay it to our husbands (no husband—no allowance!) Retire earlier—starve sooner. And for the final blow—just so that no group of women will feel left out, they've put forward new pension plans including the idea of granting one third less pension to women than to men. They claim that it is because we retire earlier and live longer. (If their plans go through it'll be a case of us starving earlier.)

It is not surprising then that more and more women are beginning to feel the need to join with others and fight back. It is obvious to us all that things will get worse and not better in the foreseeable future.

#### One Phase follows Another

We are now in Phase 2. Phase 3 is coming . . . When will these 'Phases' end? What we do know is that each Phase will get tougher as the government gets more confident about gaining control over workers' wage packets, while letting profits leap up with ever-increasing prices. Collective bargaining—a right that the working class has struggled for, and is essential for the protection of our living standards—could soon be a thing of the past, unless the working class—united—fights back.

#### EDITOR:

Barbara Kerr

#### Production:

Jacquy Hayman

#### Distribution:

Margaret Renn

## Women Must Play a Leading Role

As women, and half the working class, we must be involved in this fight, and not just verbally supporting men. It is said that Tories rely on women for a large part of their electoral support. If this is so, it **must not** come from working class women, because we must be even more active in the fight against the Tories (and the employers and big business men they represent) than they are in their attack on us. We must smash their 'Phases', by total non-co-operation. We must organise our fellow workers and housewives:—

—not to accept their wage controls but to take any necessary action for a decent living wage.

—not to pay their 'fair' rent, but to organise tenants to withhold their rent, or rent increase.

—not to accept rising prices, but to develop the fight into a political fight against the system which the Tory government actively supports and Labour makes little attempt to attack. We must build Women's Voice discussion groups on our estates and in our factories to discuss these ideas, and plan action. We must attack—we have no choice.

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# News

## Hospital Workers will fight on

This year is the 850th anniversary of Barts hospital, London. Hundreds of pounds are being spent on celebrations, one of the 'highlights' being a banquet at £10 a head. It isn't hard to guess how many ancillary workers will be there!

The real highlight of the year has been the first ancillary workers' strike ever in the hospital. Clarice has worked as a domestic there for 10 years. You might think she's luckier than many as she works only 40 hours a week. But this includes **every** weekend (there are no overtime rates for weekends), and a complete disruption of family life. For this she gets £14 odd take home pay (including the London allowance and 'bonus'). She reckons her rent has gone up from £4.85 to £7 in two years, and what with food prices and the bus fares rising madly as they are, 'after paying all the bills there's often not enough to pay the bus fare to work at the end of the week.' So the women here, like all those up and down the country who have been the backbone of the recent magnificent struggle against the government, have played a determined role in the strike.

The domestics were responsible for manning the pickets from 5.30 in the morning. 'There has been quite a bit of confusion though over the one-day strike (all trade unionists in London backing the hospital workers).

The men backed down and wanted to leave it to the women, as they felt it was more important for them to have the day's pay. We're all in this together. Women don't go out to work for fun. Many families can't make ends meet unless the woman works.'

A lot of confusion has arisen from the unions having no clear strategy for the strike. There was no attempt to link struggles in different hospitals, or pass on information so that one hospital didn't feel that it was fighting alone. On top of this there is discrimination in the unions. For example, with the GMWU, women get £4 strike pay, and men £6!

And in Barts, 60 women got no strike pay as they hadn't been in the union for 27 weeks (this has been fought successfully in other places by shop stewards).

The outcome of this round of the fight has been a step forward in equal pay. But the problem is basically one of **low pay**, or else equal pay is equal poverty. The strike has shown clearly the need for strong local organisations—the need for men and women to attend regularly their union branch to sort out these questions and many others—to build strong shop stewards committees, both within the hospital, and linking up with other hospitals to co-ordinate

Send  
contributions for  
Women's Voice  
to  
Barbara Kerr  
61 Tylney Croft,  
Harlow, Essex

activity for the second round of the fight against the government (as the All London Health Workers Action Committee is doing).

We feel we've made a start fighting for a decent wage. We've shown we're not going to take it. This is just the beginning... if we don't get anything in December there'll be a fight, and we've got to start preparing for that now.

## Hands off our Family Allowance

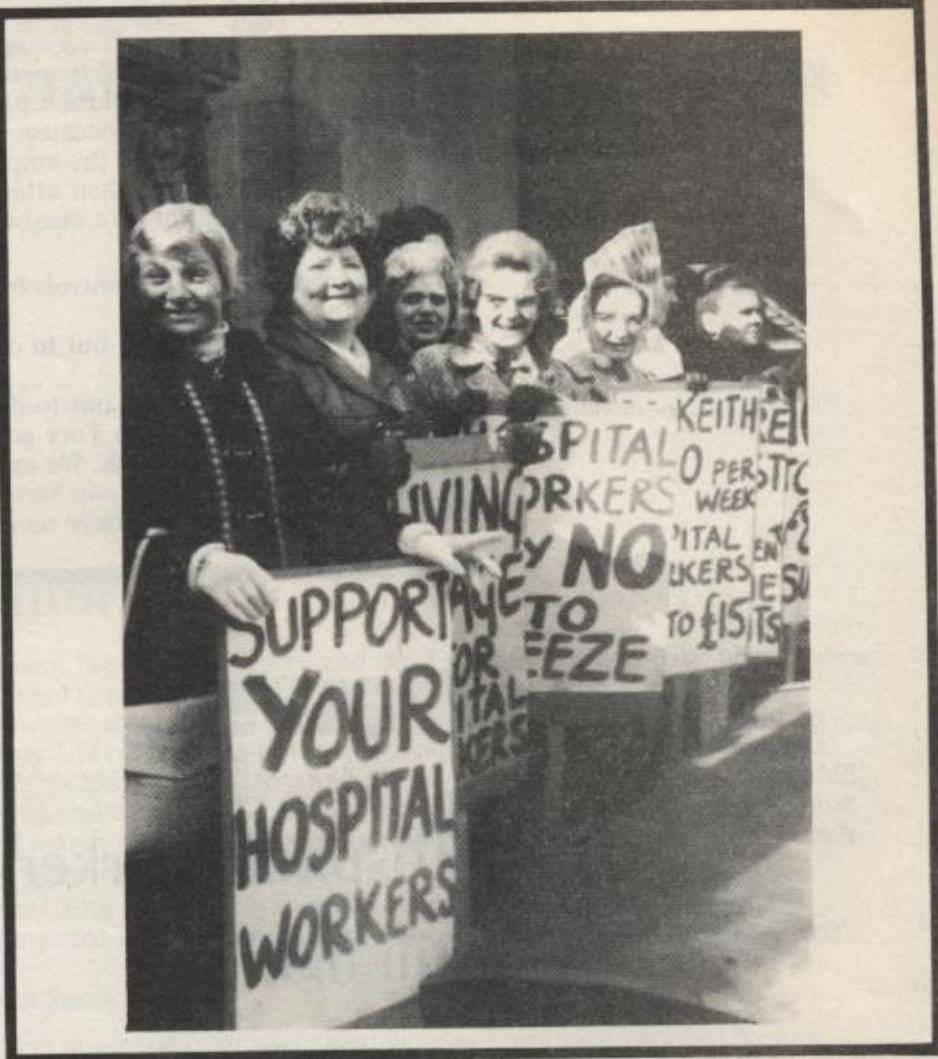
We have collected over 27,000 signatures in a petition calling for the retention of Family Allowances as a **statutory right payable directly to all women with children**. These were presented on 19 April to Paul Dean MP, deputising for Keith Joseph.

The campaign, organised by Councillor Theresa Stewart, Doris Fisher MP, Birmingham Women's Lib, and others, reached a climax on 27 March when we picketed the Post Offices collecting signatures from mothers going in to cash their Family Allowances. At least 10,000 signed that day.

We have also had great success in petitioning the market places, and through women's organisations.

Many people believe that Barber's budget statement means that we have won. This is not so. If he meant to retail family allowances as a universal, statutory right, why didn't he say so? Our campaign must continue until the government make a categorical and definite statement on the future of Family Allowances.

Why? Because under the tax credit scheme, not only is it proposed to put Family Allowances into the hands of the husband's pay packet, but also some 10 per cent of the adult population are excluded from the scheme, and thus deprived of their present statutory right. These people include some of the most needy, namely those earning under £8 a week, the self-employed, those on supplementary benefits and students. The new arrangements for these people as put forward in the Green Paper are not satisfactory. The Green Paper is a vicious attack on the living standards of the working class. Firstly, by putting child tax credits into the husband's pay packet the employers will have even more control over money coming into the average household. This is a direct threat to the only weapon of the working class—strike action. Secondly, the paper divides us into the deserving tax creditors



(working for an employer and earning more than £8 a week) and the non-deserving poor. This is the old trick of divide and rule. The abolition of Family Allowance is one of the cornerstones of the Green Paper. If we fight for its retention,

the other proposals in the paper may become so unworkable that the government may be forced to abandon the scheme altogether.

**HANDS OFF OUR FAMILY ALLOWANCE.**

## Nurses Begin to organise

The recent pay settlement for nurses of £1 plus 4 per cent was agreed after negotiating for a 40 per cent rise. However despite the fact that £1 plus 4 per cent of a nurses' wage is a miserable amount, the settlement was arrived at without any noise from the nurses apart from the occasional, traditional, dining room moans.

There are a few of us, however, who are not prepared to accept the pay and conditions, or the resulting degeneration of care in the Health Service. A meeting was called on 6 April, sponsored by the Kings College Hospital Action Group, to which about 40 nurses came from 12 different hospitals, plus a few representatives from community nurses. Out of this meeting was formed the Nurses Action Group, (NAG your way out of apathy, being the popular slogan.)

We discussed many aspects of our conditions and some of the contributing factors, such as the gross misappropriation of funds (you will recall the Roche millions), private practice abuses etc. The immediate aims were obvious—unionisation and growth of the group. With these ends in view we decided on local action meetings to be held in each of the 12 hospitals represented; a list of speakers, and a Newsletter. These local action meetings have now been held and we will be discussing the results, as well as trying to formulate a concrete programme of demands at our next meeting. We need money, articles for the newsletter, and nurses.

Any nurses interested to know more should contact the Nurses Action Group Secretary at, 333 Norwood Road, London SE24.

(Name withheld for avoidance of victimisation.)

# Women strike over equal pay

Another sign of the increasing militancy amongst women workers has been shown at the Stimur Printing Works strike in Paisley, Scotland. Workers at this factory have been on strike for the last four weeks over equal pay for women workers and full pay for all at 18. There are 100 SOGAT members in the factory, 25 of them women.

The trouble started when management tried to replace a screen cleaner with a boy at 30p an hour. This led to a realisation of just how the bosses use cheap labour. 'This applies to women as well as young workers' said a shop steward in the factory.

A wage claim of £1.50 for everyone to start from May, was placed before the management. They replied with an offer of £1.20 to start in October. This was rejected by the workers. Further consultation with the management led to an

## ANTICIPATE Equal Pay Day with VAUGHAN Automatic Assembly Machines

VAUGHAN ASSOCIATES LIMITED  
LONDON NOTTINGHAM SHREWSBURY  
SPECIALISTS IN ASSEMBLY, INSPECTION PRODUCTION AUTOMATION

3 April 1973 (*Financial Times*)

increase for the women of £1.50 to start in October, with £1 the following May and £1 in 1975 which will bring the women up to the lowest grade for men in the factory.

This must be seen as a partial victory for the women in Stimur. The fact that the factory has only been organised since last October shows what militant action can achieve in a short time and militant action will be called for by all women workers over the next two years over the question of equal pay.

Nancy Bain, Glasgow

More and more women are beginning to realise that to get equal pay they are going to have to organise like the Paisley women did.

Very few women fall into the category of doing the 'same or broadly similar work to a man employed in the same or an associated company' as laid down in the Equal Pay Act. And even these women will be denied a decent wage if the bosses get their own way.

The Engineering Employers Federation have issued a memo to all their members giving them a list of ideas on how to widen the already existing loop-holes in the Act. 'Fundamentally, the women's rate should become, at an agreed date, the minimum rate for each industry'. It goes on to say that 'it has been suggested seriously not cynically that in the event of proper provision not being made now to provide for an acceptable differential between the take-home pay of men and women the following discrimination factors are available...'

**1 Long service:** as most women give up work for at least a year when they have children and very few firms will guarantee to keep your job, we will lose out here. Also most 'women's jobs' are so rotten you couldn't stand the thought of 25 years in the same one anyway!

**2 Merit:** I've a good idea we won't be the ones deciding what this will be for.

**3 Attendance bonus:** Again most of us will lose out because we have to take the time off work when our kids are ill.

**4 Willingness to work overtime:** Even if it wasn't for the fact that most women have to rush off home to make the tea, no one should have to work overtime to get a decent wage.

And if these points aren't enough to stop us getting equal pay they come up with another bright idea—of stopping men and women doing the same job.

'Jobs should be changed now where areas of conflict are likely to arise, ie the lavatory cleaner. NB In this connection, it is suggested that if for any reason it should be impossible to designate this as a woman's job then outside contractors should be brought in...'

It is obvious from memos like this that the bosses are beginning to organise against our getting equal pay, which means that we will have to start now doing the ground work to make us better organised and to be even more determined than they are. We must start now to discuss in our union branches and trades councils how we are to fight for equal pay, getting commitments to action out of the meetings and not the usual fine speeches.

**WE WANT EQUAL PAY NOW.**

Margaret Falshaw

# Cowley Cleaners strike

British Leyland's Cowley Body Plant has its offices cleaned by 104 evening cleaners. Up until March this year they were employed by an outfit called London & Home Counties Cleaning, who paid them £8.20 a week for 20 hours. Seeing as the office cleaners at the next-door Assembly Plant get £14.30 for doing the same hours, the owner of London Home Counties must have been making a nice bit of profit off the sweat of the women—indeed during the dispute he unwisely allowed himself to be featured in the Sunday Express as a Businessman of the Week.

In February, the cleaners, who are 100 per cent TGWU, came out in support of a claim for £2 a week. The strike was immediately made official, and they received much more support from the staff-workers than in their dispute of two years ago. The staff refused, by and large, to empty their bins or sweep their floors, and soon the offices reeked of old milk cartons and mouldy orange peel. After about a month they were declared a health hazard.

Leyland didn't want the offices closed down and the contractor wouldn't pay more than the 83p per week that he'd offered (the limit under Phase Two), but his contract was up for renewal. The cleaners were in a strong position, and morale was kept up by the daily pickets which usually attracted at least 20 women, often more. But money was running short—the big TGWU manual workers' branch in the factory, which could have raised enough to keep the strikers on full pay, took ages to arrange a collection, by which

time the strike was over! So when Leyland offered the contract to another firm, the weekend the offices had to be closed under an order from the Public Health Inspector, the new contractor offered the women £45 ex gratia payment and slightly improved conditions if they went back, but still on the weekly rate London Home Counties had offered. This the women accepted, and the strike was over.

But the fight will go on, for the betterment of the everyday conditions of work. And there will be other battles over pay, because the women cleaners showed in their strike a level of determination and organisation which should act as an example to the so-called 'militant' workers in the factory, many of whom were surprised that women could take action of this sort at all!



**HARLOW WOMEN WORKER GROUP** shown at their Equal Pay stall on Saturday 5 May, where they collected signatures for an Equal Pay petition, and sold Women's Voice and Women Fight Back. Their stall is one part of the Women Worker Group's campaign for Equal Pay Now.

# GOODBYE TO COSTLY DOLLY BIRDS

'I should say that the five qualities I require in a personal and private secretary, in addition of course, to basic secretarial skills are:

*Fragrance* an unsavoury secretary would render my work quite impossible.

*Tidiness* I consider slovenliness to be a cardinal sin.

*Alacrity* a slow-witted woman is worse than one who chatters.

*Intelligence* this is of supreme importance.

*Speed* I always require everything done the day before yesterday.'

Sir Gerald Nabarro, MP.

All admirable qualities! But that aside—Nabarro's requirements are typical of what bosses want from the little women who takes the place of his wife in the office. And it is most unfortunate, but the majority of secretaries are quite prepared to succumb to these humiliating demands and to sacrifice their whole personalities to the degrading job of bolstering up the egos of their disgustingly small-minded bosses. To quote just one unfortunate lady whom I still can't decide whether to despise or pity: 'Every good secretary should be in love with her boss . . . If he comes in with a cold, close the office window and make him a hot drink. Sometimes he may forget to have lunch—remind him. Remind him of his wife's anniversary. Bake him a cake on his birthday and celebrate in the office.'

This quote comes from a new magazine called *Top Secretary*.

'But my dears, you've heard nothing yet! Your hands and brains aren't enough—they want your bodies too!'

To quote a psychologist writing in the same mag: 'Just as there are marriages which are successful and happy and not monogamous, so it's possible for the boss and his assistant to go to bed together affectionately, agreeably, without either their work or their respective marriages suffering.'

It's all very cosy and very nice—and the bosses love every minute of it. But unfortunately, time and capitalism stand still for no man, even the boss, and very soon the time-wasting luxuries of sex in the office, bed and boardroom, a bit behind the filing cabinet, will have to go.

Yes, ladies, you wouldn't be seen dead anywhere near the typing pool had better take stock—whilst you are stirring their tea for them and filing their dreary little memos, they are plotting behind your backs to eventually get rid of the lot of you. Just have a flip through the boss's files when he's having his three hour luncheon at the club. You may come across one of those glossy magazines they get sent regularly through the post. Look closer and you'll find yourself being discussed in no uncertain terms. For instance, in *Industry Week*, 13 February 1970 there is a little gem titled, Goodbye to costly dolly-birds, with the sub-heading, 'Decorative, delightful to have round the office. Costly—and growing more so. The shorthand-typist should be a vanishing species, supplanted by the audio-typing pool.' The delightful days of pottering about the office looking after the poor helpless boss are drawing to a close. Prepare yourselves for 'rationalisation'. If you've always thought yourself a cut above the factory worker you'd better get used to the idea of becoming a very small cog, working your guts out in a regimented typing pool. The pay may be a little higher, but the work you produce will make sure the bosses gain from the change. They say so themselves. 'It seems inevitable,' sobs *Industry Week*, 'that many more companies will have to make the transition to audio typing, both on cost grounds and to ensure that they can get the necessary burden of typing done. In the process they will have to provide relatively simple training to "convert" typists and executives to audio systems and they will probably have to offer inducements to their shorthand-typists to accept conversion. There is no particular difficulty about offering higher pay, because the rise in productivity from the switch to audio typing amply covers higher wages.'

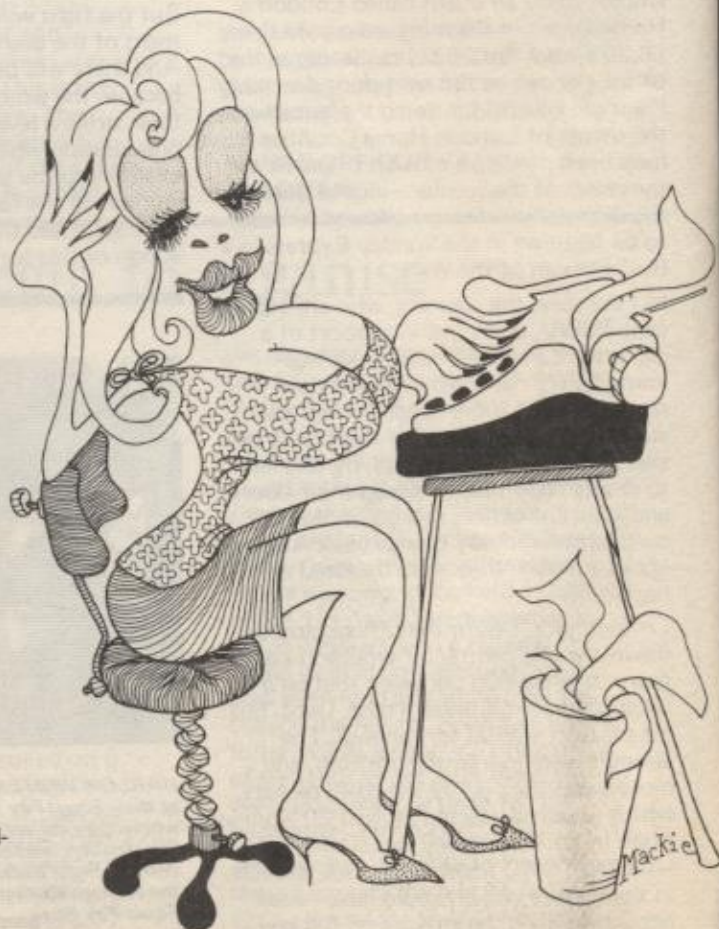
They go on to give a good example of how the sweat-shop

conditions are beneficial to profiteering.

'One department in 1965 employed six shorthand-typists to look after 21 executives. The average daily output of each girl was only 3000 words of typing. The department has since switched to audio typing and expanded greatly. Now 12 girls look after 96 staff, with an average typing output of around 6000 words a girl a day.'

There are hundreds of thousands of poor souls bashing away in typing pools all over the country—right now. I myself bear the scars of a whole six months in one of these cesspools of slavery, not to mention various temporary assignments. In case you are

## THE MYTH...



unaware of the abuse, the hypocrisy, the absolutely soul-destroying and humiliating position of working in one of these holes, let me enlighten you. You see, the secretary and the typist in the small office are also abused, but there may be certain compensations. At least you might believe you are of some importance—no matter how small. You may not be run off your feet all day. Perhaps you can nip out to the loo for a fag, chat to your mates for a few minutes now and then, perform a variety of duties that may help to break the monotony. The girl in the typing pool has none of these tiny but soul-saving concessions. Her day begins promptly, sometimes even clocking in. She takes her seat and begins to type. If she is a dictaphone typist she sticks two poles in her ears and tries to make out what the voice inside them is trying to tell her. After a few hours, the inevitable buzzing in the ears begins. She finishes one tape, takes it to a basket, signs her name in a book, puts down the length of the tape she has typed and takes another from a separate box. In this way the bosses know if she is doing her correct quota of work and if not, can take steps to ensure she does. All the while her actions are supervised by a female 'foreman' who sits like a teacher facing the rows of girls at their desks.

When the bosses write in their journals about making secretaries and typists redundant or turning them into typing machines, there is no mention of the word 'unions'. They have no fear of a backlash; there is no hint that perhaps the typists themselves do not wish to be made redundant. No sir—we've been subservient and obedient for 70 years and there's no reason to believe things will be any different now is there? Just as we stir their tea, type their letters, wear the clothes they like, even smell as they like, so when the time comes we shall humbly pick up our vanity cases and depart. Unfortunately, this is hardly an exaggeration. The top secretary abhors all contact with lower grades of clerical workers never mind the unions. The lower paid secretaries and shorthand typists are normally isolated within the firm and over the country in general that they too are conditioned into thinking that unionisation is not for them. But the 'lower orders' are ironically in a much better position to protect their own interests. Shorthand typists and dictaphone/copy typists who work together in large numbers are becoming increasingly aware that they are exploited. They have a chance to see themselves as a collective—they know they are not privileged. And like the men and women on the shop floor, pool typists must come to look upon the supervisor as a foreman whose job is to keep them under control. They must start to organise and elect their own representatives to speak for them. Isn't it about time we pushed aside all the submissive mumbo-jumbo surrounding women in the office and began to stick up for ourselves? How much longer are we going to pay lip service to these puffed-up bureaucrats? To quote one commentator on the delightful prospect of increased profits once we are all turned into audio typists—'Employers will at least be able to afford to give executives bigger and better carpets as prestige symbols.'

Kathy Simms

## & THE REALITY



# The Great Price Robbery

Kath Ennis

Over the past two years prices have been rocketing all over the world, but particularly in Britain. To buy the same amount of groceries today as you could buy with a five pound note in 1970 you need to spend £6.30. In November last year the picture was very grim indeed for housewives. But since the so-called prices freeze it has become a nightmare. From November to January alone the wholesale price of beef and lamb went up by 40 and 50pence in the pound. Food prices overall have been going up at an increasing rate every month. If they carry on at their present level then they will rise by as much this year as they did over the last two years put together.

The government has continually tried to blame rising prices on workers demanding higher wages. But the following facts clearly show that this is just not true—

From November to April we had a wages standstill yet prices soared sky high.

Although prices have risen more in Britain than in other European countries, wages have risen less.

Wage demands in this country built up to a peak only after the cost of living started shooting up.

What is it then that causes rising prices? Some of the reasons are very complicated. For instance, the American balance of payments deficit, (partly caused by the Vietnam War) and increased American spending on nuclear weapons have caused prices to increase all over the world.

Devaluation of the pound last June and again in February has also been important since it has meant a rise in the price of goods coming from abroad.

Other reasons for inflation are more straightforward. For instance, the Tories have put up council rents; rising interest rates have pushed up local authority rates and the cost of mortgages; VAT has meant a straight increase in the price of many essential goods—and firms and shopkeepers are using it as a general excuse to jack up prices.

The Common Agricultural Policy has meant that Britain has had to start switching to buying expensive European food instead of cheaper American and Commonwealth food. On top of this world shortages of beef, wheat and many other products have pushed up prices even further.

At first sight all these different causes of inflation appear to be unconnected. But in fact, although there are specific reasons for each one occurring at the present moment, a common threat runs through them all. Basically all these things happen because we live in a world where profit and not human need is the motor which drives the production of goods.

Let's take a look at each of the different factors in turn—

**The Common Market**—The reason the Tories have taken us into the Common Market is to try to increase the profits of British big business. Within the Market VAT is designed to make working people carry the burden of taxation and leave the rich to invest their money.

Similarly the Common Agricultural Policy is designed to help the big farmers make good profits. This is why prices in Europe are often kept at an artificially high level which most people

can hardly afford to pay. Over the past year for example, hundreds of thousands of tons of butter were bought up by the European Commission and put into storage to prevent the price of butter falling. Recently, to get rid of these stocks while still keeping the prices in Europe high, the Commission has sold two hundred thousand tons of butter to the Russians at the staggeringly low price of 8p a pound.

**Interest Rates**—Interest rates have shot up because the only way the building societies and finance houses can persuade the rich to invest more of their money—money which can then be lent out to people buying houses and to local authorities—is to offer them a fat profit for doing so.

**Devaluation**—The pound has been persistently devalued basically because over a long period of time British businessmen have not been able to make as large profits out of their workers as have European and American businessmen.

**World Shortages**—The most common reason we are given for world shortages of certain products is bad weather. But in fact

the main reason for shortages is that world production is not planned nationally to fit in with the needs of the world's people. Instead big businessmen in America, the Common Market, Russia and other countries all produce in competition with each other—all trying to make as large a profit as they can. As a result two thirds of the world's people never have enough to eat. And the rest of us just about manage to exist.

Another point that has to be made about world shortages is that they do not magically cause price rises all on their own. It is businessmen who put up prices. And they do so in order to keep their profits at their previous level, or in some cases even to increase them. We must not be conned by the Tories telling us that price rises are caused by 'greedy workers', world shortages or 'circumstances beyond their control'. The current spate of rising prices is a by-product of the problems British big businessmen are encountering in trying to increase their profits. Aided and abetted by the Tories, they are making the working class pay for these problems—by forcing us to take a cut in our standard of living.



# The fight against rising prices

Remember how we were all promised a wages, profits and prices freeze? Yet only wages have been frozen. The big business papers (like the Financial Times and the Economist) have been quite open about what's going on. They admit that the main aim behind the freeze is to hold down wages so that profits and investment can be increased. The rhetoric about prices control has only been put in to con us into thinking we're getting a fair deal.

Precisely because the freeze was designed to help big business increase its profits, the government has never taken the question of prices control very seriously. To do so would be to hit a blow at profits. Consequently, in the battle against rising prices women cannot expect any help from Heath or his cronies. In fact, despite the setting up of the Prices Commission, all the signs are that the number of price increases will be even greater under Phase 2 than they were under Phase 1.

Recently many housewives have taken direct action themselves. Up and down the country women have been out on the streets demonstrating against rising prices. And in some places they have also attempted to boycott beef and other products. The most spectacular example of housewives' power has been in America—a recent six day boycott of meat reduced sales in the shops by half but only succeeded in making New York's wholesale meat markets lay off half the workforce.

Unfortunately many women have only been thinking in terms of hitting the retailer. Now, while it is true that shopkeepers will use any excuse to jack up their prices, the main responsibility for increases rests with the manufacturers. This means that boycotts have to be aimed at the big firms.

Let's take a look at some of the problems involved in doing this. In the first place, to be effective a boycott has to be a national affair and it has to go on for a reasonable length of time. In America, for example, meat prices were hardly affected at all—because butchers and meat firms knew the boycott was lasting only six days. It is incredibly difficult for housewives to mobilise on this scale. At home we lack the advantages of national trade union organisation which enables women at work to fight effectively for higher wage increases. This, for instance, is why the biggest battles waged against the freeze by women have been on the wages front rather than on the prices front. (Women hospital workers, teachers, civil servants etc).

Secondly, when workers go on strike they can really hit profits because they stop production altogether. But housewives and their families cannot stop eating altogether. When we boycott one product we end up buying another as a substitute and so boost someone else's profits. With food production controlled by monopolies it is in fact no easy matter making sure that you're not just boycotting one of their products and unknowingly buying another one instead.

Thirdly, it is very difficult to secure permanent gains from a food boycott. Manufacturers can always lower prices during a boycott and then slowly sneak them up again afterwards. In comparison, employers have to carry on paying workers the wage increase won during a strike. Because these and many other problems arise with a boycott, militant housewives can be expected to look to the unions for support in the future. The TUC has already taken up the question of prices. Unfortunately all Feather and Co have done so far is to bring it up in talks with Heath over the summer. Talking to the government isn't going to solve anything—the Tories will not act on prices unless they are really forced to. Only massive housewives' demonstrations and boycotts backed up by large scale industrial action from the unions could bring about this situation.

In the present period we have to be realistic and face up to the fact that the prospects of this happening are very slim indeed. So far housewives' action against rising prices has only taken place on a small scale. This means that the main value of housewives' demonstrations in the weeks ahead is unlikely to be in their actually bringing down prices. However they have a very important role to play if their organisers use the opportunity to explain to women the causes of rising prices, and the real reasons for the freeze.

Meanwhile the most positive way for women to fight against higher prices will be to fight for higher wages at work. This is why the stand low-paid women workers have taken against the freeze is important. It is also one reason why women should be up in arms over the fact that the freeze has frozen equal pay.



# CAN YOU HELP ME MADAM?

In Erdington, North Birmingham, in the heart of a large industrial area a number of women have started up a Women's Voice readers' group, and at one of our first get-togethers we got round to the subject of escalating prices—what else? Most of us there were full-time workers as well as housewives, so we were soon discussing the problems of shopping and the various merits of the corner shops near home, the small shopping centres built into new estates and the main shopping areas. We left the meeting having decided to do our own survey comparing prices on a limited range of items in the main supermarket chains, and the independently owned stores.

Although on first impression it seemed that there was not much price variation we began to observe quite a lot once we had discussed it together. For instance—on just seven items (total bill approximately £1.50) there was a 20p range between the most and least expensive bills. And even then, if you wanted to get the cheapest in every item, you'd have to spend hours tramping round to half a dozen shops to get all the best bargains. We also noted things like no price labels on some items, different price labels on the same item, high prices for national brands whilst the shop's own brand was cheaper, and we compared our reactions to the obvious and not-so-obvious ways designed to make you spend more money. Self-service encourages you to pick up things you hadn't intended to get, as do the cut-price offers, the tempting things in racks at the cash desk, and the generally attractive display.

Not satisfied with this, we decided to look into the matter more thoroughly and report our investigations to Women's Voice so that other women would be aware of the vast empires that have been built up on a ten-minute visit to the grocery store.

## Food is Big Business

The fact that food is the one thing that we cannot really do without has not escaped the notice of profit-mongers anxious to invest their money in a stable market. It's one of the largest industries going—with one small disadvantage, that our appetites are limited and there is not much chance of profits based on expansion (except perhaps slimming foods!). And yet, while on one hand the manufacturers and retailers of food get ratty when they see other kinds of manufacturer managing to grab a bigger share of our wage packets, the food industry is booming and never more profitable than now.

*How is this?* One short answer (that most of us already know) is that they can pass any increases they have to bear straight on to us, whether it's SET, decimalisation, VAT, or rises in the prices of raw materials, and who are we to know if they made a bit extra on the side?

But more importantly in recent years food manufacturing and retailing has become more and more of a big company concern. The days of the friendly grocer who hands over the counter what you ask for, and advises you what is good value today, are GONE. Competition has become more and more intense because retailers can't make our appetites grow, so they can only expand by taking trade away from other traders.

The effects of this are felt by both shopworker and shoppers.

## You've forgotten your change, Madam!

Ever nearly walked out without collecting your change from one of those automatic change shutles at supermarket cash-desks? If you think about that and all the other things on your shopping trips that you haven't quite got used to, it may remind you of all the rapid changes that have taken place over the last few years. You could list them:—

Counter service... self service (now over 70 per cent of the grocery business)

Standard pricing of branded goods... wide variations in price (resale price maintenance by manufacturers of their products was banned in 1965)

Straight selling and straight advertising... highly competitive selling and 'below the line' promotions (free samples, price reductions, coupons, stamps etc)

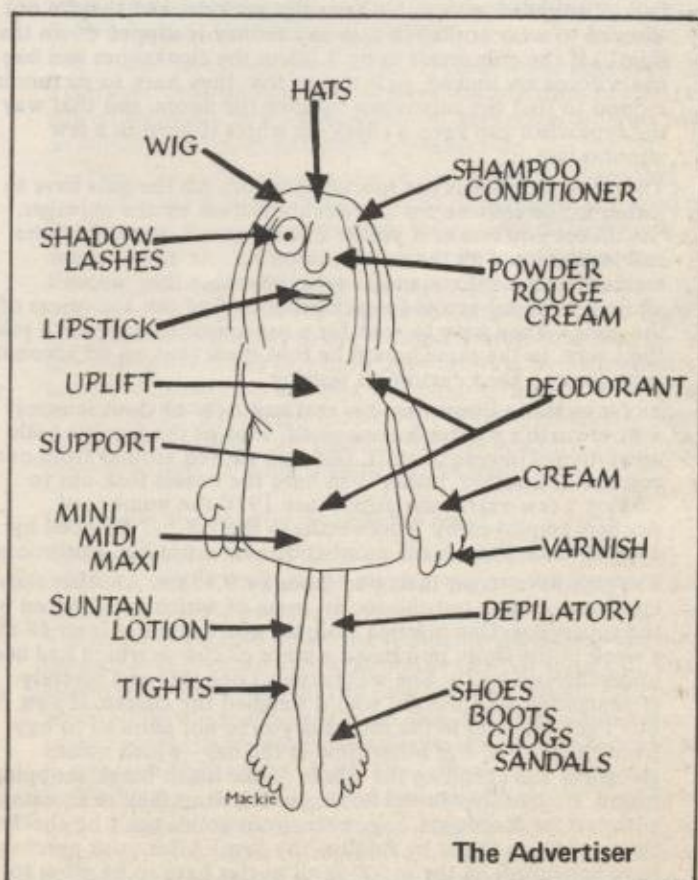
Local grocer or corner shop... local branch or big multiple like Tesco or Sainsbury (the multiples' share of the grocery trade has leapt from 25 per cent in 1960 to 45 per cent now)

Large numbers of small shops... small number of large shops (the total number of grocery stores fell by 20 per cent from 1961 to 1969)

These are things we have noticed if we've been on the shopping scene for long enough, and let's face it, in many ways, the changes are all for the better. But if you look further into the background, you begin to see the business rationale for them. You begin to see that behind all the fine words about 'more competitive prices', more choice through self-selection, more variety and better service in the larger supermarkets, is an underlying drive for survival through bigger profits, profits which we will be providing.

When we enter a supermarket we are instantly attacked from all sides by different methods of pressure selling from the 'charming' young lady who offers free samples to nibble or drink, to the piles of sweets by the cash desk that the kids pester us for while we queue up. The big companies can afford to employ research teams to work out how to make us buy what we can't afford, and could do without. How often do you come away from a supermarket with *more* in your bag than was on your shopping list? Firms like Tesco spend £900 million a year in this way, so it shows how much extra they are making from us with all their new persuasive techniques.

Sainsbury's annual report gives a very clear picture of some of the main trends. Like Tesco, the Board of Directors resembles a family reunion, with over £20 million worth of shares tucked under their belts. While the company does not use advertising or trading stamps, they are battling for a share of our trade by other means. Last year their profits increased 30 per cent over the year to £8 million, and this wasn't just through us deserting our former stores. They did it by vigorously 'weeding out' the uneconomic smaller stores, by closing them or selling them off, by opening up more and bigger 'one-stop' shopping supermarkets specially designed for the 'car-borne shopper'. They investigated more attractive forms of display and what products to put together on shelves to encourage us to buy more. They also managed to keep their wages bill down (a significant item for the retailer) through *cutting* the number of employees and pushing up productivity per employee, ie more work, fewer



The Advertiser

workers, and of course this is more possible to achieve in larger stores.

The development of Tesco from a one-man street marketing business in the 1920s to a multi-million pound empire is an even more glaring example of things to come. Tesco's main accomplishment over the past 10 to 15 years, apart from reaching the cool figure of £20 million profit last year, is in gobbling up smaller, rival chain stores (for example Victor Value). It can also claim to have introduced, or spearheaded the use of all the persuasive marketing techniques developed in the USA—trading stamps, product promotions, self-service display techniques, the introduction of non grocery items, (eg the highly profitable Home'n Wear in Tesco) and off-licences into supermarkets. So while we gain on the price cutting on many brands and the cheaper 'own-label' products in supermarket chains like Tesco, we come a cropper by our impulse purchases of magazines, sweets, clothes, toys or household items. Perhaps you think you're immune? Just look again at the profits of Tesco, Sainsbury etc and see how many of us aren't.



Hester Blewitt

# WORK AT WOOLWORTHS

While Barbara Hutton, the richest woman in the world, and principal shareholder of the American-controlled Woolworths Co, enjoys her millions, life on the shop floor for the girls who produce that wealth is a bit less luxurious.

The girls aren't allowed to have their bags or coats on them while they're working so that the company can rest assured that they're not fiddling them of a few pence. (The overalls they're supplied with don't have any pockets, and they're not allowed to wear boots, 'in case any money is slipped down the sides'.) If the girls aren't in by 9.00am the cloakroom and bag room doors are locked, so it means that they have to go running around to find the supervisor to open the doors, and that way the supervisor can keep a check on who's slipped in a few minutes late . . .

Thursday morning is the special occasion. All the girls have to gather in the canteen for the weekly lecture by the manager. 'He makes you feel as if you're still at school—standing there and laying down all the do's and don'ts.' At one of these regular teach-ins the manager told them that they weren't allowed to shout across to each other to find out the prices of the goods—they have to wait for a supervisor to happen to pass their way. In the same breath he told them that on no account were they to keep customers waiting . . .

As far as Marie Evans (not her real name for obvious reasons) a Woolworth's worker is concerned, a lot of the trouble boils down to a skimming of staff. Girls are shoved around from one counter to another, rather than have the bosses fork out to employ a few extra assistants (since 1970 the number of workers employed by Woolworths in the UK has dropped by 13,346—even though the number of new shops has mushroomed).

The girls have to get their purchases by 9.15am. Another assistant has to weigh out the goods, some of which are checked by the supervisor. One married woman, who spends at least £8-£9 a week in the shop, purchased a piece of cheese which had been undercharged by 1p. She was taken to one side and severely reprimanded with the girl who'd weighed the cheese. If you don't get the stuff in the morning you're not allowed to buy from the shop at any other time in the day—which means going out and spending the whole of the lunch break shopping round. If anyone is found buying in the shop they're threatened with instant dismissal . . . you see, your goods can't be checked then—and you might be fiddling the firm! After your purchases have been made in the morning all purses have to be given to the supervisor who bundles them into one bag. As one girl said

'The worse thing is them purses. You've got to lock them up—because you're frightened of losing them—but you've got to trust that supervisor at the same time. It's sickening the way they treat you like kids.'

Uniformed and plain-clothes store detectives prowl around. Many's the time a young kid's been hauled off to the cop-shop for being found with his hand in the sweets on the sweet counter. As Marie said, 'It makes your blood boil. There's that many people out of work—they just can't get the jobs—and these kids just don't have the kind of money to buy sweets or whatever.'

It's the assistants who often have to bear the brunt of the shoppers' disgust over the way prices of food etc, have shot up too. 'What with the rising prices many of the shop-girls have to put up with moans and groans of the customers. It's not that we don't agree with them, if it wasn't for the way rents and prices are shooting up, I wouldn't have to work in a dump like Woolie's, but with wages like ours you can't blame us for the way in which prices have shot up.' A lot of girls working there are forced to because of the high unemployment in Kirkby and they just can't get work on the factories in the industrial estate.

When Marie first started work there she found that some of the young girls didn't question their low wages. It's a job, and they just had no idea of what to expect. Now they've begun to realise how badly they're being paid by comparing their wages with those in the factories. At Krafts, for example, women day workers take home about £18-£19 a week. But the shop girls are still too scared to join the union (USDAW—the same union as the Kraft women belong to). They're frightened of getting the sack and know they can't get a job anywhere else. One girl mentioned it to an under-manager. 'He near shit himself, "Oh don't talk about unions in this place," he tried to fob her off with.' About a week later she was made supervisor . . .

As Marie said, 'The bosses aren't all that daft. Becoming a supervisor is a good way of trying to cream off potential "trouble-makers". Not only does it mean you're on about an extra £3 a week, but more importantly, you're kept separated from the rest of the girls, both in the sense that you're not tied down to any particular counter, and that you're put in the special position of being "responsible" to the company—walking round your little patch with keys to the tills, and always checking on the others.'

And for all that the women workers there have to put up with what do they get out of it? The amount paid out as wages to

the 80,876 workers in 1972 came to £46,509, which is an average weekly wage of £10 for a 45 hour working week. The older women get about £16 a week, and the 16-year-old girls get just over £6.50. The Saturday girls get £1 for the 8½ hours they work. Meanwhile the net profit of Woolworths last year, after tax, was a mere £23 million . . .

Many of the Kraft workers in Kirkby went down to the demo held by USDAW in London earlier this year. They came back disgusted with what they'd learnt from shop-workers on the march about the pathetic wages they take home. 'It's disgusting that the union lets the bosses get away with paying that kind of money,' was one woman's comment.

For a lot of women however the first step is actually *getting into* and taking part in the union. Most shop work is graded as woman's work, and the bosses rely on women not fighting for their rights to keep them in a slave-like condition. It's essential that the women join a union in their fight for better working conditions and higher wages. Without it they've got no means of defending themselves against victimisation, and through the union they'll be able to link up their struggle with the struggle of other shop-workers all over the country. The union will not do the job of fighting *for* us—but inside a union, pushing for united action, we can fight that much more effectively.

Judy Smith

# THE PROBLEMS OF SHOPWORKERS

Audrey Wise talks to Judith Condon

Audrey, during your nine years as USDAW branch secretary in Coventry, you must have learnt a lot about work in different kinds of shops—in small shops as well as supermarkets and department stores.

Of course you have to remember that even a big shop may only employ as many people as a small factory, and not many are unionised. There is an interesting point here. In 1966 we held a mass meeting on the question of late opening hours, and 500 women turned up. Of course, we expected to recruit to the union, but we found that everyone who joined worked in a small shop—even though our publicity had been aimed at Woolworths and so on. And members who stayed longest in the union tended to come from small shops.

This mystified me a long time until I went to work over a period as stock taker in Tescos. My work was akin to shelf filling, except that I had to empty each fixture to count each tin or packet.

What I found was that that sort of job takes on the worst features of factory work, but none of the good features of a shop. For instance, there is a rigid division of labour in supermarkets—either you fill shelves or you work on the till. Just filling shelves all day is soul-destroying. You open boxes, stamp prices on whatever's inside, lift them onto a trolley, and stack them on the shelves. You are what in a factory is called a 'materials handler'—in other words a labourer.

Your work load is all busy—whereas in a small shop you have slack times, and you can talk to the customer. On the other hand, if you worked in a factory, you'd probably be able to sit down, you'd be paid more, and you wouldn't have to work late hours and Saturdays.

And although big shops tend to have good toilet facilities, cheap cups of tea and so on—and some like Marks and Spencer are very paternalistic—still, you work in strange conditions. The stock room is usually dark and dingy, and yet when you go out into the store, you're hit by bright lights and soft music. That can be really disorienting, all day long.

**A lot of girls, when they leave school, would rather work in a shop than a factory, because they think it is cleaner, and shop work is one step up.**

Yes, I'll always remember a young girl in my branch who said she's always thought she wasn't clever enough to work in a shop, and so she'd gone to work in a factory when she'd left school. The boss tries to give you this idea of status to make you sell yourself cheap. And of course most young girls tend to think of their work as temporary, as filling in time. The boss uses this idea as a reason not to train them. On the other hand it's not entirely a one-sided thing. It means there is no tight link to any particular boss. Young girls in shop work don't feel much commitment to the firm. In Coventry a lot of women go back and forward between shop and factory.

**Isn't it true that in some shops, like shoe shops, you find young**

men and women doing exactly the same work, except that the men are called 'trainee managers' and get paid more. This will be one way for shops to avoid paying equal pay.

Still, managers themselves have quite a rough time, you know. That's partly why they can be like petty tyrants. Often the firm makes them personally responsible for every item of stock; sometimes they are bonded to the firm, and any losses are deducted from their salary. So a quick turnover of staff makes it difficult to keep track of every thing. Sometimes, the firm arranges insurance on managers and losses. If ever the insurance company has to pay up, it can arrange for the individual manager to be barred for life from the whole trade. This system is fading out now.

**What about the Union of Shop Distributive and Allied Workers itself? Did it change much during your nine years in Coventry?**

The biggest change was in the position with the co-op, although this started before 1960. Originally there were two shop workers' unions—the shop assistants' union mostly in private trade, and NUDAW, with compulsory membership in the co-op. They joined in 1947 to form USDAW.

The co-op was always very difficult, since it was supposed to be a workers' organisation. But workers' organisation or not, it is still an employer in a capitalist world, and co-op workers need an active union as much as other workers do.

You see, the closed shop in the co-op, whereby all workers automatically join the union, is not a closed shop enforced by the workers themselves. Through the co-op, USDAW has a captive membership—and it doesn't have to convince the members, or make them into active trades unionists. In fact, the system in this case worked for the employers, who were losing so much ground to big multiple stores. And a lot of genuine political workers have been taken in by feelings of loyalty, not wanting to 'hold the co-op to ransom'. The truth of the matter is, though, that it didn't do the co-op any good to be able to live off the backs of its own workers. All this has done is to make the management more inefficient.

**So what is the situation in USDAW now?**

Total membership is virtually unchanged, somewhere over 300,000, with tremendous turnover, up to a third every year. There was a big argument over registration as you may know. The union registered under the Industrial Relations Act, but deregistered in order not to get thrown out of the TUC. The closed shop system makes life easy for the officials. Of course, having union fees deducted from wage packets, could mean more time saved for discussion among the members and so on. But the officials take no lead. They refuse to organise on industrial lines with a proper shop steward system. Instead of organising section by section, and store by store, bettering bad conditions and wages by comparison with good ones elsewhere, the union tends to deal with things on a wide national level, over a whole trade, and in wages councils. So there is no leap-

frogging, and no bluffing the employers, who know that membership is low. Where there is strong local activity, the national agreements inhibit it. For instance, we got shoe shops in Coventry organised, but nothing was done elsewhere, so it made no difference to the national negotiations. There was no fight to join in, so our support dwindled away. But the only reason the union is badly organised in the ultimate is that workers don't join, and don't join in to change it. There is no short-cut to this.

**What about democracy inside the union? How difficult is it to get changes?**

Superficially, the union is democratic, and no more bureaucratic than most other unions. But there is one great flaw. In elections for officers, voting is done on a branch basis. The members present at the meeting cast the votes of the whole branch. For instance, the vote may be 18 to 20, and yet it goes down on record as a unanimous vote, say 5000 to 0. The biggest branches are the co-op branches, and yet these may have the smallest meetings, and very few members hear the discussion. Still, they easily outweigh the votes of a larger, better organised branch.

For example, in Birmingham there is a Lewis' branch of 300 members, and they can have a meeting of 100, casting 300 votes. Also in Birmingham there is a co-op branch of 5500 members, and all these votes may be cast by a meeting of about 20. In this way the minority is always understated, and its vote goes unrecorded. I've lost votes of 5000, just by losing on one. It makes people feel that there's nothing they can do. It's no good swelling the numbers at meetings, they think.

I'd been a member of USDAW a long time before I realised the full iniquity of this system. The large co-op branches with a less convinced membership, and smaller meetings, hold you back. And the hold of the right wing is made sure.

We need enough women workers all over the country turning out even to just the annual voting meeting, and then we could break this hold.

**Some women workers, confronted with similar difficulties, have formed breakaway unions in the past. What do you think of their attempts?**

I don't think they can possibly succeed. We have to tackle the employers as workers, not as separatists. On the other hand, I can sympathise completely with how they felt and why they wanted to do something for themselves. They were wrong for some of the right reasons, and this might even be a necessary stage to learn by. But bad unions have been changed. Look at the Transport and General Workers Union compared to how it was. And when the General and Municipal Workers didn't register, it proved the power of an organised militant section. In USDAW there is only one woman member on an executive council of sixteen. And there are no women national officers; only the research officer is a woman. And yet more than 50 per cent of the members are women. Most USDAW meetings are full of men, middle-aged men who are co-op or shoe shop managers. We need women and young girls to get in there at every level and fight for their demands.

**In your pamphlet you list and explain some of the demands that women should take up. But you don't really say how we are to organise for the fight.**

In the pamphlet I've tried to explain the issues, as well as reducing them to a simple slogan. Partly it depends on your union, but you have to fight at every level, in the shop or plant, on shop stewards committees, at your union branch, and on district committees. And some unions have women's conferences. Even just talking about things is doing something. Take my demand that overtime should be banned. Most women don't work overtime, so they may say 'How does this concern us'. But of course it does. Men and women both suffer from the disruptive effects of overtime. We have our own angle on these issues, our own critical point of view, and it's always this that we should press home. When I was first active in the union I was always reluctant to take up 'women's issues' because I didn't want to be dubbed as woman-politician. I wanted to be just an equal trades unionist. Consequently I tried

to keep clear of things that seemed to concern women alone, and tackle the 'heavy issues' even some men wouldn't take on. The women's movement has changed us all on things like this. Now we realise the worth of our special point of view, and the worth of not working overtime and nights.

I believe that women workers will find their own way to fight. I didn't want to just say 'This is the demand and this is the way to get it.'

**Of course the union officials will always say that women don't want to fight, especially the many women who work part-time.**

The union always uses excuses to cover its own failures. They say you can't recruit part-timers, but it isn't true. They use the myth that women work for pin money, or that part-timers need their wages less. In fact part-timers need their money more. Often they work part-time because they are old, or because they have heavy domestic commitments.

Of course, you can't expect part-timers to go ahead of full-timers on organising. In USDAW, no agreements even mentioned part-timers until the mid-sixties, when we in Coventry got a motion through conference to change the situation.

**Do you think there's any chance of a struggle being organised on the prices front?**

If so then it must be a completely political fight. Let me take an example. In the last issue of Women's Voice you had an article on prices. It ended up saying that we must demand more wage increases to keep pace with prices. The rest of the article was good, but this last piece was wrong. The capitalists will always pay for wage increases by putting up prices. This is not to say that wage demands cause prices to rise, though obviously the government try to turn housewives against trade unions, blaming the unions for high prices. What really happens is that the boss passes on the cost. He won't pay higher wages out of his own profit. His whole aim is to maintain and increase his profit.

So, if you demand price controls, you are really attacking the basis of the economic system, and you have to be honest about that. The system can't afford to be caught in a pincer movement between prices and wages struggle. A campaign to peg prices, in this sense, would be a campaign to stop the capitalist machine from running. It's no good pretending that under capitalism there is such a thing as a fair price, any more than a fair day's pay for a fair day's work. The fact is that the system is based on profit, and there is no such thing as a fair profit. Only under a socialist organisation of the economy could you really have price controls. So it's no good fighting this one from a defensive position—we're really attacking the whole system in a way that a wage demand on its own does not.

*Audrey Wise is also the prospective Labour Party candidate in Coventry and has recently written 'Women and the Struggle for Workers Control'. Spokesman Pamphlet No 33.*

## LET'S SHOP AT THE CO-OP

In 1855 it was said that the aim of Co-operative Societies was the 'emancipation of the working classes from poverty and degradation, by enabling them to reap the fruits of their own industry.'

These aims were not realised and today the Co-op works just like any other enterprise in our system—for profit. Your local Co-op seems just like Tescos or Marks and Spencers, if you work or shop there. Even the divi has been replaced by trading stamps which are just another trick to get us to buy more.

Surprising then that Co-ops are still run by their members in a seemingly democratic way. Anyone can be a member of the Co-op and attend its quarterly meetings, be involved in decision-making, electing directors, and accept or reject the directors' quarterly report. The truth is that to survive, the Co-op has to compete with other shops for customers, and has to use the same wholesalers. It is a good example of the impossibility of trying to make a socialist enterprise work within a capitalist

society—a society where profit making is the driving force, and not people's needs. The result is that all businesses, from the smallest shop to the largest industrial combine, are dragged into the same kind of cut-throat competition which means that the well-being of the worker and consumer is the last thing to be considered.

A Women's Voice reader in Leicester, with five children, works part-time at the local Co-op to help make ends meet. With her latest rise she gets £8.18 for 20 hours, having worked the necessary 12 months to qualify for the 'full' rate for the job. Strangely none of her workmates know exactly how much they earn each hour, and in the past no one has liked to ask. Our reader decided to find the shop steward to look into the matter—but he turned out to be the manager!

Working at the check-out she sees the hardships and frustrations caused by the so-called 'Freeze' which has let prices soar while wages are held back. This is one of the worst parts of the job. Some customers get angry with the girls when some prices are cheaper up the road, without realising that it is not the shop-

workers' fault. Shop assistants are hit just as hard by price rises. The Co-op does not even give a discount to its workers.

Nearly every customer talks about rising prices and how they don't know which way to turn to make ends meet. One customer told our reader 'these big companies and shop owners must think we're barmy—that would be the only reason to pay these prices.' Another, who worked out that some Co-op tomatoes cost 8p each, joked that who brought them should put them in a glass showcase in the front room!

Perhaps the worst part of the check-out is seeing the real hardship—like the old age pensioner who had to put cans and jars back on the shelves when she realised how much they had gone up in price. That week she went without.

Seeing how much price rises really hurt, this girl is doing something about it. She is making sure that every issue of the Women's Voice bulletin on her estate shows how price rises and rent rises are wage cuts, and attack the standard of living of us all.

Pat Kirkham

## MINER'S WIVES LEAD THE WAY

A miners' picket line is hardly the place you'd expect to find housewives, but that's where the women of Calverton, Notts, spent most of their time during the great miners' strike of January and February 1972. Many of the women who live in this little mining village are the daughters of miners and most are the wives of miners, so they know only too well what the miners' case is. And when the strike started in January, they were 100 per cent behind the men. But in Calverton the women were not content with just nodding their approval. At the invitation of the union branch secretary about 30 women set off in a bus provided by the union branch and joined in the picketing.

Thirty miners' wives on a picket made quite an impact. At Thoresby, north Notts HQ where office staff were still working, the women showed the men how picketing ought to be done. 'We talked to the girls and women as they went in, while the men just stood there. The men were pleased to see us on the picket and we were all behind them.'

Special meetings were called to involve all the women in the strike. At the first meeting there was such a good turn out that one miner remarked 'It looked as if the whole village was there.' Regular meetings kept the women in touch with what the union was doing and gave them a chance to organise their own action. Three weeks after the strike began a women's sub committee was set up which took over the hardship fund. 'We had money from the union branch and from the Miners' Welfare which we distributed to people who needed it. It went mostly on children's shoes and clothes. The union had nothing to do with it. We paid out the money where we thought best.'

Local shopkeepers soon had to face a battle with the women's committee. The morning after the first meeting a group of women set off to visit all the local shops and threatened a boycott if the traders would not co-operate. 'We went round the shops to get the prices down and most of them did. We said we would boycott them if they didn't. In the end it was to their advantage because when people heard what we'd done they came from all over to shop here.' Price cuts from the shops helped the miners' wives to make ends meet. Collective buying in bulk from warehouses were organised to help out, and from the beginning of the strike fish was brought from Grimsby at cost price and transported free of charge by special arrangement with the fishermen's union, and sold cheap at the pit canteen once a week. The Miners' Welfare also gave out food parcels once a week and in many cases made all the difference to the week's budget. Mrs Maughan, a surface worker's wife, said, 'I was brought up a miner's daughter and I can remember the '26 strike. I can remember going with my tin pot for food and my father cooking for us in the local chapel. We did well in this strike. It was well organised in the village.'

The fame of the Calverton women spread quickly to other mining areas and wives from every coal field wrote to find out how the women had organised themselves. Two women came up from Kent to see what had been done and a report appeared in a French workers' paper. The high spot for many of the women came with the miners' lobby of Parliament. Five coaches took about 200 wives from Calverton down to London and their banners were prominent as the only contingent of women. Mrs Maughan told how on the way through London the coaches got separated and only two arrived at first at the beginning of the march. 'We looked down and there was a copper standing

there and he said, there's a lot of you aren't there. Just then I saw one of the other coaches and then another and another and I waved to them. The policemen couldn't believe his eyes when he realised we were all together. There were miners from all over, from Wales, Scotland, Durham, Yorkshire, Kent and Nottingham, but we were the majority of the women.'

Since the strike the increase won has rapidly disappeared. Although the miners won a great victory and smashed through the Tory's pay norm of 7 per cent, miners' wives are finding themselves having to struggle even harder to make ends meet. 'It's gone already hasn't it, with the rent rise and the cost of food always going up. Every thing's going up. You get a pound of bacon and a pound of cheese and that's £1 gone already. And when the price of beef went up they put up the price of chicken because of the demand. With the rents going up as well, that's the increase gone completely.' Mrs Maughan remarked, 'They gave it to us and took it off us. People forget that a miner isn't like an ordinary factory worker. Sometimes he's working in 18 inches and he's working on his knees or crawling. And they have to walk a couple of miles bending down from the pit bottom to the coal face and that's before they even start work.'

Calverton women have learnt by the strike that it is not their place merely to sit at home and let the men get on with it. The wives of workers are just as much involved in the struggle for better wages and conditions as it is they who have to make the pay packet stretch to cover soaring food prices, rents and children's clothes. And it is not just in a strike situation that



women can fight for themselves. Before the strike there was no tradition of women acting together in Calverton, but now they are hoping to get the wives together again to discuss and plan action over issues which affect working class women today. Talking about the government's latest plans to include family allowances in the husband's pay packet, Mrs Eileen Russell said, 'You get a lot of men who would use it themselves—the wives would never see it. And what about women who are separated, it's hard enough to get maintenance out of the men, they'd never get family allowances as well. There ought to be allowances for the first child as well, the first one is always the most expensive.' Mrs Russell would like to see a campaign for pre-school nurseries in the village. The existing nursery system is inadequate especially for working mothers. 'If you are a working woman you have to start work before the nurseries are open and you don't get back in time to collect them. Children are off from school for 15 weeks a year and there ought to be

places for them to go.'

The women are still keenly interested in what goes on within the NUM (National Union of Mineworkers) and constantly pester their husbands for news of union meetings. Over the miners' latest pay claim they are again wholeheartedly behind them. 'They need that extra just to stand still, and it's not much the Coal Board's offering them. The last increase has gone already.'

In Calverton the women have learned by their experience of last year that they can play an active role in the miners' fight for better pay. By their courage and determination they have shown the way for other groups of women wherever workers are engaged in struggle.

Ailish D'Arcy

## Review:

# The Rights of Women

by Mary Wollstonecraft

Review of 'The Rights of Woman' (1792) by Mary Wollstonecraft  
'... the more equality there is established among men, the more virtue and happiness will reign in society.'

The Rights of Woman begins with Mary Wollstonecraft's ideas on what is wrong with society in 1792—when the book was first written and published. Her views on women's fight for freedom follow on from these general ideas.

At the end of the eighteenth century there was no women's movement to fight even for equality with men. But Mary Wollstonecraft set down her ideas, and got the book published. And at that time she suffered for publicly announcing that a woman could be in any way equal to a man.

'... women are not allowed to have sufficient strength of mind to acquire what really deserves the name of virtue' she wrote. Early on in the book she talks about 'sexual character' and how women are forced to lean on men. But men, she says, are often only 'overgrown children' and 'if the blind lead the blind, one need not come from heaven to tell us the consequences'.

At that time a woman was brought up and educated to rely on men, and not to think for herself. Mary Wollstonecraft says that instead of leading a fulfilling life a woman turns to romance: she dreams of what her husband **might** be and reads novels which describe an impossibly 'heroic' man, and a woman who will fall into his arms for his moral support. As early as the eighteenth century romantic novels, with artificial characters, often 'insipid' women, were very popular with female readers.

She admits that men are on the whole, physically stronger than women, but this is no reason to suppose that women are **naturally** weaker in mind. There is no cause to treat them as a 'half-being'. Men have praised delicate, gentle and passive women while a strong, healthy body was seen as a defect in a woman.

And yet, she goes on, men also put women on a pedestal and expect in their dreams anyway, a sort of angel. Mary Wollstonecraft asks, 'Why do men halt between two opinions and expect impossibilities? Why do they expect decency from a slave, goodness from a human being who has been made weak by her position in society. Men who pay respect to women are usually, she says, the ones who 'are most inclined to tyrannise over, and despise the very weakness they cherish'. This is a fragile but harsh and unjust **power** that women have over men. Women then are cunning to gain affection. But, writes Mary Wollstone-

craft, 'I do not wish them to have power over men; but over themselves.'

If women and men want to be free then one half of the human race must not be trampled by the other. Whatever freedom men acquire will be eaten away by this vicious and scheming creature, to satisfy her own whims and build up her flimsy power.

Liberty for all men, as well as women, is a theme that Mary Wollstonecraft mentions more than once, and this backs up her argument that women should be recognised as full human beings. She compares the freedom that women then had to the rights of the working class. In the 1790s the Revolution in France had frightened the government into bringing in laws against workmen's unions; parliament, she said, was a convenient tool for royalty who lived in great wealth and pomp while ordinary people had no political rights. Many could not earn a wage to feed their own children adequately. Women, too, she wrote lacked social and political equality.

It was essential, she thought, to educate women differently—but impossible until society itself was better organised. Women too were mainly responsible for bringing up children, for bringing them up in a reasonable way to prepare them for adult life—her job was to see that they grew up understanding justice and fairness. Mary Wollstonecraft points out '... how can a woman be **just** or **generous** when they are the slaves of injustice?'. And until husbands and wives become friends, not seeking power over each other, children will never be properly educated.

Mary Wollstonecraft earned her living mainly as a writer in London in the late eighteenth century. She lived at a time when great changes in political ideas were taking place; new ideas of democracy and social revolution were beginning to take root in a corrupt society, ruled by kings and their favourites. But in her book she hardly mentions the lives of workers in the countryside, and forced into the factories in the cities. She writes at length about wealthy upper-class ladies whose life is wasted in vanity but neglects to mention the poverty and hopelessness of working women.

One of the most important points she makes is that women's weaknesses in their character are not 'natural' but stem from schooling, and the attitudes of both men and women.

Mary Wollstonecraft was for her times, a remarkable and outstanding woman in her personal life. A violent, drunken father forced her family into poverty. Later on she lived through the Revolution in Paris and bore a child to the American she lived with. Once back in England she found it hard to care for the child on her own, at the same time heartbroken because the father took no further interest in either of them. She also went through social disgrace and contempt for her style of life and tried to commit suicide. But she battled on, went to Sweden and wrote about her travels. She finally died when giving birth to her second child, in 1797.

The rights of men were being fought for, revolution was in the air, Mary was unique in 1792 in extending these ideas to the rights of women.

Moira Garland



# LETTERS

## Organising

### Women's Voice groups

Dear Women's Voice,

I think that Women's Voice must get women involved with what's going on around them. I want to see Women's Voice discussion groups going round the country. Let's go to all the big conferences that women go to, to talk to them, to make them aware of their importance NOW in the country's affairs.

We have produced a leaflet in Burnley for women in the trade unions, saying what they should be fighting for:

**for the right to work  
for a decent living wage  
to show working people how they are  
being exploited, by the employers.**

The leaflet calls for a campaign centred around the following demands:

1. For Equal Pay, and against low pay, for a decent wage for our labour.
2. Against any kind of job evaluation scheme for these only divide the workers more to the advantage of the employer.
3. For equal opportunity for women—no discrimination in training opportunities and for more opportunities for women as well as men.
4. Against all redundancies—for the right to work of **all** workers.
5. For nurseries controlled and financed by local councils—to free women to participate more in their unions and stop being pushed about.

The leaflet ends by stating that 'We want to organise industrial groups of women to fight within our unions, to put pressure on the trade union officials for our demands. We need to form a network of groups and factory committees around the country and to get a bulletin going for exchange of ideas and experiences.'

I'm trying at the moment to organise a Women's Voice group here in Burnley. Yours fraternally, **Pat Sturdy, Burnley.**

**Note:** In the next issue of Women's Voice there will be an article by Pat Sturdy about her experiences of trying to start a separate women's union, and how she sees the way forward for women in the trade union movement.

Dear Women's Voice,

As a nurse I was interested in your article, 'Nurses Must Fight Back', in issue No 5 of Women's Voice, but was appalled to see that Herma D who wrote the article 'put down' nurses who do not put their names on protest letters. I noticed she did not have her full name on the article she wrote. Why? **Linda Stoddart, Glasgow.**

**Ed:**—Herma did not 'put down' the anonymous protest letter writers. She used them as an example of the kind of victimisation that takes place where nurses lack the strength of union organisation. She does not give her full name because she is in exactly that position herself.

## Exploiting animals

Dear Women's Voice,

I would like to correct a few misconceptions in the news item 'Let 'em eat beans' in Women's Voice No 5.

The article stated—'the fact is, there could be enough meat in the country for all of us to eat it every day.' There are two facts ignored in this statement. Firstly the demand seems to have been made because 'while the rich go on eating their roast beef' the working class should too. The rich also have a high incidence of coronary artery disease, one of the main causes of which is the consumption of too much animal fat. Is that what we want?

Secondly, it is true that there could be enough meat for us all, so long as the exploitation of animals is increased, and this is exactly what the bosses, in the shape of factory farmers, are doing their best to achieve. Mr Frank Paton, one of the biggest producers of veal calves in Britain, stated last year that when he used traditional farming methods his gross income was £4000 a year. Using intensive production, his veal units grossed £140,000 a year. He is fond of saying:

'Farming is about money production, not food production'. I think this defeats the argument that the farmers don't make enough profit out of meat, so not enough is produced. Meat prices have risen because higher prices can be obtained on the continent than the average wage-earner in Britain can afford.

As socialists, we must beware the trap of becoming 'flat-earthers', ignoring scientific progress, new levels of concern about the exploitation of animals, new evidence about the ill-effects of meat eating on our health, and clinging desperately to the habits of the ruling class, as the Victorian working class clung to Queen and Empire.

**Jo Woodward, Birmingham 13.**

## £3365m. on defence!

Dear Women's Voice,

It worried me somewhat to see such an obvious error as that on the British annual arms budget in Valerie Clark's article on population in Women's Voice No 5. I hope her grasp of population statistics is more realistic than her statement that the government spends '£200 million a year on defence'.

The British government does, of course, spend a hell of a lot more than that on so-called defence—in fact, nearly 17 times that amount is being spent this year. £3365 million to be precise: £523 million more than last year (which was £265 million more than the previous year.)

I appreciate, of course, the possibility that it was a printer's error. And in any case, I think Women's Voice is very good. Yours sincerely, **P Braithwaite, Birmingham 14.**

Dear Women's Voice,

Whoever provided the picture and caption which accompanied my article on the vaginal deodorant industry please note:

1. Both picture and caption were completely out of tone with the article.
2. Doctors are often full of unlikely suggestions about what people should and should not do. (How many people can afford in money or in time to have a bath every day anyway?) This was not the point. After all, the contraceptive pill causes thrush in some women, and baths hot or cold are no substitute for it! What we want is money spent on improving the pill, and not on devising poisonous cosmetics.

In any case anyone reading the whole page who thought that I was the one time vaginal deodorant victim of the caption, let me confess that I don't research what I write about all **that** deeply.

And sorry to disappoint you, all those who wrote fan letters, but the picture wasn't of me either! Yours fraternally, **Judith Condon, Coventry.**

**Production note:** Apologies Judith: sorry to have implicated you in caption and photo.

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