

# Industrial Relations and Social Security

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## Canadian Women in War Industry

By RENEE MORIN

THE war has revolutionized our way of living, and in Canada this applies especially when speaking of women. Whereas, at the outbreak of war, only 144,000 women were engaged in factories and industrial work, out of a total female population of 5,750,000, of whom 2,450,000 were between 18 and 45 years of age, approximately 255,000 are now engaged either directly or indirectly in war work—not counting those employed in non-essential industries. It is not surprising, therefore, to hear such phrases as “problems of women in industry” or to learn that the Dominion Government has seen fit to organize a special division in the National Selective Service to deal particularly with the welfare of workers with special attention to the adaptation of women to their new surroundings and responsibilities.

These women have either given up a leisurely life or left their former occupation to accept a more vital one making airplanes, ammunitions or other supplies for the armed forces. They have entered war industry voluntarily, some of them with a conscious desire for contributing towards the war effort, others attracted by higher wages. No revolution of this type is experienced without considerable psychological disturbances, which are especially difficult for the woman who, for the first time, is employed in a gainful occupation and makes her first acquaintance with industry. Uprooted from her milieu, her family and very often her community, she is more or less of a problem to herself and no doubt to her employer until she has learned to become a member of the labour class and has

acquired a sense of solidarity with her fellow workers.

The necessary adaptation to the new milieu may be delayed or activated by various circumstances. And, although both by tradition and by the Constitution, welfare is the responsibility of the provinces, the federal Department of Labour has found it necessary to assume some responsibility not only from a humanitarian standpoint but also in the interests of labour supply and production. It is still necessary, however, for the Dominion and the provinces to cooperate in order that the quality and scope of such welfare may be adequate and efficiently maintained.

In order to appreciate more fully the actual situation, special surveys have been conducted in a number of war plants in Quebec and Ontario and the opinions of various managerial heads have been collected. The information obtained is most instructive.

Many companies when first entering into operation and having to deliver a tremendous amount of goods, followed the British policy after Dunkirk of 10 or 12 hour shifts, twice a day, 7 days a week, and they arrived at the same results attained in England after some months under that system: more absenteeism and a drop in production due to fatigue. While the saturation point of fatigue varies considerably according to jobs, workers, and working conditions, the present tendency is toward the adoption in war plants of the 48 hour week and the 3 shift system. The 9 hour shift is still prevalent, however, where the two shift system is maintained and small town plants, employing local labour, usually have a one day shift with longer hours.

Proper working conditions is another very important factor in the well being of the workers. In this respect, moral

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as well as physical comfort must be considered. Here again the cooperation of the individual employer has also to be obtained before any worthwhile results can be secured. For, although minimum standards are set by provincial labour laws, employers are depended upon to bring whatever improvements they see fit that will increase production and maintain the labor force in good health and spirit. Not infrequently, working conditions, in the plants surveyed, were found to be far above the provincial standards and management appeared to be fully conscious of their responsibilities both from the national and individual points of view.

Good light and ventilation in shops, rest pauses, reasonable free time and good facilities for meals, health services, rest rooms for women and so on are not only greatly appreciated by employees, but would seem to be indispensable for adequate protection. The rest pauses are becoming more and more common: usually a ten minute break twice a day is allowed and the worker is permitted to leave her bench or machine during that time. In one plant, where the work being done by women is repetitive and very monotonous, the management felt that more breaks were needed and a few minutes of physical exercise are provided every hour besides the rest period.

The amount of food and the kind of food the worker eats greatly affects her working capacity and, therefore, many war plants have found it advisable, as well as necessary, to provide eating facilities for their workers, both male and female. These facilities may vary according to working schedules, neighbouring facilities and community habits. The management usually sees that these facilities are adequate and that prices are reasonable. For instance, one very large plant in the province of Quebec has succeeded in giving a full course hot meal for 15 cents. No employee may be tempted to go without it to save money since this sum is retained from his or her

wages. It is a plain but wholesome meal and is no doubt more energy producing than the lunch box snack.

The state of the female worker's health is to be considered also as an influencing factor in her placement, especially in work involving physical strength or work liable to produce occupational diseases. Obviously, the stability of a working force is very often the result of good placement which is, in itself, a benefit to be derived in part from a proper health examination. Each of the plants visited during the surveys had its own hospital or first aid station with nurses and doctors attending full time or part time according to the size of the establishment. Very satisfactory results were observed.

Safety uniforms are, of course, essential to safe working. Surprising as it may seem, sometimes a girl will not work in a certain plant because she does not like the uniform! The choice of women's uniforms is therefore a matter which should be given some attention. Uniforms that are smart looking as well as safe contribute very much to the contentment of workers.

Recreation is another important aspect of industrial welfare to which the Federal Government has given a good deal of consideration. Tired workers, workers who have no outlet beyond their job, are not productive of the best type of work, nor can they continue in a high state of efficiency over a long period of time. Some form of recreation is essential for us all. In many districts where workers have been moved closer to their work, entertainment and recreation has not always been available. Many managements have shown their understanding of this problem by building recreation halls, courts, and even employing recreational leaders whose job is to stir the workers into organizing their own clubs and teams rather than doing the planning for them. But much remains to be done. Recently, however, the Minister of Labour convened an Advisory Conference on Recreation and

the government has granted a provisional sum of \$40,000 for the expansion of recreational facilities to meet war-time needs. The policy of promotion has not yet been definitely formulated but it will be pushed forward as rapidly as possible.

Turning to the function of women in industry, it has been found in many instances, that women are more satisfactory than men on certain jobs, such as those requiring manual dexterity, minute and precise work. Women have proven to be good machine operators and with training are quite able to set their own machines. The bulk of female employees in war plants, however, is employed on semi-skilled jobs, such as assembly work, which require little training and no special mechanical ability. Women are more patient and more able to give a sustained effort than men in repetitive work which seems to be particularly suitable for them as it usually requires very little physical strength. In the future, it may be anticipated that a greater number of women will take advantage of the technical training facilities provided under the Dominion-Provincial War Emergency Training Program.

One consequence of the unparalleled expansion of industry has been the necessity of resorting to labour transfers. In the case of women, these transfers are arranged through the employment offices of the National Selective Service, and are surrounded with the greatest possible guarantee of moral protection. Before leaving their home towns, employees-to-be are required to undergo a medical examination to determine their physical fitness. An escort is provided during the

transfer whose duty it is to conduct the girls safely to their new employer and to the rooms and quarters retained in advance for them.

With a view to the establishment of a sound industrial policy, many companies have found it indispensable to add at least one woman to their personnel department. The simple reason is that maximum production is not possible without good human relations in the industry. Managers recognize the fact that a woman, well qualified for the position, is more apt to understand the reactions of other women and find suitable solutions to their problems. She is usually responsible for the welfare of all women employed in the plant and, in addition, assists the personnel manager in all other matters where female workers are concerned. This development is regarded very favourably by the Department of Labour and in order to facilitate the appointment of properly qualified persons, the Welfare Division of the National Selective Service has organized, in conjunction with the Dominion-Provincial War Emergency Training Program, a short special course for women supervisors.

A final word must be said about absenteeism. It is to be remembered that many women are doing two jobs and no one can expect them to discharge their heavier responsibilities without a flaw. Fortunately, this has been recognized by many managers—as one manager expressed it recently: “as long as we have to depend on mothers or women with heavy house-keeping responsibilities to do industrial work, absenteeism will be higher among women workers than among men.”