WOMEN DON'T QUIT, IF—

By MARY HEATON VORSE

RECENTLY the head of the Magazine Bureau of the OWI resigned from her job because she said that the lack of community services meant "a definite neglect" of her two children. She had launched more than a score of nationwide campaigns urging women to take war jobs; she had inspired hundreds of articles praising women in war work and persuading others to follow the example of their working sisters. Now she herself had been caught in the same chain of circumstances which has brought about the present spectacular turnover in women workers.

Before leaving OWI, she made the following statement: "Women wouldn't need to neglect their children if the whole community felt it important to help them do war jobs, but the communities do *not* feel it important, and take no steps to make it possible for women to work. Juvenile delinquency is not just a slum district problem. It has now become a middle-class problem. My children have enough to eat and wear, good shelter and reasonably intelligent, interested parents. Yet without proper supervision, what is really only harmless mischief can now turn into serious delinquency."

This woman had borne a leading part in the magnificent selling job which has been done both by government and by private industry to persuade women to take war jobs. The educational campaign has been superb. Practically every magazine and newspaper has carried articles urging women to take up war work. Different communities have found new and effective ways of recruiting women. When Buffalo found that womanpower only was left to draw upon in that region, a charming little house like a Cape Cod cottage appeared in Lafayette Square in the heart of downtown Buffalo. The cottage was put up by the War Manpower Commission, which was then headed by Mr. LeRoy Peterson, whose happy inspiration it was to provide an invitingly homelike center where women could register for work.

The first hazard against a woman's accepting an unfamiliar type of job lies in the bleak impersonal coldness which characterizes most employment agencies. Through the windows of this cosy little house, a woman worker could usually be seen working at some sort of machine. The hostesses who passed out the application forms and helped the applicants fill them in welcomed all comers with the cheery warmth of a friendly neighbor. The consequence was that women who dropped in at the little Cape Cod cottage, whether to make inquiries or merely to look around, remained to chat, then to ask questions, and finally to sign up for a job.

All over the country a campaign similar to the one in Buffalo has been energetically carried on. In Baltimore, in Norfolk, in Mobile, throughout the Middle West, in New England, along the Pacific Coast, the call went out for women to come and work in the war plants — and the women responded. Wherever and whenever women turned on their radios they heard about war jobs for women; whenever they picked up a magazine or newspaper they read about them; when they went shopping they saw women mannikins modeling the work clothes which the well-dressed woman war worker would wear; when they went to the movies, there was nearly always a film showing women doing some form of war work.

Everywhere the womanpower recruiters went to work with the enthusiasm of politicians getting out the vote. They made house-to-house visits, arguing with husbands who were reluctant to have their wives go to work, bearing down all objections with the appeal that the nation *needed* the work of its women.

One cause for hesitation on the part of women, it developed, was that they had got the idea that one had to be as strong as Superman in order to work at a machine successfully.

Realizing that this impression must have been received from the standardized posters in which labor is impersonated by a husky giant with muscles of heroic proportions, the recruiters sought to offset this impression by installing machines in department store windows as well as in the recruiting stations — putting

women to work at them in order to demonstrate that, in fact, many machines require no more physical force to operate than a sewing machine or a vacuum cleaner.

It soon became evident that before women could be put to work, they would have to be given job training. New training courses were set up, and facilities developed for making available to women existing training courses in vocational schools. Training within industry, already well underway, went into a new high.

The dam of resistance was broken. Women were drawn into industry in unprecedented numbers. Still there arose a cry for more—nearly 2,000,000 more within the next few months.

Yes—the task of selling a war job to the woman worker has been magnificently done. Unfortunately, in the equally important task of keeping the woman worker *on* the job neither industrial plant nor community has measured up.

As I write, the radio and newspapers are full of complaints that women are leaving the war industries almost as rapidly as they are hired. There are fantastic figures—that of one firm, for instance, which has hired 23,000 workers only to loose 13,000 of them within a short time. These figures are duplicated throughout the country.

Why this appalling turnover in womanpower?

Let us examine first the causes arising within the plant.

A headline in a metropolitan newspaper shrieks in large black letters, INDUSTRY DISCOVERS WOMEN NEED REST, while an almost equally emphatic subheading goes on to say, "War Worker Survey Reports Absence Too Often Due To Plain Fatigue." Quitting permanently, also, it appeared, was often due to "plain fatigue."

There you have it; women—not unlike men on unfamiliar jobs to which their muscles have not had a chance to become accustomed—are likely to suffer from plain fatigue.

Women who have never before worked at an industrial job are put on eight-hour shifts without any preliminary "toughening-up" practice. This is very much as if a raw recruit in any army camp were to be sent on a twenty-mile hike, with full accouterment, without previous hardening.

Comparatively few plants have yet installed suitable or adequate restrooms for their women workers. Women are kept on their feet unnecessarily. Men seem not yet to have learned the facts of life.

"I work in final assembly," a girl worker told me. "When we finish wiring our plane, an hour or more often goes by before another can be set up. You'd think—wouldn't you?—that we might be resting during this interval. But are we? We are not. We are obliged to remain on our feet the entire time. Why? The Navy might come through on inspection."

Job conditions all over the country, especially in old industries which have had a rapid expansion to accommodate war orders are surprisingly lacking in restroom and locker facilities. In California, the state law provides a ten-minute rest period for workers. Individual industries here and there have found rest areas helpful in production schedules; but there is no uniformity, no general plan through which the whole country can benefit by developments made in one industry, and by which these developments can be rapidly and generally adopted.

The foreman's attitude has been responsible for many women's leaving. "If only *once* our foreman would tell us when we have done good work!" one of a group of girls from the YWCA said to me. "But he never even speaks to us except to pounce on us like a hawk when we do anything wrong."

The average old-time male worker does not look with favor upon women in industry. In the new industries such as aircraft, the situation is somewhat easier for the women. But consider that in ship building—according to the census of 1939—there were formerly only thirty-nine women employed. Today, shipyards count their women by hundreds of thousands. Women today have been accepted, but it has been hard sledding.

Although employment managers will tell you that the age barriers are down and that they will take any woman who is "enough alive to wiggle a finger," there is still discrimination against the older woman. It is definitely harder for the woman of over forty-five to get a job, although she is the very woman whose children are out of the home. There are hundreds and thousands of older women who could work four hours, but who cannot stand the strain of an eight-hour day.

Long ago, Margaret Bondfield, former English Secretary of Labor, stated that America would have to resort to the split shift and better feeding facilities if this country wished to have as full a utilization of womanpower as England. A program has been worked out in the Pratt-Whitney Aircraft plant in East Hartford, Connecticut, where a full shift is made up by a team of two workers, each working four hours a day six days a week. At the Sprague Specialty Company (electrical production manufacturers) split shifts have proved successful. In the great Bell Aircraft plant in Buffalo, teams are made up of women, each of whom works three days a week. In Dayton, Ohio, the "buddy shift" is being successfully tried out. It has been exceptionally successful with white collar workers. One white collar worker works four hours in a plant and her partner takes over the following four hours. In New Brunswick, New Jersey, 300 college workers and housewives are working from three to twenty-four hours a week turning out surgical dressings. But as yet, women half-time workers are a mere drop in the bucket, though long ago England showed a way of tapping womanpower through the half-time job, or the half-workweek.

So much for the conditions within industry itself which chiefly cause women to stay away from work or quit the job altogether.

The reason above all others which causes both absences and quitting is the lack of care for children. It is not putting it too strongly to say that with all the talk and with all the efforts made in individual communities, there is no single war center which has successfully solved all the problems of child care. Except for the recently installed great nurseries near the Kaiser shipyards in Portland, Oregon, industry as a whole has felt—and rightly, I think— (*Continued on page* 24)