

LABOR

Women in the Labor Force

Majority want to keep higher paying industrial jobs, but most employers prefer to hire men. Result: Unions campaign for equal-pay legislation to thwart lowering of wage scales.

Under the pressure of wartime manpower shortages, five million women doffed aprons and left their homes for the nation's industrial plants. The number of women employed shot up from 13 million in 1940 to a peak of 18 million, or nearly one-third of the civilian labor force. Old prejudices against women, held by both employers and male workers since mid-Victorian days of silks and satin, lace and perfumed idleness, were forgotten—at least for so long as there were more jobs than men.

But with V-J Day, industrial jobs tumbled. Women, under the union principle of last hired-first fired, were a large part of the first mass layoffs.

• **Barriers Not Forgotten**—What has happened since then dispelled a widespread belief that women were working just for patriotism and “pin money” and would leave industrial plants when emergency jobs ended, and has dashed the hope held by women and more progressive trade unionists that industrial barriers had been permanently lowered by a demonstration that women can perform many industrial jobs.

In both state and federal capitals, employer groups and labor unions are pressing for legislation to protect their special interests in the present handling of the female labor problem.

• **They Want to Stay**—Surveys conducted by the Women's Bureau of the U. S. Dept. of Labor indicate that 75% to 80% of new women industrial workers want to continue in or return to plant jobs they held during the war. One spot check, taken in Mobile, Ala., showed that more than 22,500 of 27,000 women wanted to keep the jobs they had taken for the duration. That meant that in Mobile there are now five women available for every two jobs open to women there in 1940.

Women's divisions in organized labor maintain that four of every five women employed during the war actually need to continue working because of higher living costs or changed conditions at home.

• **Service Jobs Ignored**—Moreover, they want higher paying industrial jobs. Failing to get them immediately, they pre-

fer collecting unemployment insurance instead of taking lower paying service jobs widely held by women in the past.

This has meant a continuing personnel pinch on stores and restaurants which lost, at peak, half of their women employees, and hotels and laundries, which saw two-thirds of their women workers leave for government shipyard and other duration jobs. The shortage of household help is also acute.

• **Can Hold Their Own**—Surveys conducted by the Women's Bureau also indicated that women can hold industrial jobs successfully, and compete with men. During the war, 80% of more than 1,800 classifications of industrial jobs were held by women and they were found in all but 30 of 534 occupations. In some, particularly machine operations on light metal, involving monotonous and repetitive work, the bureau found operating efficiency actually increased when women replaced men.

But despite this record, now that industrial rehiring is well under way

(chart, page 94), women are finding that many plants in which they worked during the war are rehiring on a basis of “men only” or (the same thing thinly veiled) on a basis of “first-class mechanics only.” Women, rated as skilled workers during the war, in many instances are finding they are being given a peacetime rating as “third-class” mechanics, based in part on their lack of service on a basis of years.

• **Prejudice Remains**—Primarily this is due to recurrence of old prejudices. Despite organized labor's outspoken advocacy of women's job rights (three million of the total 15 million in labor unions now are women, a wartime increase from 800,000), large numbers of male workers retain old fears of job competition from women who in the past often have been employable at lower rates than men. And despite wartime experiences, many employers still are not convinced that women can hold their own with men in productivity.

U. S. Employment Service investigators who made a spot check of several industrial centers recently found this situation general (BW—Nov. 24 '45, p. 94). Women made up a large part of the industrial unemployed; industrial jobs for men were going unfilled.

• **Back to Restrictions**—The result has been a behind-the-scenes legislative and administrative tug of war. In many states, laws governing hours and conditions of work for women were relaxed during the war. There is a general movement now to restore the old taboos (in California, for instance, a



Now that many plants are again signaling their preference for “men only,” queues of women that used to line up to punch the time clock (left) are checking in, instead, at the USES (right)—for jobs or compensation.

...woman worker cannot be required to lift more than 25 lb.) as a support for industrialists who want to be able to demand that men only fill job openings. The talking point, of course, is that such laws are a safeguard for women's health and welfare.

Unions are pushing for contract provisions and federal legislation which would establish a principle of equal pay for equal work. They hope that, by wiping out old lower-wage female job classifications, they can reassure male workers that an influx of women workers into peacetime plant jobs would not mean cut-throat competition for jobs, which employers could seize upon to force down wage scales. Unions are asking that wages be based upon the job, not the worker. They also are urging that women be given equal opportunities for upgrading and promotions.

Boost for Equal Pay—Success in the first field is reflected by a recent federal report that of 80 typical union contracts studied—covering 75,000 women workers—one-half had equal pay clauses, one-half guaranteed the same automatic progression for men and women, and one-third specified the same entrance, or starting, rate for both.

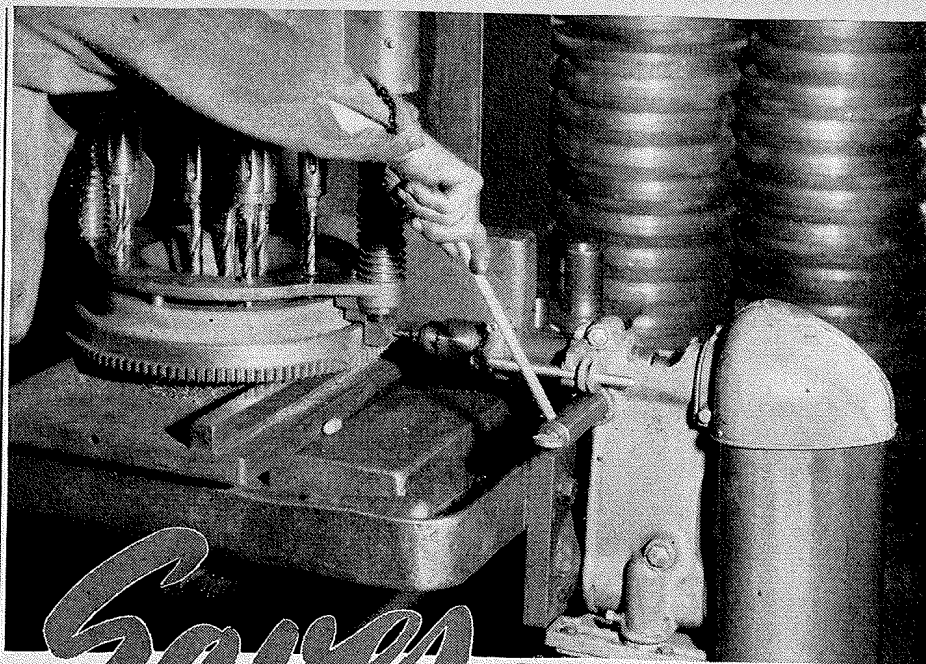
Two current bills, one sponsored by Senators Claude Pepper and Wayne Morse in the Senate and the other by Rep. Mary Norton in the House, are supported by labor in its attempt to give statutory strength to the equal-pay policy.

Would Ban Discrimination—The Pepper-Morse bill would make it an unfair labor practice for an employer to discriminate against women by paying them lower wages or by laying them off in favor of men employees without sound reason, or unless it was done in accordance with either a nondiscrimination seniority system or veteran's preference legislation.

Administration and enforcement would be under the Women's Bureau of the Dept. of Labor, and much the same procedure would be used as in the wartime Fair Employment Practice Committee. Industry committees would be set up to cover the industries having the most women employees and most charges of discrimination.

The House version would have the same objectives as that in the Senate, but would be administered by a separate division of the Dept. of Labor in order to undertake properly the large-scale inspection job Rep. Norton considers would be necessary to end discriminatory practices.

Question of Economics—Secretary of Labor Lewis B. Schwellenbach told a Senate subcommittee studying the Pepper-Morse bill that he was vitally interested "not only [as] a matter of



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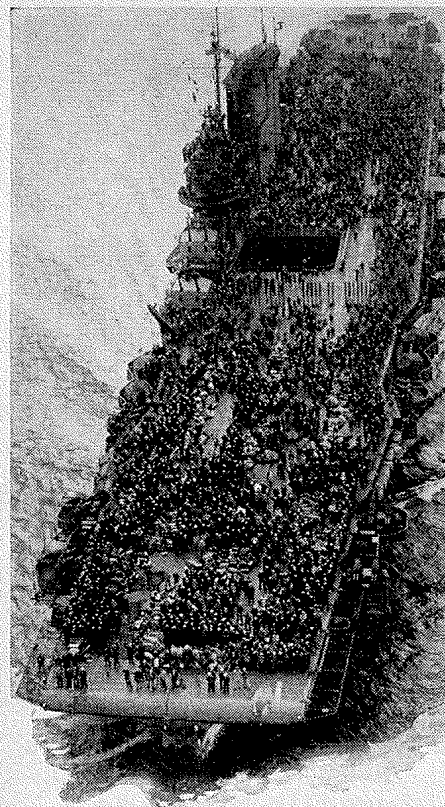
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fairness to women but also from the standpoint of preserving wage standards and consumer purchasing power."

No opposition to the proposal was heard by the subcommittee, but many employers are wary. They warn that, if the law is passed, women workers might find themselves cut off from many jobs which they now hold under pay differentials. If they've got to pay the same wages, most employers want men.

Unions and the Women's Division of the Dept. of Labor also are urging workers to press for state equal-pay laws and wage minimums, just in case federal action does not materialize. At present, six states have equal-pay laws, but enforcement is lax in some cases. Prior to the war only two states had equal-pay laws. During 1945 state legislative sessions 17 bills were proposed, but only two passed.

• **Amendment Opposed**—There has been a perennial proposal in Congress for an equal rights amendment to the Constitution, but neither organized labor nor women's associations want to see it enacted. While its purpose, sponsors say, is to give women economic and social equality with men, labor argues that it would create "terrific confusion" by outlawing breach-of-promise actions, throwing minimum marriage age differentials out of the window, and making women's dependency rights extremely questionable.

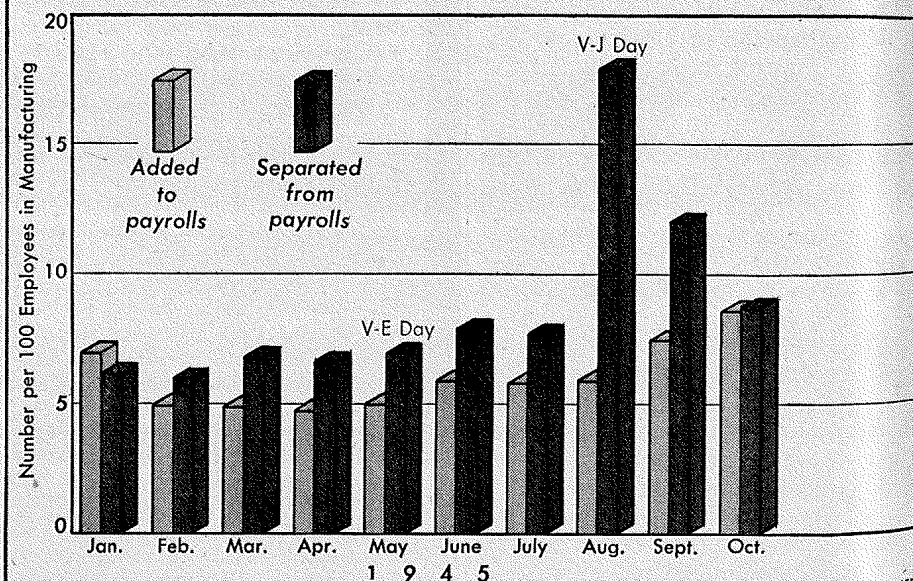
U. E.'s Broadside

Union charges of "sitdown" by radio and appliance makers hit publicity jackpot. Companies urge congressional inquiry.

Last week the United Electrical, Radio & Machine Workers (C.I.O.) made newspaper headlines with a demand, filed officially in Washington, for an investigation of what the union described as a "sitdown strike" of major radio and electrical appliance producers against immediate manufacture and sale of badly wanted civilian goods. The union charged that corporations were gambling with the nation's reconversion hopes through maneuvers to force a boost in price ceilings on their products and to defer sales until 1946, when excess-profits taxes will not apply.

• **Rings Publicity Bell**—It was the most spectacular of a series of similar charges made in recent months by C.I.O. unions—notably by the Textile Workers, against cotton mill operators—and hotly denied by management. But where other charges had attracted little attention, U. E. is citing headlines to support its confidence that it has tied the inability of John Consumer to get a new radio and John Worker to get a

HIRING AND FIRING COME BACK INTO BALANCE



Data: Bureau of Labor Statistics.

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Industry once again is hiring about as many workers as are fired, laid off, or quit. This reverses a trend which was making itself felt even before V-E Day and which became pronounced with the deep cutbacks marking final victory. Ability of manufacturers to begin increasing their hirings as rapidly as they did after the first shock of cancellations reflects the speed of their reconversion. And even the net drop in manufacturing employment does not represent an addition to the unemployment figures. Many of those who were let out quickly found work in other lines, notably trade and service jobs.