

Women's Economic Conference.

WE FEEL SURE THAT the Report of the recent Women's Economic Conference held in Maidstone will be of great interest to our readers, as sent to us by Miss Mabel Wakefield who represented the British College of Nurses, Ltd. on this occasion.

We therefore publish in full the very informative discussion which took place on this subject—so vital to all sections of society and their way of life:—

THE CHAIRMAN.

The Women's Organisations' Committee for Economic Information, which meets every month under the chairmanship of the Information Division of the Treasury, was set up in 1947 to help and advise the Treasury in its task of keeping the women of the country informed of the facts of the economic situation. It consists of 13 members representing, between them, most of the main women's organisations in England, Wales and Scotland. The Committee carries out this task in various ways but considers that the most effective is conferences such as this, where key-members of women's organisations have the opportunity of hearing the facts of the economic situation from an authoritative speaker who has no political bias, and can then discuss them with him. The Committee lays great stress on the discussion aspect of the conferences and on their hope that the delegates will later pass on the results of the talk and discussion to their branches.

MR. SCHUMACHER.

In order to understand the present economic situation, we must take a long view.

The Setting.

We must realise first that this country which, only six generations ago, had a population of 10 million people, now has 50 million; and that the population is ageing rapidly. Now, there are six National Insurance contributors for every one pensioner. In 1977 the proportion will be three to one.

Second, that the density of population in this country is 20 times the world average.

Third, that it has to make a living in a world whose population increases by 60,000 a day while the area of land under cultivation is shrinking.

The Problems.

1. During the nineteenth century we put all our eggs into one basket—manufacturing—and had a short moment of monopolistic bliss when manufactured goods were more in demand than primary goods. Now the reverse is the case.

Foodstuffs.

Britain is the world's largest importer of food. Food production in the world (excluding the Soviet Union) was 4 per cent. lower in 1950-51 than it was in 1934-38 in the case of crops, 7 per cent. in the case of meat. Surplus food for export is declining in many countries, Australia is turning to industry. One hears of "meatless days in Buenos Aires," "butter shortage in Australia," and sees the writing on the wall.

Incidentally, it is interesting to note that in 1951 consumption of butter in the U.K. was 14.6 lb. per head of the population while in the U.S. it was 9.7 lb. per head.

Raw Materials.

Britain is also the world's largest importer of raw materials. The United States has been the world's largest exporter of raw materials. It has been stated officially that "the quantity of most metals and mineral fuels used in the United States since the first world war exceeds the total used throughout the entire world in all of history preceding 1914."

By 1975 the U.S. cupboard will be empty of many of them. Other countries are following the same pattern as the U.S.

So there is our first problem. Shall we be able to get the imports of food and raw materials we need?

2. In the first quarter of 1952 the terms of trade (the ratio between what we pay for imports and get paid for exports) were 37 per cent. against us as compared with 1938.

In 1951 this was costing us £100 million a month—twice the value of all the coal we mine, 10 per cent. of our national income.

So there is the second problem. What shall we have to pay for imports?

3. Britain is the world's second largest exporter. With 2 per cent. of the world's population, it has 10 per cent. of the world's export trade, 40 per cent. of all the overseas exports of Western Europe.

Yet we never seem to be exporting enough.

Our third problem is how to pay for our imports.

4. The overwhelming industrial power of the United States means that we, among other countries, may be at the mercy of economic changes there.

Our fourth problem is this kind of vulnerability.

If we are to deal with these problems, we must not pay hysterical attention to small fluctuations in our fortunes, but to the larger issues—the two tasks we now have. The first is to concentrate more on production of primary products—food, coal, minerals. The second is to concentrate on quality in what we produce for export.

In general we must re-orientate ourselves, concentrate not on what we can consume, but on what we can produce. By so doing we shall not diminish our happiness, but increase it.

QUESTIONS.

Q. Would the speaker give his opinion as to whether emigration would solve the problem?—(National Association of Women Civil Servants.)

A. I said that one of our problems is that the proportion of old people is rising and will go on rising, and I gave you the figure that at present there are about six contributors to pensions to every one pensioner. In 25 years' time it will be three to one. That is the answer to the question—it is the young who emigrate—and the only difference emigration would make would be that in 25 years' time it would be a proportion of two, or perhaps only one contributor to each pensioner. It ought to be possible to shift whole families (including grandparents, aunts, uncles, etc.) but in this world that doesn't happen. No. Emigration would not really affect the problem.

Q. Cannot anything be done to ensure that active old people are used more than they are at present? There are many old people who can still do useful work if they can find it.—(Mrs. Cole.)

A. I agree, more use could be made of them but it really wouldn't affect the problem.

Q. Would it help if the regulations about old people's pension being reduced when they earn over a certain amount were altered to encourage more old people to work?—(National Association of Women Civil Servants.)

A. Very likely it might help if old people could stay on at work instead of being forced into retirement by economic pressure. I would suggest that we should not pursue this particular line too far, as our problem is not so much how many people we have working but that the workers should produce the right things.

Q. Is the first step towards producing the right things to deal with the problem of returning to the soil and agriculture?—(Tenterden Labour Party.)

A. I agree 100 per cent. or more than 100 per cent., if that were possible. Food production has been neglected in

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