

NURSES UNANIMOUS IN THEIR DESIRE TO BE EXCLUDED FROM THE UNEMPLOYMENT INSURANCE ACT, 1920.

On Wednesday, January 5th, the Inquiry arranged by the Minister of Labour to discuss the inclusion of the various grades of nurses in hospitals in the Unemployment Act was held at 8, Richmond Terrace, S.W. Mr. B. O. Bircham, legal adviser to the Ministry, was in the chair, and amongst others there were present Mr. G. Q. Roberts (House Governor St. Thomas' Hospital), Mr. E. W. Morris (House Governor London Hospital), and Mr. Courtenay Buchanan (Member of the British Hospitals Association), Mrs. Bedford Fenwick and Miss I. Macdonald (Royal British Nurses Association), Miss Cox-Davies and Miss Rundle (College of Nursing, Ltd.), Miss H. L. Pearse and Miss Rimmer (National Union Trained Nurses), Miss Peterkin (Queen Victoria Jubilee Institute), and Miss Hogg (Matron, Guy's Hospital).

Mr. B. O. Bircham, who received the delegates on behalf of the Minister of Labour, explained that the Conference was convened principally that the Minister might have information regarding the position of Sisters, Staff Nurses and Probationers in hospitals in relation to the Unemployment Insurance Act, and although he did not wish to bind the speakers he would be glad if they would confine their remarks as far as possible to those three classes.

Mr. Courtenay Buchanan suggested that Mr. G. Q. Roberts should speak as representing the Governors of the Hospitals, and Miss Cox Davies as representing the Matrons' point of view. Miss Cox Davies proposed that Miss Biggar, who held a Sister's post at St. Thomas' Hospital, should also speak.

Mrs. Bedford Fenwick inquired whether the views of all trained nurses were to be placed before the Conference or only of those in hospitals, and whether it would be out of order to address the Conference in relation to the position of other classes of nurses than those mentioned in the reference, as the Act would affect them and had been passed without nurses being consulted.

The Chairman agreed this might be done.

Miss Cox Davies said that she had understood that it was principally the views of the nurses in hospitals which were desired by the Minister. The question of their position under the Unemployment Insurance Act was a very serious one, and most Matrons had discussed it with the nurses with a view to getting their opinions. Nurses were given no opportunity of being heard before the Act was established. The first point was that the probationers were not liable to unemployment, and they would not benefit in any sense by coming under the Act. Trained Nurses had now been given legal status, they had a defined position, and as professional workers they ought not to be brought under an industrial Act such

as that under discussion. Their conditions of work were entirely unsuited to the provisions of the Act. The only way in which they could be brought under it was as domestic workers, and they should not be placed in that category because domestic service was not recognised as skilled professional work as nursing was.

Miss Biggar said that she agreed with Miss Cox Davies that there was little unemployment among hospital nurses. Most Charge Nurses signed a contract for one or two years with three months' notice. Sisters signed contracts for two years at least. Nurses would never agree to be classed as domestic servants. There was no fear of nurses in hospitals being unemployed.

Miss Cox Davies said that she had attended that day as representing nearly 20,000 nurses grouped in the College of Nursing. The Council of that body had taken a referendum of its members, and 80 per cent. had expressed themselves as against inclusion in the Act, and 4 per cent. as desirous of coming under it.

Mr. Bircham enquired what percentage had replied to the communication.

Miss Rundle, the Secretary of the College, said that up to date 3,000 had replied to the questionnaire, and 80 per cent. of that number were opposed to inclusion in the Act.

Mr. Roberts said that directly the Act came out it came under the consideration of the British Hospitals Association; those responsible for the government of the hospitals felt that it was not necessary for them to take action until they knew the feeling of the nurses themselves. There was a general scheme of training in all the large hospitals for affording nurses the necessary training to fit them for their careers. They entered the hospitals for a three years' training, in many cases one of four years. It was probable that most of the Sisters in the hospitals could claim exemption on the ground that they received remuneration and emoluments equal to £250 per annum. Those nurses who went into private practice either engaged themselves under some independent employers, or joined a co-operation; by far the larger proportion joined co-operations. In view of the fact that all private nurses were paid three or three and a half guineas weekly and received board and lodging, it seemed probable that they would automatically come out of the Act. Thus they would receive no benefit from their previous contributions paid during hospital service. So far as Mr. Roberts knew the governors of hospitals were simply desirous of doing what was best for the nurses in the matter.

Mr. Bircham asked for information as to the contract of service of hospital probationers with regard to remuneration, discipline, &c., to which Mr. Roberts replied.

Mrs. Bedford Fenwick said the Royal British Nurses' Association, which she represented, had very carefully considered the position of trained nurses under the Act, and with the permission of the Chair she read the following Resolution passed.

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