

NURSING IN THE HOUSE OF COMMONS.

Friday, December 3rd, was Nurses' Day in the House of Commons, and the public galleries were filled with nurses and others when the Right Hon. F. O. Roberts, J.P., Member for West Bromwich, rose to move the second reading of the Local Authorities (Hours of Employment in connection with Hospitals and Institutions) Bill, "A Bill to provide for the limitation of hours of work for persons employed in or in connection with hospitals and institutions under the control of local authorities."

Presentation of the Local Authorities Bill.

Mr. Roberts formally moved "That the Bill be now read a second time," and then in a closely reasoned speech submitted it to the House.

There was, he said, a general recognition that the working hours of nurses and allied services required drastic overhaul, and the urgency of the problem was becoming more apparent. He was glad to note one very significant and hopeful sign, and that was that nurses and hospital workers were now more ready to try to protect themselves. They were beginning to know something of their own strength, and he believed they were seeing just a little of the beneficial results of union and unity.

There was no doubt that in some directions greatly improved conditions had been adopted, but those improvements could only be regarded as comparative: it was the general standard that mattered for those engaged in hospital and institutional work.

He was not forgetting that there was a financial consideration which had to be borne in mind. As the House was aware, a Committee had been appointed, and in connection with these matters inquiry might be justified, but with regard to the matter of hours, as proposed in the Bill, no inquiry was necessary: the facts were well known, and in his judgment they had been proved.

In reply to a question by Sir Francis Fremantle, Mr. Roberts gave an instance of schedules in a hospital in Manchester where a 48-hour week was already in force, and quoted the opinions of Matrons of hospitals in favour of shorter hours; He also quoted, as supporting the Bill, the Nurses' Advisory Council; and the Guild of Nurses at a meeting recently held in London at which 500 nurses representing some 4,000 nurses employed in the London hospitals, were present. Mr. Roberts further advocated the development of the living-out system. As illustrating the advantage of this system he instanced a mental hospital in the North of England which had not had to advertise for any staff for 14 years. The hospital, because of its conditions, had been its own recommendation.

He came back to the main contention of the Bill, that the regulation of working hours was necessary to be authorised by Parliament before some of the factors, reforms which had an important general bearing on the present position in relation to hospitals and institutions, could be brought about. He held it to be the duty of the State to determine that those who were nursing the nation's sick and mentally depressed ought not to be compelled so to work that they ran the avoidable risk of becoming patients themselves.

Mr. F. Marshall, Member for Brightside, Sheffield, who seconded the motion, said that he did not deny that some improvements had taken place. Some of the great cities had adopted a 48-hour week, but not all. He thought they were justified in saying that a great deal of excessive work was being put in by the nurses in some hospitals. In face of these facts, and with the avenues of employment open to-day to young women, was there any wonder that there was an acute shortage of probationers for the hospitals?

The Rejection of the Bill Moved and Seconded.

Mr. Erskine Hill, Member for North Edinburgh, moved to leave out from the word "That" to the end of the question and to add instead thereof:

"This House, in view of the setting up of an inter-departmental Committee on the conditions affecting the nursing services, is of opinion that it is premature to proceed with this Bill and declines to give it a second reading."

Mr. Erskine Hill said it seemed to him that one must regard this question as one wide comprehensive problem and deal with it in one Measure.

Major Neven-Spence, Member for Orkney and Shetland, seconded the Amendment.

The Right Hon. George Lansbury, J.P., Member for Bow and Bromley, said that on the previous Friday he had presided over a large meeting of nurses, and out of over 500 nurses who were present only 13 voted against a motion asking everybody to give this Bill a second reading.

Sir Francis Fremantle, O.B.E., Member for St. Albans, said that he was a member, he thought the only member present, of the new Departmental Committee, which had had its first meeting on the previous day. He maintained that you could not take the principles of factory organisation into hospital life in trying to establish an eight-hour day. The hospital was not simply a workshop to which women came, downing tools at four o'clock or eight o'clock regardless of the patients. They looked on the institution as a home in which they lived and moved and had their whole main being for the time. You concentrated entirely and shut out the outside world. It was a finer life for those taking part in it, whether doctors or nurses, and an infinitely finer service for the patients. Under this Bill all that was left to look after itself. (Interruption.) He did not say that was the intention of the Bill, but it was the basis of the ordinary trade union system in factory life.

Mr. W. Lunn, Member for Rothwell, enquired how the hon. Member justified his acceptance of the position of a judge on the Departmental Committee to consider the question impartially, when he had that day, before the Committee has begun to work, expressed himself so passionately.

Sir Francis Fremantle said that he was entirely in the hands of those who were concerned, to say whether he had gone beyond what was right as a member of a Departmental Committee. They had got this clash of the old historical principle of service and the modern idea of regularisation and systematisation. The question was whether they believed in getting the improvements they all had in mind by a dictatorial legislation, that was the object of hon. Members on the opposite side, or did they believe that they should work not by dictatorial legislation, but through conviction, that was by voluntary principles, enforced by public opinion.

Mr. F. Messer, Member for South Tottenham, said he confessed to a feeling of genuine amazement at Sir F. Fremantle's speech. If he stood in the position of the hon. Member he would feel compelled to withdraw from the Departmental Committee. He could hardly conceive of the possibility of a Committee which was to enquire, receive evidence, and, it was assumed, deal impartially with the situation being able to do it when there sat on it a member who had already made up his mind in the way that the hon. Member had done.

Captain Cunningham Reid urges Direct Representation of Nurses' Organisations.

Captain Cunningham Reid, D.F.C., Member for St. Marylebone, while considering the Bill impracticable, regretted that on the Government Department Com-

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