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A rousing tale of pioneering women workers fighting and winning.

• past tense •

The Corruganza Boxmakers Strike



Bronwen Griffiths

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In August 1908, 44 young women box makers went on strike. They were part of a 1,500-strong workforce from the Corruganza Box Making works in Summerstown, Garratt Lane, Wandsworth, South London, and they had never struck in their lives before.

The company made cardboard boxes of all types for shops and industry and the women concerned worked in a department dealing with tube rolling, cutting and glueing. The cause of the strike was simple. Mr Stevenson, the manager, had ordered a reduction in the wages paid for piece work. In some cases he wanted to cut the pay back to half the previous rate.

Miss Mary Williams, the forewoman, refused to accept the new wages even though she herself had not been affected by the reductions. *"I asked him for a revised price list to put before the hands" she said, "and he gave me the prices on a piece of paper and said 'If they don't like it they can clear out'. I told the girls and they struck there and then. I and two of the others were supposed to be the ring-leaders and we got the sack."* (Wandsworth Borough News Aug. 1908).

The strike got considerable public support as well as the backing of the National Federation of Women Workers, which had been formed only two years earlier. Mary MacArthur, Secretary of the Federation, came to address the workers on the picket lines and provided them with strike pay. Within two weeks this had been increased to 5 shillings a week because people like the writer John Galsworthy had sent in sums of £5 and more.

Front cover picture:
Corruganza Strikers rallying in Trafalgar Square,
August 1908.

Much of the argument between managers and workers centred around the issue of what was a reasonable piece work rate. The young women were prepared to accept a reduction on one type of the work but, according to Miss Williams, *"He (Mr Stevenson) reduced plain work and they could not agree to that, especially as the girls had already lost on the first reduction. Taking all the year round and taking busy times with slack times, our wages do not average 12s. per week. We are supposed to work 9 1/2 hours a day. When we are busy, we work those hours and earn perhaps 17s. a week but for the rest of the year we don't do nearly so much, and are lucky to get 10s. a week. Under the new conditions, I don't suppose we could earn more than 10s. a week at the best of times, and our average would certainly be a lot lower than that"*.

Another of the strikers was more emphatic. *"He won't give us a blooming chance to live. We used to earn from 15s. to 17s. per week and now we shall get from 6s. to 9s. per week. That is not enough to keep one, let alone a family on"*. (Wandsworth Borough News Aug. 1908).

This was at a time when average wages for box making were from 10-15s. a week, with a pound a week being the highest wage. However, according to the 'Women's Industrial News' (1912) *'workers hardly ever get a full week's work'*.

Nor was the work easy. Polly, who was quoted in 'The Woman Worker' of August 21st described how she was exhausted by working on one of the large, heavy rolling machines: *"Don't yer all know that I often gits knocked up with pain in the stommick and 'ave ter lie in bed all day through 'andling it? They don't remember that when they're reducing their rites and slinging nimes abart"*.

Mr Stevenson was adamant however that the women were idle and had 'tyrannised' his factory.

"For the past 15 years" he told the 'Borough News' reporter covering the strike *"there has been no reduction in wages in the works. More than one attempt has been made to reduce the wages to a proper basis and in proportion to the small amount which the firm receives for the goods. The girls*

have always objected to any reduction and the managers have always given way to them. That is not my habit and I do not intend to start now".

He continued: *"I wanted to put little girls on the machines some time since, but they refused"*. ('They' referring to the older women). *"In fact, they have ruled the place and tyrannised for over 10 years and I don't intend to stand it. Under the new arrangement the girh will be able to earn from 15s. to 25s. per week and that I consider a fair wage for girls"*.

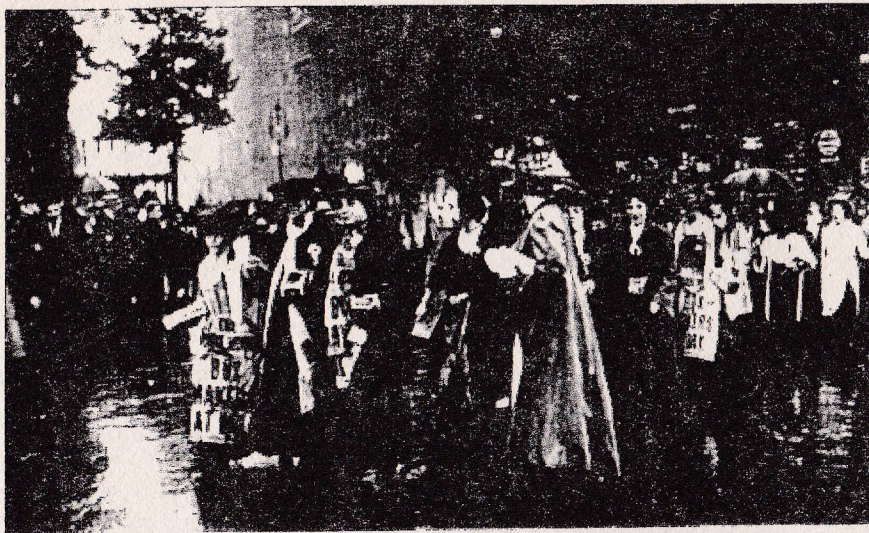
The 'Boro' News' reporter toured the factory, claiming that the women could earn between 17s. and 26s. a week at the new prices. These young women were novices. The strikers were very indignant with what they alleged to be 'mis-statements' in the paper. *"What do ~e say in yer piper! That we could earn free paand a week at the gime. Lummy, we should just 'alf like to have a go at it. Fifteen bob is not so bad, and a quid is a lot, but free paand!! So 'elp me, it's a bit fick, I don't fink! "*

Although the 'Boro' News' reported Mr Stevenson as saying that no additional women would go out on strike 'The Times' of August 14th wrote: *"Peaceful picketing was carried on during yesterday, and one result of this is that seven girls, who were taken on yesterday morning, have signified their intention of not going in this morning"*.

The strikers, together with the Federation of Women Workers, arranged a demonstration at Trafalgar Square on Saturday August 22nd. The women came from Earlsfield Station carrying banners with the words 'Box Makers At Bay'. They marched in a downpour from Waterloo Station via the Embankment to Trafalgar Square where they were met by a crowd of between-five and seven hundred supporters. Mary MacArthur opened the proceedings and the crowd heard speeches from the women themselves, from Frank Smith of the London County Council and from Victor Grayson MP.

The 'Woman Worker' of August 28th gives the following account of the demonstration:

"When we got to Waterloo it was raining. My word, it did rain. We marched



three a line over Waterloo Bridge and along the Embankment. The rain soaked through and through us. It got into your bones, so to speak - as Polly said.

"And the mud. It was slush up to our ankles, but we felt real gay all the same.

'We waited for a bit under the archway, till all at once it cleared. Polly started to sing, 'If you can't do no good, don't do no harm'.

(This was the women's strike song).

'We were all still singing when we marched into the Square, and all at once the sun started shining, and the big crowd started cheering.'

"Miss MacArthur told the people all about the goings-on at the Corriganza works. Then she asked Alice to speak up and tell the people all about everything. Alice is what they call a fine girl. She's the big dark one what does the heavy work. Her as Mr Stevenson calls the 'Battersea Bruiser'. She told 'em how we had been cut down so as we couldn't earn nothing, and how she stood up to Mr Stevenson and the Galloping Major (what Miss MacArthur says is a commissionaire) and how she got the sack. Then Polly

up and spoke. She told the folk how heavy the work was, and what hard times we had been having before the prices were cut down. Then it was Annie's turn. She has always kept respectable, has Annie, though she has had an awful struggle.

"Annie told them as how she had lost her mother before she was a year old, and her father when she was seven. 'I have always kept strite up to now' Annie said. 'Gawd 'elping me, I will still'.

"All the speeches were fine. Miss Margaret Bondfield and Mr Frank Smith spoke up for us grand, and Mr Victor Grayson, who looked a very young boy to be a member of Parlyment, was spiffin'.

"When the speaking came to an end the crowd flung no end of money up to us. Not only pennies, but crowns and half-sovereigns too."

Support continued to pour in after the demonstration in the form of money and letters. A group of box-makers from Manchester wrote to the 'Woman Worker' saying: 'We know how hard it is to make a living wage, and we realise that it is our battle the girls are fighting as well as theirs. So we made a collection amongst us, because we think it is our duty to help one another as much as lies in our power'.

On September -3rd the dispute was settled by the Board of Trade. The firm agreed to reinstate all the strikers and the piece work rates were to remain as before, except in the case of tube rolling for incandescent mantle boxes where the rate was to be reduced. Mary Williams, the fore-woman, decided not to return but was sent £10 by a well-wisher to help her until she found another position. The Women's Suffrage League Paper saw the victory as an important step for women. 'The amount of sympathy and help given to the strikers by the public shows that, thanks to the Suffrage agitation, fair play towards women has now made decided progress'.

Later in September, however, 'The Times' reported Mr Stevenson as saying that the strikers had agreed to accept the reductions as originally proposed and that 'the strike was entirely without justification. The charge of 'sweating' which was really too absurd to need refutation, disposes of itself'.

Miss Sophy Safliger, who represented the strikers at the conciliation proceedings replied immediately to Mr Stevenson's letter of the 17th September: *'The reductions agreed to at the conciliation proceedings were only in respect of one class of work, and had already been agreed to by the girls before the strike took place. In the interests of the girls and their helpers, a statement that the strike was entirely without justification cannot be allowed to pass. It is not to be supposed that work-girls, most of whom had worked many years with the firm and were entirely dependent upon their own earnings, with no organisation or funds behind them, would be likely to throw up their work and risk hunger for an imaginary grievance.'*

In fact, the 'Woman Worker' had already reported on the 11th September Mr Stevenson's attempts to hide the facts behind the strike. *'It seemed that at the first meeting the negotiations had not progressed at all, and a fierce resumption of the war had appeared probable. But on the second day a great discovery was made. The strike was an accident - a carelessness. Mr. Stevenson had been misunderstood by the girls, by Miss Wilhams, by Miss MacArthur, by the Press-men, the Board of Trade - everybody. Reductions? Bless you, he had intended one only: a little one. applying merely small percentage of work, and not seriously affecting wages ... It was agreed at last that a settlement should be accepted in good faith and Miss MacArthur reminded the girls that they were organised now and therefore no longer helpless, no longer likely to be agressed upon'*.

At the same time as the strike, the Women's Industrial Council, as reported by 'The Women's Industrial News' of September 1908, was investigating the box-making industry reporting that *'fifteen or sixteen years ago the wages of the women employed were, comparitively speaking, good, and the average wage throughout the trade, including that of learners, was, at a guess 15s. If it had been possible to form a strong trade union the same rates might perhaps prevail today. But some employers lowered prices by introducing a great many young learners, who often received for the first few weeks, or even months, nothing at all and only a very small wage afterwards'*.

By 1910, 'The Women's Industrial News' was able to report that it is *'particularly pleasing to those who saw at the time of the Council's enquiry the*

growing underpayment in this trade, to find it included among the first four in which Trade boards are being instituted; and to learn that the women, stimulated by the hope which these Boards offer them, are joining a trade union by hundreds'. These Boards were set up to regulate wages.

The Corruganza box-makers strike, starting from personal hardship, had now become history and part of a larger struggle. It is an important landmark in working class women's history.

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56 Crampton St,
London,
SE17 0AE

email: mudlark1@postmaster.co.uk

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