

# WOMEN ENGINEERS, HEALTH *and* TRADE UNIONISM *in* POST-WAR BRITAIN

This poster summarises findings from the research undertaken by Neil Adams as part of the Undergraduate Research Scholarship Scheme.

The project focussed upon the place of women engineers within trade unionism, using records of the Amalgamated Engineering Union held at the Modern Records Centre. The poster explores issues that emerged in the course of the research under three research questions that consider the union's involvement in health and welfare issues, women's role within the union, and efforts to reconcile trade unionism with ideas of femininity. This research will feed into an ongoing Wellcome Trust-funded project into 'The Politics and Practices of Health in Work in Britain, 1915-1974', currently being undertaken in the Centre for the History of Medicine at the University of Warwick.

*'I would say to a young girl, whose dreams are all of glamour and romance. Take a look at the most glamorous women in the world...take, for example, Elizabeth Taylor... take Marilyn Monroe...These women are all you long to be. They are beautiful, talented, famous, rich, but nevertheless, they are working women...They are both members of their trade union...and right now both of them are out on strike... they have both learned a working woman's best friend is her trade union.'*

(Address of Mrs M. McKay, Annual Women's Conference Report 1960, pp.10-11, MSS.259/AEU/4/15/60)

## HOW DID THE A.E.U. ADDRESS WOMEN'S HEALTH AND WELFARE INTERESTS?

An annual conference solely for women was set up in 1943 in order to create a forum in which general issues and those specifically concerned with women could be discussed by female members. The resolutions that were passed at the women's conference would then be forwarded to the National Executive of the A.E.U. for consideration.

Though a broad range of issues were covered at the conferences the focus often tended to be on gaining equal pay, with sometimes three or four resolutions on wages being passed, but this is not to say health and welfare were ignored. By establishing a woman's conference very varied health and welfare issues were raised including provision of nurseries and the wearing of jewellery in the workplace, which were unlikely to be put forward at a male dominated conference.



THIS Bazeley Cap is fashion's smart new way of keeping hair covered at work and still looking bright and attractive. It is light, cool and comfortable to wear, and yet covers all lengths and styles of hair without flattening them. There are gingham checks and pretty floral patterns as well as plain colours, all developed from the snappy, outdoor, denim version which is just right for keeping the sea breezes off a holiday hair-do. The Bazeley Cap is British designed and made, is inexpensive and stands up well to laundering.

*The Way, August 1976, p.5. A young girl demonstrates the 'bright and attractive' new Bazeley cap.*

Publications such as the *Woman's Angle* Newsletter and later *The Way: For Women and Youth* tried to increase their appeal to women by featuring fashion and beauty features. This meant that one publication could contain articles ranging from a criticism of the apartheid government in South Africa to the most fashionable summer clothes. These articles, mostly written by women, provided another avenue through which female members of the union could express their views on health and welfare.

All positions within the union were made open for women in 1950, giving women more of a chance to voice their concerns over trade union issues and allowing health and welfare issues specific to women to be raised. Yet alongside the pursuit of equality for women, appeals to more feminine ideals continued. Thus in 1965, the Chairman of the A.E.U. expressed his hope that 'the women of this country (never) lose their femininity'. (Annual Women's Conference Report, 1965 p. 9, MSS.259/AEU/4/15/65)

*'I hope you will all work and campaign to convince every woman engineering worker that a trade union card is as indispensable to her as her lipstick, powder puff and looking glass.'*  
(Presidential Address, Annual Women's Conference 1954, pp. 8-9, MSS.259/AEU/4/15/54)

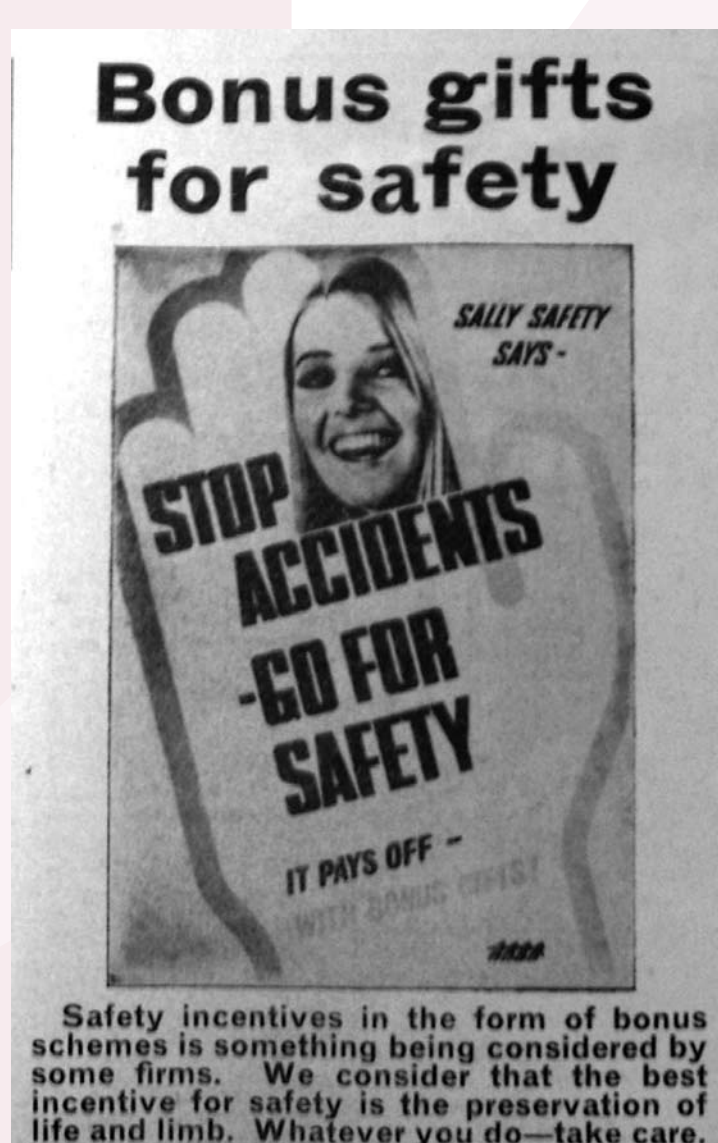
## FROM THIS POSITION OF EQUALITY WITHIN THE A.E.U. DID WOMEN PUSH FOR MANY HEALTH AND WELFARE ISSUES?

From the inaugural women's conference in 1943 resolutions were passed on issues concerning women which may have previously gone unaddressed, such as lighter work for women who were pregnant. Although carrying a resolution did not mean that it would automatically be enforced, it no doubt helped raise awareness about the situation faced by many women working within the engineering industry.

The subject of care for the children of working mothers is one that was raised soon after women were admitted to the union in 1943 and would continue to be raised in years to come. There were numerous resolutions passed in favour of state funded nurseries and articles in publications such as *The Way* in praise of nursery systems in other countries such as the U.S.A.

Though attention was focussed on issues related to working mothers, general safety within the workplace was also a subject of concern. In the 1950s unemployment and trade union membership numbers had been the central issues, but in the 1960s and 1970s safety at work became a priority and this was reflected in the growing number of resolutions passed on this matter.

With such advertising campaigns as 'Sally Safety', publications such as *The Way* tried to put forward individuals who women in the workplace could identify with. This ran alongside repeated calls from the conference for an increase in the number of factory inspectors.



*The Way, June 1967, p.8. 'Sally Safety': advertisement offering prizes for safety in the workplace.*

*'(T) he pamphlets and the different things we had done, such as the beauty parades, in a kind of new venture to organise women and it was interesting to know that other countries had done likewise.'*  
(W. Baddeley reporting on the International Metalworkers' Federation Women's Conference, Annual Women's Conference 1957, p. 22, MSS.259/AEU/4/15/57)



*The Way, September 1968, p.2. 'Play Talk and Friends'.*

## HOW DID WOMEN ENGINEERS SEEK TO RECONCILE TRADE UNION ISSUES WITH TRADITIONAL VIEWS OF FEMININITY?

The main concern in the initial years following women's inclusion in the A.E.U. was to overturn the perception of women as cheap, makeshift labour. As it became clear by 1950 that there was a permanent female workforce within the engineering industry the focus moved onto how best to increase trade union membership amongst female workers.

The low membership numbers were a constant concern throughout the 1950s and, in attempts to help recruitment, the monthly *Woman's Angle Newsletter* was launched, followed in the late 1960's by the quarterly *The Way: For Women and Youth*. These publications were therefore not just for women who were already members of the A.E.U. but tried to get more women to sign up.



*'What's Her Secret?', MSS.259/AEU/4/3.*

*'Her Secret'* was directly trying to show how femininity was not compromised by, but actually enhanced, trade union membership.

Repeated efforts were made to demonstrate that a commitment to trade unionism did not necessarily entail losing your feminine beauty. Thus in her 1960 speech to the women's conference, Mrs McKay drew upon Marilyn Monroe and Elizabeth Taylor as role models of female trade union members. The Margate branch even held a beauty pageant for its female members in 1968, at which 'mini-skirted lovely' Rose Young was voted the winner.

There was opposition raised to the publications' inclusion of fashion tips and glamorous models, as at the 1956 conference when some members felt the *Women's Angle Newsletter* should focus solely on trade union issues. Yet it must be remembered that these publications were in no small part recruitment propaganda and therefore to associate trade unionism with glamour and fashion was no doubt a very sensible move in widening the appeal of trade unionism.



*The Way, April 1968, p.2, 'Miss AEU'.*