

## Congress

There's nowhere in the world where the Congress is run like our Guild Congress. You don't let the men come out and smoke. When you're there, you're there. You've just got to concentrate you see. It really was — well, I've been to the Tories and I've been to the Labour Party Conference, but ours is the best!

In fact the first year I went to Congress we had to sit round the table — not that they hadn't asked me to go to Congress before, because they had — I just couldn't go and by that time my Ken was just starting work and my husband being a shift worker . . . and I said, you know I'd love to go to Congress, but I realise the difficulties . . . So we sat round the table the three of us and my husband said, "Let's look and see what shift I'm on — what week is it?" He looked up his shift — so he said "I'm on early shift. I'm off early in the morning" — because he was on at seven or whenever it was — "I can get him up — make sure he's up, before I go to work — see that he's had his breakfast and I shall be home by three in the afternoon that week, so I'm home by the time he comes home from work". You know this is how we worked it out. That's how we worked it out, and I was able to go to Congress — only for that reason.

And then the great really reaching all that was possible emerged when you were sent by your local Guild as a delegate to Congress and you escaped. You went and stayed in somebody else's house, somebody else cooked the breakfast — bed and breakfast usually of some kind — boarding house somewhere — and there you were in a seaside place other than Lowestoft and there was all the enthusiasm and I remember — I must have been very young — when my mum came home from her first Congress and I can remember the excitement — that she was full of it. Enthusiasm bursting over. She'd had four or five days of unforgettable experience and this was the life. This was it!

We used to have our meetings in Central Hall and then we would walk over to Parliament. It was a sight, 'cos once you're a Guildswoman and see them all with their scarves on and they're marching over, well, well you think you're somebody — especially when it's Congress — you see we have a Congress every year, and we all go up and I took my hubby with me once as a visitor and he turned round and he said: "I don't know," he said, "it's marvellous". There was a resolution being passed there — it was on pollution. And my hubby said when we came out, he said, "Well if you women have got the power in your hands" — because there was more women than men, wasn't there, after the war, "you've got the power," he said, "to rule the world". He was amazed at the women with their knowledge and resolutions they up and spoke out.

On the morning of the last day of conference an announcement is made about who is going to be the new President — it is supposed to have been kept a deadly secret, but it leaks out really and then at the very end of Conference, the retiring President takes off the Chain of Office and transfers it to the new one, wishing her a good year of office, and the Vice President who also wears a medallion and a chain, does the same. It used to be a very highly emotional thing and everyone was in tears and it was one of those things we tried to get rid of. It was an image of women that I felt we ought to get rid of — the idea of these emotional, sentimental creatures and it has now become so much more realistic and I haven't seen anyone in tears for years. It is much more businesslike now.

I remember when people used first names on the platform, we got all these letters from people saying it was undignified — that the General Secretary should be called by her Christian name was very undignified. And that was only a few years ago.

In those days at Munster Park we had a wonderful secretary of the section — her name was Mrs Banham and she used to run a coach from Charing Cross — we used to get the coach at Charing Cross and we'd go all round London picking up the delegates from East Ham, West Ham and everywhere, picking up the delegates. So we all got to know each other before we got to the conference. And that went on till Mrs Banham died.

It was fairly late on, by the time I started. I think they were beginning to stay in hotels — the Central Committee, I mean — but all the delegates would be in Co-op homes. It was vast, I mean, it would fill the Central Hall, Westminster, now that will hold several thousand, won't it? When it was held in Leicester, the DeMontfort Hall is a very big hall and it was full. I should say it was very likely 2,000 delegates and at least 1,000 observers, which is a very big Conference. It was marvellously well run. They had a Standing Orders Committee, who sorted things out and prompted the Chairman and most of the Chairmen were pretty good, some of them were very good indeed, the Presidents. Can you imagine controlling 2,000 delegates who were not frightfully well educated but, on the other hand, they had all this experience, they wouldn't be delegates unless they'd had experience of how to behave at meetings, how to move the amendments and so on and I think they were very exciting, I loved them, I loved these conferences — a brilliant atmosphere!

The first Congress I went to was in Blackpool in 1947 and, talk about a new girl. Thank God they had no resolutions that year — I was awe-inspired. All those thousands of women — I was really awe-inspired. You have to go to those places to find out how large your organisation is.

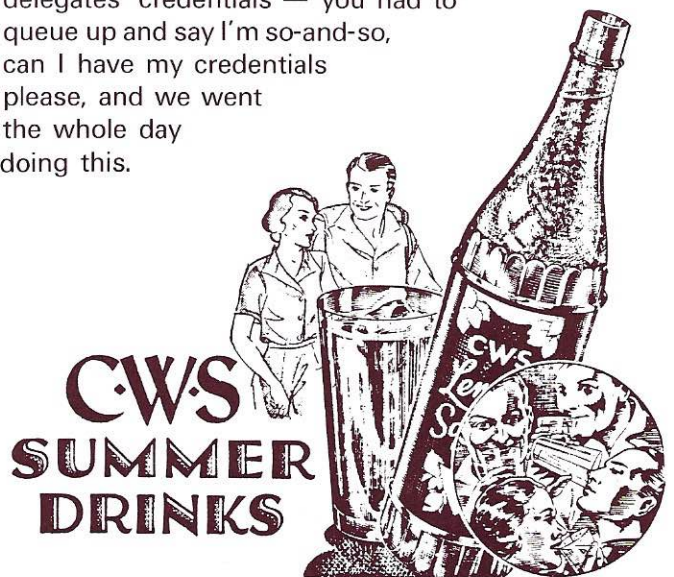
I said no, I'm not wearing a hat. A hat doesn't mean anything to me. I've never worn a hat and why should I start to wear a hat because I happen to be on the platform.



The hall taken for Congress would be absolutely packed with delegates so that there was hardly any room for visitors. And in those days, everybody wore hats and coats — it wasn't the done thing to go without a hat — in other words they aped their betters. It was always a working class movement and it often came out very strongly. I can remember one particular Guildswoman that used to go to Congress, year after year. She was an agricultural worker — she was more like a man. She came from somewhere outside Southend — an agricultural village — and she would get up to the rostrum and say — she would give her name, not her Christian name, her surname "Smith", like that — a very deep voice and my word, everybody learnt a lot from her. They got so used to seeing her at each Congress, that as soon as she started, they would say it with her. It was amusing, but she was a marvellous speaker. She dressed like a man and in those days — I'm going back a good way now — in those days women didn't wear trousers as much as they do today. It wasn't ladylike, you know, to wear trousers. She always wore trousers, a short shirt blouse and a tie. She was an agricultural worker. She was a real hard worker, but she was an educated woman and she put over very clearly the poisons that were used in spraying fields and that sort of thing. And I always remember it — it remained in my memory ever since — it still applies today. She said "if men have to get dressed up and put masks on to spray the fields — that goes into our food" — which is true. And that would have been about 1940.

The first congress I went to was in Leicester about 50 years ago. I suppose in those days there was about 1500 of us and the members used to bring their banners — they were all round the hall and it was really wonderful. And I remember so well because there is this hymn they sang — "Of whole heart cometh hope" and I remember singing

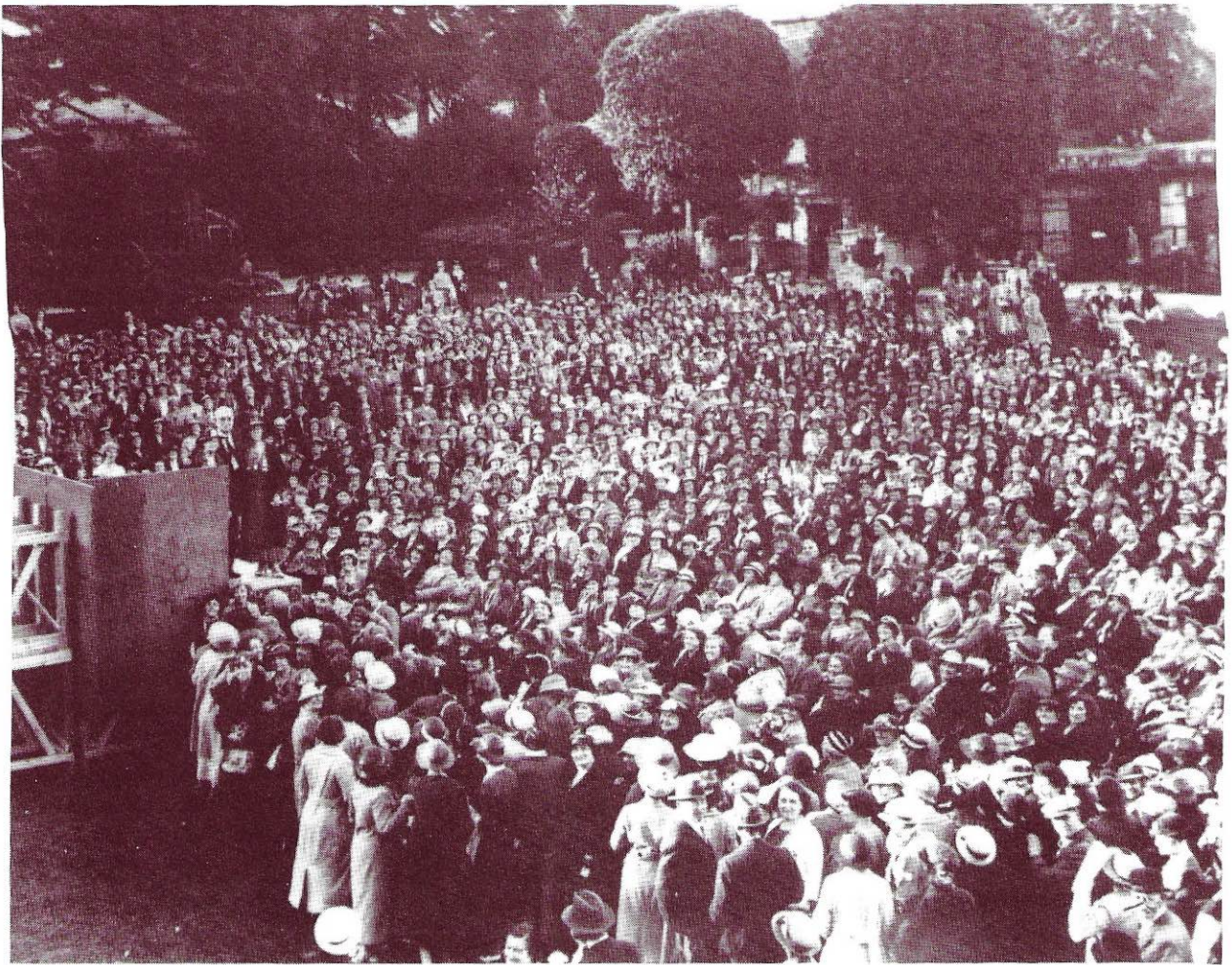
that and I remember the tears streaming down my eyes because I thought "all of us women have come together here to try and make the world a better place for people to live in — and what's going to be the outcome of it?" After all these years I can remember that. And I cried. It was a Rules Congress — which everyone was concerned about. We only had them every five years when you could amend the rules and you spent the whole of the first day there queuing up — the queue went right round this civic hall — because nothing was sent to you in advance — you had to queue up to collect all your papers. The Branches had had the resolutions and amendments but the delegates' credentials — you had to queue up and say I'm so-and-so, can I have my credentials please, and we went the whole day doing this.




---

**FROM EVERY GROCERY BRANCH  
ONE SHILLING PER BOTTLE**

---



## The Black List

Womens Guild produced a prohibited list saying you can't be a member of the Guild if you are a member of this, this and this and it produced in 1936 a thing that is still called today by a great many older Guildswomen "The Black Circular" which told you what you must not belong to — and if people belonged to those organisations they couldn't hold office in the Guild. They could be members and we would take their money, but they couldn't hold office.

I don't know if you know it, but I'm a member of the Communist Party and another time when I was in trouble — I can't remember the date, but it was then the Guild conference was held and they passed the resolution prohibiting — we called it the political rule — prohibiting anyone from holding office, from going to conferences at the Guild's expense, who was a member of an organisation other than the Co-operative Party or the Labour Party. This removed me. And that very year, I had run for the Guild District Committee which was delegates of all the Guilds in our part of the Western area. And I had won an election and I would have been going to my very first District Committee meeting the following week. I was at that Congress as a delegate when the rule was passed and the then District Secretary, she couldn't wait. I can see her now, come up that aisle in that big hall. I think it was at Southampton and she said, "You won't need to come to the next meeting, because you're no longer eligible". That's the kind of leadership in my opinion that killed the Guild movement and led to the state it's in now.

The leader of my Guild, she just died a year ago, Rosie Rice, was a delegate to Congress one year when my Guild agreed to vote against the political rule and she was an honest woman and she said that she would vote as we mandated her although we knew that she would have liked to have kept to the rule. And I do know from other delegates that she went to the rostrum and she spoke in favour of the abolition of the rule because of me. She didn't name me, but because she said that she had a Communist member in her Guild and blah blah blah, you know, all that I'd done for it . . .

People felt that if you didn't have the safeguard of the Black List then the Communist Party would come in, take over the Co-op Womens Guild and turn it into a Communist organisation and people still fear that and it's a very real fear. I know prominent Guildswomen, women who have been National Presidents, who really believe that there is this terrible danger and that we mustn't have anything to do with the Communists. I made up my mind that I was going to get that rule changed and I've tried and I've tried on the Executive Committee to get rid of the rule but when it comes to Congress, the hands go up in blind prejudice — not any thought or discussion — just blind prejudice. And this is another reason why the Guild is in decline — because it has clung to these outdated rules and outdated methods.

We always end up with the Rainbow Flag. And it's the most marvellous thing at Congress — all these women singing . . .

## The Guild and Co-operative Democracy

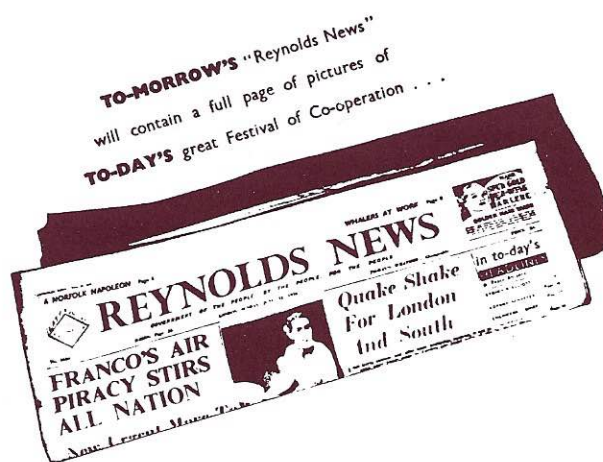
We were the Women with the Basket. We are the active ones in the Movement and always have been and if you want anything done, then ask Guildswomen. If they want their meetings — an audience for their meetings, they always write to the Guilds. "Members meeting so and so and so and so . . . please make sure you are there." And I'd get up at my Guild and say, "This is our job. We are members. We've got to go to our members' meetings".

When it came to elections, when I was elected, over 800 people voted. And you knew instinctively that half those people who voted were the Guildswomen. And the irony of it was that the Guildswomen used to vote, but they didn't used to vote for women. They would vote for the men folk because, you know what's inside us, we've always been the underdog and because they felt they hadn't got any faith in themselves, they hadn't got any faith in their next door woman neighbour either. And if the men wanted to get on the Committee of the Society what they did was inveigle their way into a Guild by being a speaker; they would come and talk about "My life as a Railway Man" and this has always happened. You see they had to get known if they wanted to get on the Management Committee or Board of Directors of the Society. So they used the Guild. They called them old so and so's when they were not with the Guilds, but when they came to the Guilds it was a different matter.

In order to win elections we had to visit the Women's Guilds and I suppose I visited every branch of the Women's Guilds in the Greater London Area — from Sudbury to Southend, from Heston to Hertfordshire — I covered London, speaking of Co-operative Progress. I still believed in those days that it was possible to be successful.

One man who came to speak was a butcher. And he was a Co-op butcher. But he wanted to get on to the Committee so what he did, he used to go along and talk about his life as a butcher and take along small joints. Then he explained what the joints were and gave the Guildswomen an insight into butchery and he would say "You can have those pieces of meat for your raffle". So we used to raffle the meat and of course we all thought he was a wonderful man. We all used to go and vote for him.

It is, I think, important to remember that the Women's Co-operative Guild was, and maybe in some towns is, the most important electoral element in the democracy in the Co-operative Movement. Without it, there is no democracy, because there is no mechanism for people to participate. It is just impossible to apply the one member, one vote principle unless people can be contacted, can be organised, can have some method of knowing who is standing for election. So the theory is useless unless there is an organisation of members to help them to participate. The Co-operative elections were very tied up with organising the Women's Guilds in the electoral process.



Members mark the opening of a new branch in Hounslow 1913.

## Wembley Pageant

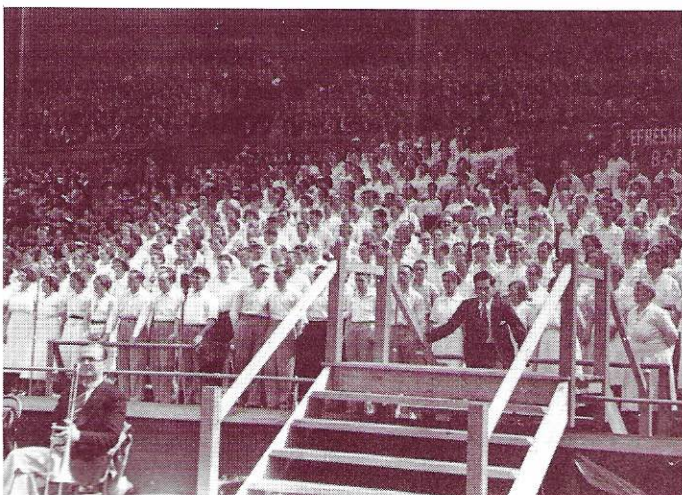
I remember the Pageant as a most spectacular affair. I wanted to be in the machine ballet that was part of it, but they used all the Woodcraft leaders from South East London and we were too far away to get to the rehearsals. So we had all them ladies, Woodcraft Folk dressed in the Basque colours — we got yards and yards and yards of this cheap material from somewhere and we had to make all these dresses and skirts for the girls, in stripes, and they had a three cornered sort of shawl in purple or green or orange, yellow and so on and they all came in Spanish Civil War colours. My sewing machine, that I still possess, stitched hundreds and hundreds of those coloured skirts.

They said, instead of having these small things, why not let's have a grand Co-operators Day — Wembley Stadium. We will have a great pageant, and Andre Van Gyseghem was pulled in — he was one of the famous at the time. They had enough money you see — they could go for the top. And for months, we in the youth movement and the Guilds, we were in a great pageant about the Industrial Revolution. "General Ludd says, General Ludd says, smash the machines," I can still quote it. So you had this tremendous Great Pageant with thousands and thousands of people converging on Wembley. It was the one and only. It was in 1938.

We went to the Pageant as Switzerland from our Guild. We had everything that we should have had, it was skis, everything to do with Switzerland and we did get a certificate for being correct.

My little girl, she was dressed as Food for Plenty. She looked lovely. She was dressed in bananas and fruit. She had flowers in her hair. She did look lovely. She was only about nine.

I was at the Pageant. There was more people there than I've ever seen in my life, I think. We all walked round the stadium singing. I was in the choir. Alan Bush was my conductor. I loved it. The Women's Co-operative Choir we were called. We were all in white dressed up as peace.



But the Pageant itself, it's never been before and it's never been since. I think Van Gyseghem was a fantastic organiser.

The machine ballet was really wonderful. I can see the wonderful costumes in my mind's eye. I can see all these steel automatons, shall we call them...and you got used to the music — the music at first was strong but it continued to give volume. And there was all sorts of things. It was really wonderful.

Yes I went to the Wembley Pageant and it was so hot that Birdy and I had our feet in the pool! We had all the countries that are in the Guild, all dressed up in their National colour, and we all marched round the Stadium singing our hymns. Jerusalem is our main one — and the Rainbow Flag.



They sent round to the Guilds asking would anyone be interested in a Pageant and there was only me was interested, so it was arranged. Andre van Gyseghem, he organised it and we used to meet at Forest Gate I think it was. He collected us all, Sunday mornings, for a kind of rehearsal to pick us out, what we were good for. I was only in a group that represented Latvia. I think all these countries were represented in the Pageant because the movement was growing and we use to chant the Luddites, about breaking the machinery and we got more and more excited — this was how he trained us, until we got to a crescendo (my youngsters used to go as well, you could take them) and later on towards the end we used to have rehearsals at Wembley and we used to take the children with us on the coach and they'd give us a snack lunch and then on the day, we all got dressed up — they provided us with our clothes — we marched along with the banners and there were flower girls and everything that was necessary for a mixture of countries. I think it was to spread the movement round the countries but I particularly remember the Luddites because we had to get excited and show our fists — rebelling against machinery. It was all anti-machinery, you see the war was building up and I think it must have built up a fever against machines of any kind. But the Luddites were backward weren't they, they thought that it was going to destroy their trade.

We all had white dresses — it was like a dream really. You think you're there — big place like Wembley Stadium, singing with all these people.

# CAMPAIGNS AND DEMONSTRATIONS

Everything we did was campaigning. It's a campaign life!

There was a time, no matter what working class demonstrations took place, you'd find Guild banners.

Mabel Ridealgh led us from Central Hall, in the older days when travel was cheaper, petrol was cheaper, we had so many outings to the Central Hall and all these MP's came to speak to us, you see. We used to get out petitions such as, we had a petition on "Eden must Go" on Suez. "Cheap rent". "The rates". "The cost of living" and with all these petitions we used to walk over you see, and Mabel Ridealgh on many occasions had led us.

We walked from Central Hall, where we'd had a meeting — we marched across with our banners you see to the Parliament. We weren't very popular I might tell you! And I'm charging in with my banner and about a 6' 3" policeman says to me "Where are you going with that?" So I says "I'm going in there" — he said "You can't take that in there," so I says "What am I supposed to do with it?" So he says "You must stand it over in that corner, you see." So I says "You'd better look after it — 'cos there'll be a row if I haven't got it when I come out". We've had some times in the House of Commons.



*Guild General Secretary Mabel Ridealgh (RF.) and other Guild members presenting an Anti-Nuclear petition to Larie Pavitt MP 1962.*

My husband and I would never never fail to go down the Embankment and start to walk to Hyde Park with our banners — we had the Guild banner up you know and the Trade Union banner. We never missed on the First of May.

In that period of unemployment, when there was a big unemployment workers movement, there were demonstrations and people came out onto the streets including Guildswomen, including representatives of the Co-operative movement, because these demonstrations were for the kind of things that they were fighting for.



## Maternity

The chairman of the Guild was this Mrs Layton, of course she's dead and gone now. Mrs. Layton was the first person that took an interest in maternity and having babies and she was married to a railway man and she was in Cricklewood Guild. But when I got to Cricklewood she was getting on in years, you know, more mature. But she was the one that when young people couldn't afford to have babies, she used to go out, but she would never afford to pay the £30 fee to be a midwife, but she learned so much from doctors, and doctors were so kind to her that they invited her and trusted her to go to maternity cases and she was only the wife of a railway man. She was a fantastic woman was Mrs Layton.

When I went into the Guild, Mrs Layton was getting on in years. She'd done all the good things, and all the old people round there, if they wanted anything they'd say "Ooh you go and see Mrs Layton, she'll do it for you. She'll give it to you." And I think many women round in Cricklewood cottages there, owed her their lives and that of the babies. She couldn't afford to pay that £30 to become a midwife, but she was a fantastic person, she really was.

Those first women that formed the Guild movement worked very hard and they helped such a lot of women and it was truly, truly necessary. Some of them had very hard lives. They seemed to be having babies one after the other and the prospect of no different life or anything. I mean, the campaign that we ran for contraception, there was a lot of controversy over it. It was a dirty word then. The women that did that, that took that up with the doctors, some of the doctors were most insulting to them. We used to get reports and I used to think "I couldn't do that". I think you need to be very brave to take up that sort of thing to fight for. It was a dirty word. It wasn't mentioned ever. The young women today don't know how much freedom they've got in that respect. I mean, some one had to start it.

## Miners' Strike

When the miners strike was on, they marched up to Hammersmith and the Garry Owen Club, it was the Irish club in those days and all the Guildswomen in London were asked to give a day to feed the miners, to cook and clean and that sort of thing and we all gave one day to looking after the miners.

My husband told me that in 1921, in the bad times in South Wales, because he was a South Wales Miner he said that in 1921, the Co-op allowed all the miners that were out on strike to run bills up. If they hadn't got the money, the Co-op allowed all the miners to have food and things till the worst times were over and he said he could really speak ... well everyone in his valley ... every miner paid up every penny to the Co-operative movement afterwards. That was the solidarity between the miners and the people and the Co-operative movement. They trusted them you see. Heartbreaking days. 1921.

When the Kent mines were on strike we collected food, you know, tinned stuff and we took it to the Society's depot.

My mother was a member of the Labour Party and she was very active in the Campaign for the miners' children and she sold those brass miners' lamps for weeks and weeks and weeks on end outside the Co-op, was involved in collecting clothing for miners' children and doing teas for people who came to tell people in London what the conditions were in the North and Wales. She'd known poverty to the extent of going to school with no shoes on and wearing her brothers and sisters boots, handed down the line, so she really knew from personal experience what they were suffering.

---

---

---

# Buy Keighley

# Co-operative

# COAL



*The dividend swells the saving*

**BECAUSE WE HAVE NOT  
ADVANCED OUR PRICES  
BUY YOUR WINTER COAL NOW!**

---

---

---

## Women's Suffrage

Women had just got the vote at thirty but we were saying that women had the same right as men — we were as good as men and we had the right to have the vote. We carried the weight of the family while the man carried the weight of, you know, keeping the family. But we had to bring them up and we said we were just as important as men. They got the vote at 30 but they wouldn't bring it down. So we then formed a big effort throughout the country demanding that we should have the vote at twenty-one, the same as men and I headed the women for the Enfield Highway Society. All the Guilds sent a representative, we had quite a number of Guilds in the Society (in the different areas) and I headed that and we went to the House of Commons to demand that we should be given the same rights as men and we met our Member of Parliament of that time, we demanded that we should see him — we said we wouldn't go away until he came. We told the policeman that. And eventually he did come out and he gave me a lot of chinwag, you know, he was a real spoofer. He thought we should just wait a little longer — we'd got it at thirty and that was big step he said, so "Yes" I said "but it should have been a bigger step because we're quite as good as a man at twenty-one." And he agreed with me that I was as good as a man. I headed that. And I was twenty-one.