

Women in Congress

By J. J. MALLON

NOT the least significant testimony to the influence of Trade Unionism during the lifetime of the Trades Union Congress is the change in the status of the women workers. Trade Unionism among women is largely the outcome of propaganda and organisation within the last 30 years, though women delegates have been attending the Trades Union Congress practically from the beginning of its existence and efforts were made as early as the "30's" of last century to enrol women wage-earners as Trade Unionists.

Representatives of the working women made their voices heard first at the Glasgow Congress in 1875. A feature of the Congress programme for many years has been the meeting for women workers, with which the names of the late Lady Dilke and Mary Macarthur, as well as Miss Gertrude Tuckwell, and others are associated. Lady Dilke, like her husband, Sir Charles Dilke, took a keen interest in Trades Unionism; she appeared at Congress first in 1889, and from that year until her death in 1904 she was a regular attendant. On her death, Congress expressed deep regret and voted a sum of £50 to the Lady Dilke Memorial Fund.

In the history of Congress the work of organising the women wage-earners is closely linked with the long and skilfully directed agitation which established in this country the legal minimum wage system, through the operation of the Trade Boards. There is dispute as to which of the political parties may claim most credit for the establishment of the system. But the truth is, of course, that the "father" of systems of legal minimum wages is Sidney Webb. Mr. Webb's brilliant and original work on "Industrial Democracy" revealed the "parasitic trade" as a deadly element in economic society—subtly and steadily undermining alike the foundations of Trade Unionism and Free Trade.