

## Evidence to the Arbitration Hearing 1920

*“Well, rent is very dear now. People are out to make, and everyone cannot live at home”.*

*“We spend most of our spare time brushing and remaking our costumes.”*

*“...if any of the gentlemen present ask their wives, they will find their bills three times that price”.*

The quotes above are from the evidence given by courageous union member Eileen Despard at the Arbitration Hearing on a salary claim by the Irish Bank Officials' Association in 1920.

Eileen, and her colleague Miss Alexander, were the two women witnesses for the union, approximately 20 were men. All bank representatives and arbitration hearers were men and the 'Umpire' was the Lord Chancellor for Ireland.

For more fascinating insights into 'costumes' and the social status of women who worked in the banks, the familiar problems of having to clothe and house oneself on an inadequate salary, read the following extracts from the questioning of the Eileen Despard, from Bank of Ireland, Dublin. Eileen's pay, having worked in the bank for five years, was £112 per annum. She was supporting a claim for a £144 per annum starting salary.

**Miss Eileen Despard (ED):** I am the analysis clerk at present. Analysis deals with exchanges, cheques drawn on one bank and cashed on another. They have to be analysed and balanced. I assist the teller in certain branches of work. I also count notes and check them, and I am responsible, of course, if I make a mistake, for any deficiency that may occur.

**Sergeant Hanna (SH):** (Kings Counsel for Irish Bank Officials' Association): About the cost of living, Miss Despard, can you give the Arbitrators and the Lord Chancellor some information with reference to what your opinion is on the cost of living for a young, unmarried lady?

**ED:** “I think it would take £190 a year, that is for a girl to be absolutely independent. As girls are in the bank at present, they are not independent. They are all dependent on the sympathy of their friends. They could not possibly live on the salaries they get or anything like them.

**Lord Chancellor:** You mean if a young lady was left to her own resources?

**ED:** She could not keep up the position of clerk. I know many girls have to do their own costumes and hats in their spare time in order to keep a respectable appearance.

**SH:** As we know, young ladies in the bank are of a very good class?

**ED:** Yes

**SH:** .....they are supposed to be above the level of the ordinary shop girl or the girl of that class?

**ED:** Yes

.....

**SH:** How much of that £190 would be down for clothes?

**ED:** Well, none of us can afford to spend it. We spend most of our spare time brushing and remaking our costumes.

Banks' Kings Counsel (**Banks' KC**): How much of the £190 is spent on clothes?

**ED:** To dress ourselves properly it would take at least £60. I am very grateful to my relatives for presents of many clothes. I don't know how my unfortunate fellow-workers get on.

**Banks' KC:** Do you suggest that no young lady employed by the bank could properly keep herself in clothes for less than £60?

**ED:** I don't think so; and if any of the gentlemen present ask their wives, they will find their bills three times that price.

**Banks' KC:** I am not sure that is the standard I wish to put to you. .... What do you put down for lodging for this independent lady?

**ED:** I would say it would take £52 for the mere lodging and £60 for food. I have made inquiries, and they charge about £12 for light and coal, and £6 for laundry

**Banks' KC:** £60 for a room means the rent of one room only?

**ED:** ... (agrees)

**Banks' KC:** I suggest £60 as extravagantly high for one room?

**ED:** Well, rent is very dear now. People are out to make, and everyone cannot live at home.

**Banks' KC:** This £190 is an estimate?

**ED:** It is an estimate of how a girl can be absolutely independent.

**Banks' KC:** Your own estimate?

**ED:** Yes. A lot of girls' relatives object to pay girls for doing the bank's work.

**Bank's KC:** £190 is your own estimate, without any actual experience?

**ED:** Yes. I get presents from my relatives, and I live at home.

In response to a question posed by Mr Blacker Arbitrator, Bank nominee on the Arbitration panel regarding what was the claim for 'ladies', Eileen responded:

**ED:** Well no. The girls wish to start at the same salary as the men, and to go up by £10 for about 10 years

**Arbitrator:** According to the scale you claim £144?

**ED:** She could not live on it. We are asking it because we know we would probably get no more. As we think it is the correct sum, we have approved of it.

**SH:** Do you know any of the Civil Service young ladies...?

**ED:** At the same time that I passed the examination for this bank I took third place in the competitive examination for the Civil Service. I would be very much better off there now than I am here.

**SH:** You have a sister employed in the insurance business?

**ED:** Yes, in the Norwegian Atlas Insurance Company. She is 22 years of age and is paid £200 a year, with a variable bonus which brings it to £250. She does not always get £250 because the bonus is variable.

**SH:** What is your age?

**ED:** Just 26 now.

**SH:** That closes our case.