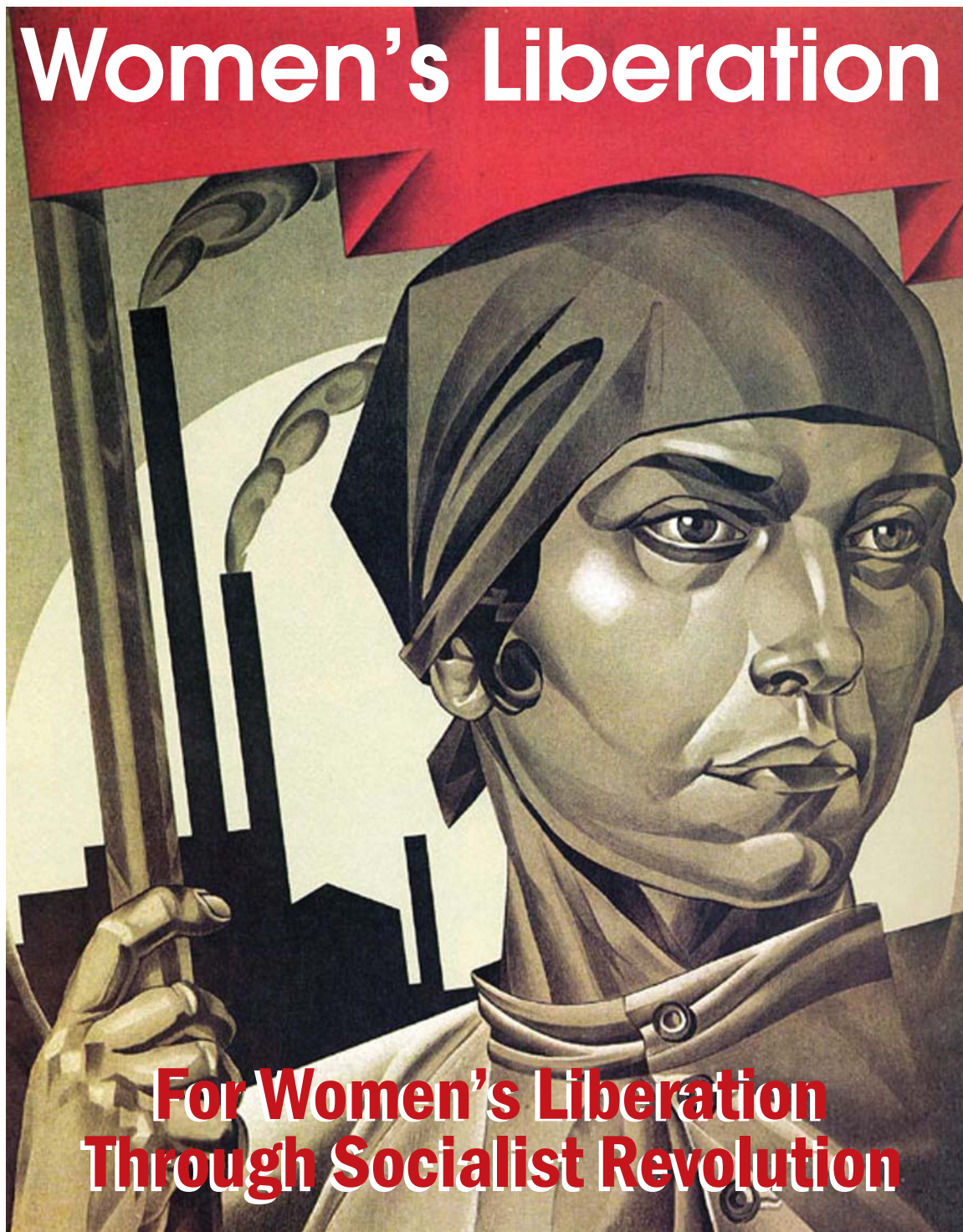




# Marxism and

# Women's Liberation



**For Women's Liberation  
Through Socialist Revolution**

An Internationalist Group Pamphlet  
May 2017

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# Women's Liberation Through Socialist Revolution

## Introduction

The great French utopian socialist Charles Fourier observed "that in any given society the degree of woman's emancipation is the natural measure of the general emancipation." By that measure, and many others, the social condition of humanity in these early years of the 21st century is decidedly regressing. Women's rights are everywhere under attack.

The struggle for the emancipation of women has been a core issue ever since the French Revolution of 1789-1802. Although many key demands are basic democratic rights (the right to vote, the right to abortion), the implacable opposition to equality for women is rooted in the nuclear family, key to the maintenance and reproduction of capitalist society.

On the "woman question," there are two sharply counterposed programs in conflict: bourgeois feminism and revolutionary Marxism. While the term "feminist" is often loosely applied to all those who support women's rights, feminism is a bourgeois ideology and program. By posing "sisterhood" between bourgeois and working-class women, feminism is an obstacle to the liberation of women.

Marxism emphasizes the *class divide*, locating the origin of woman's oppression in the advent of private property and emergence of a ruling class, backed up by its enforcing power, the state. From slavery to serfdom and now capitalism, women have been held in thrall, and even as we fight for every real reform, this condition will not change short of a socialist revolution making possible the superseding of the family through collective institutions.

The present publication begins with writings of leading Marxist theorists, from Marx and Engels to August Bebel, Clara Zetkin, Rosa Luxemburg and Leon Trotsky. There follow three groundbreaking articles on feminism vs. Marxism and the history of communist work among women by German Social Democracy and the Russian Bolsheviks. These articles appeared in the magazine *Women and Revolution*, published by the then-revolutionary Spartacist League.

Finally, several articles reflect the work of the League for the Fourth International in our fight for *women's liberation through socialist revolution*. This collection should be read together with our pamphlet *Bolsheviks and the Liberation of Women* (ad on page 49), which also includes articles by Alexandra Kollontai and resolutions of the Communist International on special work among women.



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# Marx and Engels on Liberation of Women: Excerpts The Communist Manifesto (1848)

By Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels

Abolition [*Aufhebung*]<sup>1</sup> of the family! Even the most radical flare up at this infamous proposal of the Communists.

On what foundation is the present family, the bourgeois family, based? On capital, on private gain. In its completely developed form, this family exists only among the bourgeoisie. But this state of things finds its complement in the practical absence of the family among the proletarians, and in public prostitution.

The bourgeois family will vanish as a matter of course when its complement vanishes, and both will vanish with the vanishing of capital.

Do you charge us with wanting to stop the exploitation of children by their parents? To this crime we plead guilty.

But, you will say, we destroy the most hallowed of relations, when we replace home education by social.

And your education! Is not that also social, and determined by the social conditions under which you educate, by the intervention, direct or indirect, of society, by means of schools, etc.? The Communists have not invented the intervention of society in education; they do but seek to alter the character of that intervention, and to rescue education from the influence of the ruling class.<sup>2</sup>

The bourgeois clap-trap about the family, and education, about the hallowed co-relation of parent and child, becomes all the more disgusting, the more, by the action of modern industry, all family ties among the proletarians are torn asunder, and their children transformed into simple articles of commerce and instruments of labor.

But you Communists would introduce community of women, screams the whole bourgeoisie in chorus.

The bourgeois sees in his wife a mere instrument of

<sup>1</sup> Here and throughout the *Manifesto* when speaking of “abolition,” the original German is *Aufhebung*, which also denoted overcoming, superseding. In Hegel’s dialectic, the *Aufhebung* represents the resolution of a contradiction. Thus the meaning of Marx and Engels’ phrase included the concept of the superseding of the family by higher, collective social institutions. (Note: Footnotes in this publication are by *The Internationalist*.)

<sup>2</sup> At the end of the *Manifesto*, Marx and Engels put forward a series of ten measures aiming at “entirely revolutionizing the mode of production,” including the demand for “Free education for all children in public schools.” The communists were among the first to call for free public education for all, which the decrepit bourgeoisie is now avidly seeking to abolish.



Friedrich Engels and Karl Marx

production. He hears that the instruments of production are to be exploited in common, and, naturally, can come to no other conclusion than that the lot of being common to all will likewise fall to the women.

He has not even a suspicion that the real point aimed at is to do away with the status of women as mere instruments of production.

For the rest, nothing is more ridiculous than the virtuous indignation of our bourgeois at the community of women which, they pretend, is to be openly and officially established by the Communists. The Communists have no need to introduce community of women; it has existed almost from time immemorial.

Our bourgeois, not content with having the wives and daughters of their proletarians at their disposal, not to speak of common prostitutes, take the greatest pleasure in seducing each other’s wives.

Bourgeois marriage is, in reality, a system of wives in common and thus, at the most, what the Communists might possibly be reproached with is that they desire to introduce, in substitution for a hypocritically concealed, an openly legalized community of women.<sup>3</sup> For the rest, it is self-evident, that the abolition of the present system of production must bring with it the abolition of the community of women springing from that system, i.e., of prostitution both public and private. ■

<sup>3</sup> Marx and Engels are being ironic, as the following sentence shows.

# The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State

(1884)

By Friedrich Engels

## 4. The Monogamous Family

It develops out of the pairing family, as previously shown, in the transitional period between the upper and middle stages of barbarism; its decisive victory is one of the signs that civilization is beginning. It is based on the supremacy of the man, the express purpose being to produce children of undisputed paternity; such paternity is demanded because these children are later to come into their father's property as his natural heirs. It is distinguished from pairing marriage by the much greater strength of the marriage tie, which can no longer be dissolved at either partner's wish. As a rule, it is now only the man who can dissolve it, and repudiate his wife. The right of conjugal infidelity also remains secured to him, at any rate by custom (the *Code Napoléon* explicitly accords it to the husband as long as he does not bring his concubine into the house), and as social life develops he exercises his right more and more; should the wife recall the old form of sexual life and attempt to revive it, she is punished more severely than ever.

We meet this new form of the family in all its severity among the Greeks. While the position of the goddesses in their mythology, as Marx points out, brings before us an earlier period when the position of women was freer and more respected, in the heroic age we find the woman already being humiliated by the domination of the man and by competition from female slaves. Note how Telemachus in the *Odyssey* silences his mother.<sup>1</sup> In Homer young women are booty and are handed over to the pleasure of the conquerors, the handsomest being picked by the commanders in order of rank; the entire *Iliad*, it will be remembered, turns on the quarrel of Achilles and Agamemnon over one of these slaves. If a hero is of any importance, Homer also mentions the captive girl with whom he shares his tent and his bed. These girls were also taken back to Greece and brought under the same roof as the wife, as Cassandra was brought by Agamemnon in Aeschylus; the sons begotten of them received a small share of the paternal inheritance and had the full status of freemen. Teucer, for instance, is a natural son of Telamon by one of these slaves and has the right to use his father's name.

The legitimate wife was expected to put up with all this, but herself to remain strictly chaste and faithful. In the heroic age a Greek woman is, indeed, more respected than in the period of civilization, but to her husband she is after all nothing but the mother of his legitimate children and heirs, his chief housekeeper and the supervisor of his female slaves, whom he can and does take as concubines if he so fancies. It is the

<sup>1</sup> The reference is to a passage where Telemachus, son of Odysseus and Penelope, tells his mother to get on with her weaving and leave the men to mind their own business (*Odyssey*, Book 21, ll. 350 ff.).



**Hetaira depicted on ancient Greek ornamental plate.**

existence of slavery side by side with monogamy, the presence of young, beautiful slaves belonging unreservedly to the *man*, that stamps monogamy from the very beginning with its specific character of monogamy *for the woman only*, but not for the man. And that is the character it still has today.

Coming to the later Greeks, we must distinguish between Dorians and Ionians. Among the former – Sparta is the classic example – marriage relations are in some ways still more archaic than even in Homer. The recognized form of marriage in Sparta was a pairing marriage, modified according to the Spartan conceptions of the state, in which there still survived vestiges of group marriage. Childless marriages were dissolved; King Anaxandridas (about 650 B.C.), whose first wife was childless, took a second and kept two households; about the same time, King Ariston, who had two unfruitful wives, took a third, but dismissed one of the other two. On the other hand, several brothers could have a wife in common; a friend who preferred his friend's wife could share her with him; and it was considered quite proper to place one's wife at the disposal of a sturdy "stallion," as Bismarck would say, even if he was not a citizen. A passage in Plutarch, where a Spartan woman refers an importunate wooer to her husband, seems to indicate, according to Schömann, even greater freedom. Real adultery, secret infidelity by the woman without the husband's knowledge, was therefore unheard of. On the other hand, domestic slavery was unknown in Sparta, at least during its best period; the unfree

helots<sup>2</sup> were segregated on the estates and the Spartans were therefore less tempted to take the helots' wives. Inevitably in these conditions women held a much more honored position in Sparta than anywhere else in Greece. The Spartan women and the élite of the Athenian *hetairai*<sup>3</sup> are the only Greek women of whom the ancients speak with respect and whose words they thought it worth while to record.

The position is quite different among the Ionians; here Athens is typical. Girls only learned spinning, weaving, and sewing, and at most a little reading and writing. They lived more or less behind locked doors and had no company except other women. The women's apartments formed a separate part of the house, on the upper floor or at the back, where men, especially strangers, could not easily enter, and to which the women retired when men visited the house. They never went out without being accompanied by a female slave; indoors they were kept under regular guard. Aristophanes speaks of Molossian dogs kept to frighten away adulterers, and, at any rate in the Asiatic towns, eunuchs were employed to keep watch over the women – making and exporting eunuchs was an industry in Chios as early as Herodotus' time, and, according to Wachsmuth, it was not only the barbarians who bought the supply. In Euripides a woman is called an *oikourema*, a thing (the word is neuter) for looking after the house, and, apart from her business of bearing children, that was all she was for the Athenian – his chief female domestic servant. The man had his athletics and his public business, from which women were barred; in addition, he often had female slaves at his disposal and during the most flourishing days of Athens an extensive system of prostitution which the state at least favored. . . .

This is the origin of monogamy as far as we can trace it back among the most civilized and highly developed people of antiquity. It was not in any way the fruit of individual sex-love, with which it had nothing whatever to do; marriages remained as before marriages of convenience. It was the first form of the family to be based, not on natural, but on economic conditions – on the victory of private property over primitive, natural communal property. The Greeks themselves put the matter quite frankly: the sole exclusive aims of monogamous marriage were to make the man supreme in the family, and to propagate, as the future heirs to his wealth, children indisputably his own. Otherwise, marriage was a burden, a duty which had to be performed, whether one liked it or not, to gods, state, and one's ancestors. In Athens the law exacted from the man not only marriage but also the performance of a minimum of so-called conjugal duties.

Thus when monogamous marriage first makes its appearance in history, it is not as the reconciliation of man and woman, still less as the highest form of such a reconciliation. Quite the contrary. Monogamous marriage comes on the scene as the subjugation of the one sex by the other; it announces a struggle between the sexes unknown throughout the whole previous prehistoric period. In an old unpublished manuscript, written by Marx and myself in 1846,<sup>4</sup> I find the words: "The first division

<sup>2</sup> Helots were subjugated peasants in Sparta who were kept in serf-like bondage to the land, while chattel slaves were the personal property of the slave owner.

<sup>3</sup> The *hetairai* were courtesans, often highly educated.

<sup>4</sup> The reference here is to *The German Ideology*, published after Engels' death.

of labor is that between man and woman for the propagation of children." And today I can add: The first class opposition that appears in history coincides with the development of the antagonism between man and woman in monogamous marriage, and the first class oppression coincides with that of the female sex by the male. Monogamous marriage was a great historical step forward; nevertheless, together with slavery and private wealth, it opens the period that has lasted until today in which every step forward is also relatively a step backward, in which prosperity and development for some is won through the misery and frustration of others. It is the cellular form of civilized society, in which the nature of the oppositions and contradictions fully active in that society can be already studied. . . .

### Bourgeois Marriage

Nowadays there are two ways of concluding a bourgeois marriage. In Catholic countries the parents, as before, procure a suitable wife for their young bourgeois son, and the consequence is, of course, the fullest development of the contradiction inherent in monogamy: the husband abandons himself to hetaerism and the wife to adultery. Probably the only reason why the Catholic Church abolished divorce was because it had convinced itself that there is no more a cure for adultery than there is for death. In Protestant countries, on the other hand, the rule is that the son of a bourgeois family is allowed to choose a wife from his own class with more or less freedom; hence there may be a certain element of love in the marriage, as, indeed, in accordance with Protestant hypocrisy, is always assumed, for decency's sake. Here the husband's hetaerism is a more sleepy kind of business, and adultery by the wife is less the rule. But since, in every kind of marriage, people remain what they were before, and since the bourgeois of Protestant countries are mostly philistines, all that this Protestant monogamy achieves, taking the average of the best cases, is a conjugal partnership of leaden boredom, known as "domestic bliss." The best mirror of these two methods of marrying is the novel – the French novel for the Catholic manner, the German for the Protestant. In both, the hero "gets" them; in the German, the young man gets the girl; in the French, the husband gets the horns. Which of them is worse off is sometimes questionable. This is why the French bourgeois is as much horrified by the dullness of the German novel as the German philistine is by the "immorality" of the French. However, now that "Berlin is a world capital," the German novel is beginning with a little less timidity to use as part of its regular stock-in-trade the hetaerism and adultery long familiar to that town.

In both cases, however, the marriage is conditioned by the class position of the parties and is to that extent always a marriage of convenience. In both cases this marriage of convenience turns often enough into crassest prostitution – sometimes of both parties, but far more commonly of the woman, who only differs from the ordinary courtesan in that she does not let out her body on piece-work as a wage-worker, but sells it once and for all into slavery. And of all marriages of convenience Fourier's words hold true: "As in grammar two negatives make an affirmative, so in matrimonial morality two prostitutions pass for a virtue."<sup>5</sup> Sex-love in the relationship with a woman becomes, and can

<sup>5</sup> Charles Fourier, *Théorie de l'Unité Universelle*. Paris, 1841-45, Vol. III, p. 120.

only become, the real rule among the oppressed classes, which means today among the proletariat – whether this relation is officially sanctioned or not. But here all the foundations of typical monogamy are cleared away. Here there is not property, for the preservation and inheritance of which monogamy and male supremacy were established; hence there is no incentive to make this male supremacy effective. What is more, there are no means of making it so. Bourgeois law, which protects this supremacy, exists only for the possessing class and their dealings with the proletarians. The law costs money and, on account of the worker's poverty, it has no validity for his relation to his wife. Here quite other personal and social conditions decide. And now that large-scale industry has taken the wife out of the home onto the labor market and into the factory, and made her often the bread-winner of the family, no basis for any kind of male supremacy is left in the proletarian household – except, perhaps, for something of the brutality towards women that has spread since the introduction of monogamy. The proletarian family is therefore no longer monogamous in the strict sense, even where there is passionate love and firmest loyalty on both sides, and maybe all the blessings of religious and civil authority. Here, therefore, the eternal attendants of monogamy, heterism and adultery, play only an almost vanishing part. The wife has in fact regained the right to dissolve the marriage, and if two people cannot get on with one another, they prefer to separate. In short, proletarian marriage is monogamous in the etymological sense of the word, but not at all in its historical sense.

Our jurists, of course, find that progress in legislation is leaving women with no further ground of complaint. Modern civilized systems of law increasingly acknowledge, first, that for a marriage to be legal, it must be a contract freely entered into by both partners, and, secondly, that also in the married state both partners must stand on a common footing of equal rights and duties. If both these demands are consistently carried out, say the jurists, women have all they can ask.

This typically legalist method of argument is exactly the same as that which the radical republican bourgeois uses to put the proletarian in his place. The labor contract is to be freely entered into by both partners. But it is considered to have been freely entered into as soon as the law makes both parties equal *on paper*. The power conferred on the one party by the difference of class position, the pressure thereby brought to bear on the other party – the real economic position of both – that is not the law's business. Again, for the duration of the labor contract both parties are to have equal rights, in so far as one or the other does not expressly surrender them. That economic relations compel the worker to surrender even the last semblance of equal rights – here again, that is no concern of the law.

In regard to marriage, the law, even the most advanced, is fully satisfied as soon as the partners have formally recorded that they are entering into the marriage of their own free consent. What goes on in real life behind the juridical scenes, how this free consent comes about – that is not the business of the law and the jurist. And yet the most elementary comparative jurisprudence should show the jurist what this free consent really amounts to. In the countries where an obligatory share of the paternal inheritance is secured to the children by law and they



**Bourgeois family, c. 1900.**

cannot therefore be disinherited – in Germany, in the countries with French law and elsewhere – the children are obliged to obtain their parents' consent to their marriage. In the countries with English law, where parental consent to a marriage is not legally required, the parents on their side have full freedom in the testamentary disposal of their property and can disinherit their children at their pleasure. It is obvious that, in spite and precisely because of this fact, freedom of marriage among the classes with something to inherit is in reality not a whit greater in England and America than it is in France and Germany.

As regards the legal equality of husband and wife in marriage, the position is no better. The legal inequality of the two partners, bequeathed to us from earlier social conditions, is not the cause but the effect of the economic oppression of the woman. In the old communistic household, which comprised many couples and their children, the task entrusted to the women of managing the household was as much a public and socially necessary industry as the procuring of food by the men. With the patriarchal family, and still more with the single monogamous family, a change came. Household management lost its public character. It no longer concerned society. It became a *private service*; the wife became the head servant, excluded from all participation in social production. Not until the coming of modern large-scale industry was the road to social production opened to her again – and then only to the proletarian wife. But it was opened in such a manner that, if she carries out her duties in the private service of her family, she remains excluded from public production and unable to earn; and if she wants to take part in public production and earn independently, she cannot carry out family duties. And the wife's position in the factory is the position of women in all branches of business, right up to medicine and the law. The modern individual family is founded on the open or concealed domestic slavery of the



**Working-class family, East End, London, c. 1900.**

wife, and modern society is a mass composed of these individual families as its molecules.

In the great majority of cases today, at least in the possessing classes, the husband is obliged to earn a living and support his family, and that in itself gives him a position of supremacy, without any need for special legal titles and privileges. Within the family he is the bourgeois and the wife represents the proletariat. In the industrial world, the specific character of the economic oppression burdening the proletariat is visible in all its sharpness only when all special legal privileges of the capitalist class have been abolished and complete legal equality of both classes established. The democratic republic does not do away with the opposition of the two classes; on the contrary, it provides the clear field on which the fight can be fought out. And in the same way, the peculiar character of the supremacy of the husband over the wife in the modern family, the necessity of creating real social equality between them, and the way to do it, will only be seen in the clear light of day when both possess legally complete equality of rights. Then it will be plain that the first condition for the liberation of the wife is to bring the whole female sex back into public industry, and that this in turn demands the abolition of the monogamous family as the economic unit of society.

We thus have three principal forms of marriage which correspond broadly to the three principal stages of human development. For the period of savagery, group marriage; for barbarism, pairing marriage; for civilization, monogamy, supplemented by adultery and prostitution. Between pairing marriage and monogamy intervenes a period in the upper stage of barbarism when men have female slaves at their command and polygamy is practiced.

As our whole presentation has shown, the progress which manifests itself in these successive forms is connected with the

peculiarity that women, but not men, are increasingly deprived of the sexual freedom of group marriage. In fact, for men group marriage actually still exists even to this day. What for the woman is a crime, entailing grave legal and social consequences, is considered honorable in a man or, at the worse, a slight moral blemish which he cheerfully bears. But the more the heterism of the past is changed in our time by capitalist commodity production and brought into conformity with it, the more, that is to say, it is transformed into undisguised prostitution, the more demoralizing are its effects. And it demoralizes men far more than women. Among women, prostitution degrades only the unfortunate ones who become its victims, and even these by no means to the extent commonly believed. But it degrades the character of the whole male world. A long engagement, particularly, is in nine cases out of ten a regular preparatory school for conjugal infidelity.

We are now approaching a social revolution in which the economic foundations of monogamy as they have existed hitherto will disappear just as surely as those of its complement – prostitution. Monogamy arose from the concentration of considerable wealth in the hands of a single individual – a man – and from the need to bequeath this wealth to the children of that man and of no other. For this purpose, the monogamy of the woman was required, not that of the man, so this monogamy of the woman did not in any way interfere with open or concealed polygamy on the part of the man. But by transforming by far the greater portion, at any rate, of permanent, heritable wealth – the means of production – into social property, the coming social revolution will reduce to a minimum all this anxiety about bequeathing and inheriting. Having arisen from economic causes, will monogamy then disappear when these causes disappear?

One might answer, not without reason: far from disappearing, it will, on the contrary, be realized completely. For with the transformation of the means of production into social property there will disappear also wage-labor, the proletariat, and therefore the necessity for a certain – statistically calculable – number of women to surrender themselves for money. Prostitution disappears; monogamy, instead of collapsing, at last becomes a reality – also for men.

In any case, therefore, the position of men will be very much altered. But the position of women, of *all* women, also undergoes significant change. With the transfer of the means of production into common ownership, the single family ceases to be the economic unit of society. Private housekeeping is transformed into a social industry. The care and education of the children becomes a public affair; society looks after all children alike, whether they are legitimate or not. This removes all the anxiety about the “consequences,” which today is the most essential social – moral as well as economic – factor that prevents a girl from giving herself completely to the man she loves. Will not that suffice to bring about the gradual growth of unconstrained sexual intercourse and with it a more tolerant public opinion in regard to a maiden’s honor and a woman’s shame? And, finally, have we not seen that in the modern world monogamy and prostitution are indeed contradictions, but inseparable contradictions, poles of the same state of society? Can prostitution disappear without dragging monogamy with it into the abyss? ■

# Woman and Socialism

(1879)

By August Bebel

## Chapter XXVIII. Woman in the Future (excerpts)

This chapter may be brief. It merely contains the conclusions that may be drawn in regard to the position of woman in future society, from all that has been said so far; conclusions that every reader can easily draw for him or herself.

In the new society woman will be entirely independent, both socially and economically. She will not be subjected to even a trace of domination and exploitation, but will be free and man's equal, and mistress of her own lot. Her education will be the same as man's, with the exception of those deviations that are necessitated by the differences of sex and sexual functions. Living under normal conditions of life, she may fully develop and employ her physical and mental faculties. She chooses an occupation suited to her wishes, inclinations and abilities, and works under the same conditions as man. Engaged as a practical working woman in some field of industrial activity, she may, during a second part of the day, be educator, teacher or nurse, during a third she may practice a science or an art, and during a fourth she may perform some administrative function. She studies, works, enjoys pleasures and recreation with other women or with men, as she may choose or as occasions may present themselves.

In the choice of love she is as free and unhampered as man. She woos or is wooed, and enters into a union prompted by no other considerations but her own feelings. This union is a private agreement, without the interference of a functionary, just as marriage has been a private agreement until far into the middle ages. Here Socialism will create nothing new, it will merely reinstate, on a higher level of civilization and under a different social form, *what generally prevailed before private property dominated society*.

Man shall dispose of his own person, provided that the gratification of his impulses is not harmful or detrimental to others. The satisfaction of the sexual impulse is as much the private concern of each individual, as the satisfaction of any other natural impulse. No one is accountable to any one else, and no third person has a right to interfere. What I eat and drink, how I sleep and dress is my private affair, and my private affair also is my intercourse with a person of the opposite sex. Intelligence and culture, personal independence – qualities that will become natural, owing to the education and conditions prevailing in the new society – will prevent persons from committing actions that will prove detrimental to themselves. Men and women of future society will possess far more self-control and a better knowledge of their own natures, than men and women of today. The one fact alone, that the foolish prudery and secrecy connected with sexual matters will disappear, will make the relation of the sexes a far more natural and health-

ful one. If between a man and woman who have entered into a union, incompatibility, disappointment or revulsion should appear, morality commands a dissolution of the union which has become unnatural, and therefore immoral. As all those circumstances will have vanished that have so far compelled a great many women either to choose celibacy or prostitution, men can no longer dominate over women. On the other hand, the completely changed social conditions will have removed the many hindrances and harmful influences that affect married life today and frequently prevent its full development or make it quite impossible.

The impediments, contradictions and unnatural features in the present position of woman are being recognized by ever wider circles, and find expression in our modern literature on social questions, as well as in modern fiction; only the form in which it is expressed sometimes fails to answer the purpose. That present-day marriage is not suited to its purpose is no longer denied by any thinking person. So it is not surprising that even such persons favor a free choice of love and a free dissolution of the marriage relation, who are not inclined to draw the resulting conclusions that point to a change of the entire social system. They believe that freedom in sexual intercourse is justifiable among members of the privileged classes only. ...

Compulsory marriage is the normal marriage to bourgeois society. It is the only "moral" union of the sexes; any other sexual union is "immoral." Bourgeois marriage is – this we have irrefutably proved – the result of bourgeois relations. Closely connected with private property and the right of inheritance, it is contracted to obtain "legitimate" children. Under the pressure of social conditions it is forced also upon those who have nothing to bequeath. It becomes a social law, the violation of which is punished by the state, by imprisonment of the men or women who have committed adultery and have become divorced.

But in socialist society there will be nothing to bequeath, unless house furnishings and personal belongings should be regarded as hereditary portions; so the modern form of marriage becomes untenable from this point of view also. This also settles the question of inheritance, which socialism will not need to abolish. Where there is no private property, there can be no right of inheritance. So woman will be *free*, and the children she may have will not impair her freedom, they will only increase her pleasure in life. Nurses, teachers, women friends, the rising female generation, all these will stand by her when she is in need of assistance. ...

This time is rapidly approaching. For thousands of years human society has passed through all phases of development, only to return to its starting point: communistic property and complete liberty and fraternity, but no longer only for the



members of the gens,<sup>1</sup> *but for all human beings*. That is what the great progress consists of. What bourgeois society has striven for in vain, in what it failed and was bound to fail – to establish liberty, equality and fraternity for all – will be realized by socialism. Bourgeois society could merely advance the theory, but here, as in many other things, practice was contrary to the theories. Socialism will unite theory and practice.

But as mankind returns to the starting point of its development, it will do so on an infinitely higher level of civilization. If primitive society had common ownership in the gens and the clan, it was but in a coarse form and an undeveloped stage. The course of development that man has since undergone, has reduced common property to small and insignificant remnants, has shattered the gens and has finally atomized society; but in its various phases it has also greatly heightened the productive forces of society and the extensiveness of its demands; it has transformed the gentes and the tribes into nations, and has thereby again created a condition that is in glaring contradiction to the requirements of society. It is the task of the future to remove this contradiction by reestablishing the common ownership of property and the means of production on the broadest basis.

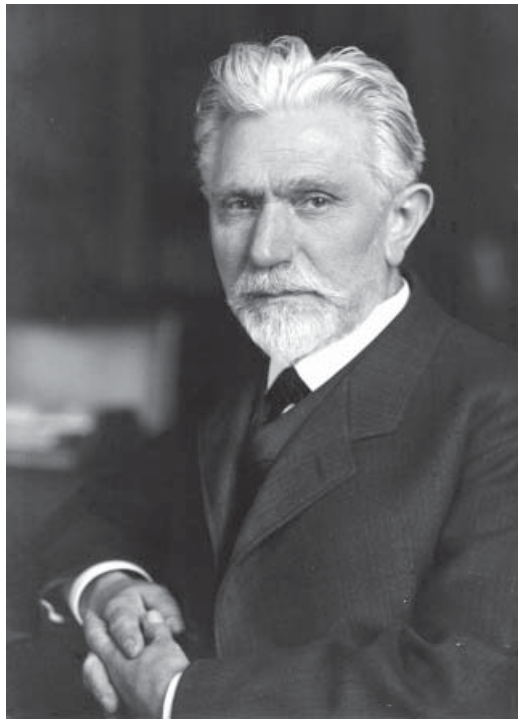
Society takes back what it has at one time possessed and has itself created, but it enables all to live in accordance with the newly created conditions of life on *the highest level of civilization*. In other words, *it grants to all what under more primitive conditions has been the privilege of single individuals or classes*. Now woman, too, is restored to the active position maintained by her in primitive society; only she no longer is mistress, but man's equal.

“The end of the development of the state resembles the beginnings of human existence. Primitive equality is reinstated. The maternal material existence opens and closes the cycle of human affairs.” Thus Bachofen, in his book on *The Matriarchate*;<sup>2</sup> and Morgan<sup>3</sup> says:

<sup>1</sup> Commonly translated as “clan,” the Roman *gens* was a social unit of people sharing a common patrilineal surname and claiming descent from a common ancestor. It could be as small as a single family or include hundreds of individuals. The oldest *gentes* (plural) claimed to have originated before the foundation of Rome, tracing their lineage to mythological figures.

<sup>2</sup> Johann Jakob Bachofen was a Swiss jurist and anthropologist, who authored a seminal book on matriarchy in pre-class society, *Das Mutterrecht. Eine Untersuchung über die Gynaiokratie der alten Welt nach ihrer religiösen und rechtlichen Natur* (The Matriarchate: An Investigation of the Religious and Judicial Character of Matriarchy in the Ancient World) [1861], which influenced August Bebel's *Women and Socialism* (1879) and Friedrich Engels' *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884).

<sup>3</sup> Lewis Henry Morgan was a pioneering American anthropolo-



August Bebel

“Since the advent of civilization, the increase of wealth has been so enormous, its forms so varied, its application so extensive, *and its administration so skillful in the interest of the owners, that this wealth has become an invincible power against the people*. The human mind is helpless and bewildered in the face of its own creation. And yet the time will come, when human intelligence will be sufficiently strong to master wealth, when it will determine both the relation of the state to the property that it protects, and the limit of the rights of individual owners. *The interests of society are absolutely paramount to individual interests, and both must be placed into a just and harmonious relation*. Pursuit of wealth is not the ultimate aim of man, if progress is to remain the law of the future as it has been the law of the past. The time that has elapsed since the advent of

civilization is only a small fraction of the past existence of humanity; it is only a small fraction of its coming existence. *We are threatened by the dissolution of society as the termination of a historic career, whose sole aim is wealth; for a career of this sort contains the elements of its own destruction. Democracy in administration, fraternity in social relations, general education – these will initiate the next, higher stage of society, toward which experience, reason and science are constantly leading us. It will be a resurrection, only in a higher form, of the liberty, equality and fraternity of the old gens.*”

So men, proceeding from the most varied standpoints, arrive at the same conclusions, as a result of their scientific investigations. The complete emancipation of woman, and her establishment of equal rights with man is one of the aims of our cultured development, whose realization no power on earth can prevent. But it can be accomplished only by means of a transformation that will abolish the rule of man over man, including the rule of the capitalist over the laborer. Then only can humanity attain its fullest development. The “golden age” of which men have been dreaming, and for which they have been yearning for thousands of years, will come at last. *Class rule will forever be at an end, and with it the rule of man over woman.* ■

gist whose treatise *Ancient Society* (1877) – from which the quotation is taken – analyzed the role of the different types of family in societies ranging from the Iroquois gens, the Aztecs, ancient Greece and Rome, documenting the shift to patriarchy with the dawn of class society, likewise greatly influencing and informing the works of Bebel, Engels and Marx, who began a book based on Morgan's work.

# Only in Conjunction with the Proletarian Woman Will Socialism Be Victorious

(1896)

By Clara Zetkin

## Speech at the Party Congress of the Social Democratic Party of Germany

The investigations of Bachofen, Morgan<sup>1</sup> and others seem to prove that the social suppression of women coincided with the creation of private property. The contrast within the family between the husband as proprietor and the wife as non-proprietor became the basis for the economic dependence and the social illegality of the female sex. This social illegality represents, according to Engels, one of the first and oldest forms of class rule. He states: "Within the family, the husband constitutes the bourgeoisie and the wife the proletariat." Nonetheless, a woman question in the modern sense of the word did not exist. It was only the capitalist mode of production which created the societal transformation that brought forth the modern woman question by destroying the old family economic system which provided both livelihood and life's meaning for the great mass of women during the pre-capitalist period. We must, however, not transfer to the ancient economic activities of women those concepts (the concepts of futility and pettiness), that we connect with the activities of women in our times. As long as the old type of family still existed, a woman found a meaningful life by productive activity. Thus she was not conscious of her social illegality even though the development of her potentials as an individual was strictly limited.

The period of the Renaissance is the storm and stress period of the awakening of modern individuality that was able to develop fully and completely in the most diverse directions. We encounter individuals who are giants in both good and evil, who spurn the commandments of both religion and morals and despise equally both heaven and hell. We discover women at the center of the social, artistic and political life. And yet there is not a trace of a women's movement. This is all the more characteristic because at that time the old family economic system began to crumble under the impact of the division of labor. Thousands upon thousands of women no longer found their livelihood and their lives' meaning within the family. But this woman question, as far as one can designate it as such, was solved at that time by convents, charitable institutions and religious orders.

The machines, the modern mode of production, slowly undermined domestic production and not just for thousands but for millions of women the question arose: Where do we now find our livelihood? Where do we find a meaningful life as well as a job that gives us mental satisfaction? Millions were now forced to find their livelihood and their meaningful lives outside of their families and within society as a whole. At that moment they became aware of the fact that their social illegality

<sup>1</sup> See footnotes on page 9 of this pamphlet.



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Clara Zetkin

ity stood in opposition to their most basic interests. It was from this moment on that there existed the modern woman question. Here are a few statistics to demonstrate how the modern mode of production works to make the woman question even more acute. During 1882, 5½ million out of 23 million women and girls in Germany were fully employed; i.e., a quarter of the female population could no longer find its livelihood within the family. According to the Census of 1895, the number of employed women in agriculture, in the broadest meaning of this term, has increased since 1882 by more than 8%, in the narrow sense by 6%, while at the same time the number of men employed in agriculture has decreased by 3%, i.e., to 11%. In the area of industry and mining, the number of employed women workers has increased by 35%, that of men by only 28%. In the retail trade, the number of women employed has increased by more than 94%, that of men by only 38%. These dry numbers stress much more the urgency of solving the woman question than any grandiloquent declamations.

The woman question, however, is only present within



**Die Gleichheit** (“Equality”) was the German Social Democrats’ newspaper for working women, edited by Clara Zetkin. This issue announces the first International Women’s Day on 19 March 1911. This was the result of a motion introduced by left-wing German socialist Luise Zietz and seconded by Zetkin at the 1910 Congress of the Second (Socialist) International.

those classes of society which are themselves the products of the capitalist mode of production. Thus it is that we find no woman question in peasant circles that possess a natural (although severely curtailed and punctured) economy. But we certainly find a woman question within those classes of society who are the very children of the modern mode of production. There is a woman question for the women of the proletariat, the bourgeoisie, the intelligentsia and the Upper Ten Thousand.<sup>2</sup> It assumes a different form according to the class situation of each one of these strata.

How does the women’s question shape up as far as the Upper Ten Thousand are concerned? The woman of the Upper Ten Thousand, thanks to her property, may freely develop her individuality and live as she pleases. In her role as wife, however, she is still dependent upon her husband. The guardianship of the weaker sex has survived in the family law which still states: And he shall be your master. And how is the family of the Upper Ten Thousand constituted in which the wife is legally subjugated by the husband? At its very founding, such a family lacks the moral prerequisites. Not individuality but money decides the matrimony. Its motto is: What capital joins, sentimental morality must not part. Thus in this marriage, two prostitutions are taken for one virtue. The eventual family life develops accordingly. Wherever a woman is no longer forced to fulfill her duties, she devolves her duties as spouse, mother and housewife upon paid servants. If the women of these circles have the desire to give their lives a serious purpose, they must, first of all, raise the demand to dispose of their property in an independent and free manner. This demand, therefore, represents the core of the demands raised by the women’s movement of the Upper Ten Thousand. These women, in their fight for the realization of their demand vis-a-vis the masculine world of their class, fight exactly the same battle that the bourgeoisie fought against all of the privileged estates; i.e., a battle to

<sup>2</sup> A phrase coined in the mid-1800s to describe upper strata of New York society circles, which was then generalized to Britain and Europe, where it denoted the broadening of the ruling class from the traditional aristocracy and gentry as a result of the industrial revolution.

remove all social differences based upon the possession of property. The fact that this demand does not deal with the rights of the individual is proven by Herr von Stumm’s<sup>3</sup> advocacy of it in the Reichstag. Just when would Herr von Stumm ever advocate the rights of a person? This man in Germany signifies more than a personality, he is capital itself turned into flesh and blood and if this man has put in an appearance in a cheap masquerade for women’s rights, then it only happened because he was forced to dance before capitalism’s Ark of the Covenant.<sup>4</sup> This is the Herr von Stumm who is always ready to put his workers on short rations if they do not dance to his tune and he would certainly welcome it with a satisfied smile if the state as employer would also put those professors and scholars who meddle in social politics on short rations. Herr von Stumm endeavors nothing more than instituting the entail for movable female property in case of female inheritance because there are fathers who have acquired property but were not careful in the choice of their children, leaving only daughters as heirs. Capitalism honors even lowly womanhood and permits it to dispose of its fortunes. That is the final phase of the emancipation of private property.

How does the women’s question appear in the circles of the petty bourgeoisie, the middle class and the bourgeois intelligentsia? Here it is not property which dissolves the family, but mainly the concomitant symptoms of capitalist production. To the degree this production completes its triumphal march, the middle class and the petty bourgeoisie are hurtling further and further towards their destruction. Within the bourgeois intelligentsia, another circumstance leads to the worsening of living conditions: capitalism needs an intelligent and scientifically trained workforce. It therefore favored an overproduction of mental-work proletarians and contributed to the phenomenon that the formerly respected and profitable societal positions of members of the professional class are more and more eroding. To the same degree, however, the number of marriages is decreasing; although on the one hand the material basis is worsening, on the other hand the individual’s expectations of life are increasing, so that a man of that background will think twice or even thrice before he enters into a marriage. The age limit for the founding of a family is raised higher and higher and a man is under no pressure to marry since there exist in our time enough societal institutions which offer to an old bachelor a comfortable life without a legitimate wife. The capitalist exploitation of the proletarian work force through its starvation wages, sees to it that there is a large supply of prostitutes which corresponds to the demand by the men. Thus within the

<sup>3</sup> Carl Ferdinand von Stumm, an iron and steel industrialist from Germany’s Rhineland who was a Conservative politician in the late 1800s. As a member of the Reichstag (imperial parliament) he opposed both the Social Democrats’ and Bismarck’s social policies, but in its commission for social legislation he advocated the separation of women’s property and equality for women in legal guardianship. How little this had to do with the rights of working women was shown by the fact that Stumm’s wife would determine whom his workers could marry.

<sup>4</sup> In the Judeo-Christian biblical tradition, the Ark of the Covenant is a chest described in the Book of Exodus as containing the stone tables with the Ten Commandments.

bourgeois circles, the number of unmarried women increases all the time. The wives and daughters of these circles are pushed out into society so that they may establish for themselves their own livelihood which is not only supposed to provide them with bread but also with mental satisfaction. In these circles women are not equal to men in the form of possessors of private property as they are in the upper circles. The women of these circles have yet to achieve their economic equality with men and they can only do so by making two demands: The demand for equal professional training and the demand for equal job opportunities for both sexes. In economic terms, this means nothing less than the realization of free access to all jobs and the untrammled competition between men and women. The realization of this demand unleashes a conflict of interest between the men and women of the bourgeoisie and the intelligentsia.



**Women textile workers in American mill town.**

The competition of the women in the professional world is the driving force for the resistance of men against the demands of bourgeois women's rights advocates. It is, pure and simple, the fear of competition. All other reasons which are listed against the mental work of women, such as the smaller brain of women or their allegedly natural avocation to be a mother are only pretexts. This battle of competition pushes the women of these social strata towards demanding their political rights so that they may, by fighting politically, tear down all barriers which have been created against their economic activity.

So far I have addressed myself only to the basic and purely economic substructure. We would, however, perform an injustice to the bourgeois women's rights movement if we would regard it as solely motivated by economics. No, this movement also contains a more profound spiritual and moral aspect. The bourgeois woman not only demands her own bread but she also requests spiritual nourishment and wants to develop her individuality. It is exactly among these strata that we find these tragic, yet psychologically interesting *Nora* figures,<sup>5</sup> women who are tired of living like dolls in doll houses and who want to share in the development of modern culture. The economic as well as the intellectual and moral endeavors of bourgeois women's rights advocates are completely justified.

As far as the proletarian woman is concerned, it is capitalism's need to exploit and to search incessantly for a cheap labor force that has created the woman question. It is for this reason, too, that the proletarian woman has become enmeshed in the mechanism of the economic life of our period and has been driven into the workshop and to the machines. She went out into

the economic life in order to aid her husband in making a living, but the capitalist mode of production transformed her into an unfair competitor. She wanted to bring prosperity to her family, but instead misery descended upon it. The proletarian woman obtained her own employment because she wanted to create a more sunny and pleasant life for her children, but instead she became almost entirely separated from them. She became an equal of the man as a worker; the machine rendered muscular force superfluous and everywhere women's work showed the same results in production as men's work. And since women constitute a cheap labor force and above all a submissive one that only in the rarest of cases dares to kick against the thorns of capitalist exploitation, the capitalists multiply the possibilities of women's work in industry. As a result of all this, the proletarian woman has achieved her independence. But verily, the price was very high and for the moment they have gained very little. If during the Age of the Family, a man had the right (just think of the law of Electoral Bavaria!<sup>6</sup>) to tame his wife occasionally with a whip, capitalism is now taming her with scorpions. In former times, the rule of a man over his wife was ameliorated by their personal relationship. Between an employer and his worker, however, exists only a cash nexus. The proletarian woman has gained her economic independence, but neither as a human being nor as a woman or wife has she had the possibility to develop her individuality. For her task as a wife and a mother, there remain only the breadcrumbs which the capitalist production drops from the table.

Therefore the liberation struggle of the proletarian woman cannot be similar to the struggle that the bourgeois woman wages against the male of her class. On the contrary, it must be a joint struggle with the male of her class against the entire class of capitalists. She does not need to fight against the men

<sup>5</sup> A reference to Nora Helmer, the main character in Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen's work, *A Doll's House* (1879), who leaves her husband and children because she wants to discover herself. The play unleashed tremendous controversy because of its challenge to bourgeois marriage norms.

<sup>6</sup> The Electorate of Bavaria was a subdivision of the Holy Roman Empire from 1623 to 1806.



**Female and male workers strike for the ten-hour workday in Crimmitschau, Saxony, Germany in 1904: “Long live solidarity!” The liberation of working women will be the task of the entire proletariat.**

of her class in order to tear down the barriers which have been raised against her participation in the free competition of the market place. Capitalism's need to exploit and the development of the modern mode of production totally relieves her of having to fight such a struggle. On the contrary, new barriers need to be erected against the exploitation of the proletarian woman. Her rights as wife and mother need to be restored and permanently secured. Her final aim is not the free competition with the man, but the achievement of the political rule of the proletariat. The proletarian woman fights hand in hand with the man of her class against capitalist society. To be sure, she also agrees with the demands of the bourgeois women's movement, but she regards the fulfillment of these demands simply as a means to enable that movement to enter the battle, equipped with the same weapons, alongside the proletariat.

Bourgeois society is not fundamentally opposed to the bourgeois women's movement, which is proven by the fact

that in various states reforms of private and public laws concerning women have been initiated. There are two reasons why the accomplishment of these reforms seems to take an exceptionally long time in Germany: First of all, men fear the battle of competition in the liberal professions and secondly, one has to take into account the very slow and weak development of bourgeois democracy in Germany which does not live up to its historical task because of its class fear of the proletariat. It fears that the realization of such reforms will only bring advantages to Social-Democracy. The less a bourgeois democracy allows itself to be hypnotized by such a fear, the more it is prepared to undertake reforms. England is a good example. England is the only country that still possesses a truly powerful bourgeoisie, whereas the German bourgeoisie, shaking in fear of the proletariat, shies away from carrying out political and social reforms. As far as Germany is concerned, there is the additional factor of widespread philistine views. The philistine braid of prejudice reaches far down the back of the German bourgeoisie. To be sure, this fear of the bourgeois democracy is very short-sighted. The granting of political equality to women does not change the actual balance of power. The proletarian woman ends up in the proletariat, the bourgeois woman in the bourgeois camp. We must not let ourselves be fooled by socialist trends in the bourgeois women's movement which last only as long as bourgeois women feel oppressed.

The less bourgeois democracy comprehends its task, the more important it is for Social-Democracy to advocate the political

equality of women. We do not want to make us out to be better than we are. We are not making this demand for the sake of a principle, but in the interests of the proletarian class. The more women's work exercises its detrimental influence upon the standard of living of men, the more urgent becomes the necessity to include them in the economic battle. The more the political struggle affects the existence of each individual, the more urgent becomes the necessity of women's participation in this political struggle. It was the Anti-Socialist Law<sup>7</sup> which for the first time made clear to women what is meant by the terms class justice, class state and class rule. It was this law

<sup>7</sup> The Anti-Socialist Laws enacted by Imperial Chancellor Otto von Bismarck between 1878 and 1881 sought to cripple the Social Democratic Party by banning public meetings to spread socialist principles, outlawing trade unions, closing left-wing newspapers and prohibiting socialist parliamentary candidates. The laws lapsed after 1890.

which taught women the need to learn about the force which so brutally intervened in their family lives. The Anti-Socialist Law has done successful work which could never have been done by hundreds of women agitators and, indeed, we are deeply grateful to the father of the Anti-Socialist Law as well as to all organs of the state (from the minister to the local cop) who have participated in its enforcement and rendered such marvelous involuntary propaganda services. How then can one accuse us Social-Democrats of ingratitude?

Yet another event must be taken into consideration. I am referring to the publication of August Bebel's book *Woman and Socialism*. This book must not be judged according to its positive aspects or its shortcomings. Rather, it must be judged within the context of the times in which it was written. It was more than a book, it was an event – a great deed. The book pointed out for the first time the connection between the woman question and historical development. For the first time, there sounded from this book the appeal: We will only conquer the future if we persuade the women to become our co-fighters. In recognizing this, I am not speaking as a woman but as a party comrade.

What practical conclusions may we now draw for our propaganda work among women? The task of this Party Congress must not be to issue detailed practical suggestions, but to draw up general directions for the proletarian women's movement.

Our guiding thought must be: We must not conduct special women's propaganda, but socialist agitation among women. The petty, momentary interests of the female world must not be allowed to take up the stage. Our task must be to incorporate the modern proletarian woman in our class battle! We have no special tasks for the agitation among women. Those reforms for women which must be accomplished within the framework of today's society are already demanded within the minimal program of our party.

Women's propaganda must touch upon all those questions which are of great importance to the general proletarian movement. The main task is, indeed, to awaken the women's class consciousness and to incorporate them into the class struggle. The unionization of female workers is made extremely difficult. During the years 1892 to 1895, the number of female laborers organized in central trade unions grew to around 7,000. If we add to this number the female workers organized in local unions and realize that there are at least 700,000 female workers actively involved in large industrial enterprises, then we begin to realize the magnitude of the organizing work that still lies ahead of us. Our work is made more burdensome by the fact that many women are active in cottage industry<sup>8</sup> and can, therefore, be organized only with great difficulty. Then we also have to deal with the widely held belief among young girls that their industrial labor is only transitory and will be terminated by their marriage. For many women there is the double obligation to be active in both the factory and the home.

<sup>8</sup> In the early stages of capitalist production at the beginning of the industrial revolution and continuing into the late 1800s, a common way of avoiding guilds (and thus lowering wages) associated with large factories was putting out the production of products from raw materials to producers working from their homes, in particular sewing, lace-making and other branches of the textile and garment industry.

All the more necessary is it for female workers to obtain a legally fixed workday. Whereas in England everybody agrees that the elimination of cottage industry, the establishment of a legal workday and the achievement of higher wages are important prerequisites for the unionization of female workers – in Germany, in addition to these obstacles there is also the enforcement of our unionization and assemblage laws. ... In Bavaria all women are excluded from public meetings. ...

Until now they [proletarian women] had to wage a fight against police power and juridical stratagems and on the surface they seemed to have been defeated. In reality, however, they emerged as victors because all those measures which were employed to smash the organization of the proletarian woman only served to arouse her class consciousness. If we want to obtain a powerful women's organization in both the economic and political realms, then we must, first of all, take care of the possibility of women's freedom of movement by fighting against cottage industry, for shorter working hours and, above all, against what the ruling classes like to call the right of association.<sup>9</sup>

We cannot determine at this party congress what form our propaganda among women should take. We must, first of all, learn how we ought to carry out our work among women. In the resolution which has been submitted to you, it is proposed to elect shop stewards among the women whose task it will be to stimulate the union and economic organization of women and to consolidate it in a uniform and planned manner. ...

Our propaganda must not be carried out solely in an oral fashion. A large number of passive people do not even come to our meetings and countless wives and mothers cannot come to our meetings. ...

Thus if the mountain does not come to Mohammed, Mohammed must go to the mountain: We must take Socialism to the women by a planned written propaganda campaign. ...

But we also have to create a series of brochures which bring Socialism closer to the woman in her capacity as female proletarian, wife and mother. ...

Propaganda among women is difficult and burdensome and requires great devotion and great sacrifice, but these sacrifices will be rewarded and must be brought forth. The proletariat will be able to attain its liberation only if it fights together without the difference of nationality and profession. In the same way it can attain its liberation only if it stands together without the distinction of sex. The incorporation of the great masses of proletarian women in the liberation struggle of the proletariat is one of the prerequisites for the victory of the socialist idea and for the construction of a Socialist society. ... ■

<sup>9</sup> The Imperial Associations Law of 1907, in the guise of providing uniform legal bases for associations throughout the empire, among other things conceding women's right of participation, actually established the principle of government control of "civic organizations." In particular, it decreed that the police could send officers into any meeting of any association, and in particular into "political meetings," where they could make drawings of those present and even dissolve the meeting. In addition, it denied youth and agricultural workers associations the right to engage in political activity, banned minority languages in public discourse, and had numerous other repressive features.

# Women's Suffrage and Class Struggle

(1912)

By Rosa Luxemburg

*The following speech was delivered on 12 May 1912 at the Second Social Democratic Women's Rally in Stuttgart, Germany. The present version is based on the translation by Rosmarie Waldrop, published by Monthly Review Press.*

“Why are there no organizations for working women in Germany? Why do we hear so little about the working women's movement?” With these questions, Emma Ihrer, one of the founders of the proletarian women's movement of Germany, introduced her 1898 essay, “Working Women in the Class Struggle.” Hardly 14 years have passed since, but they have seen a great expansion of the proletarian women's movement. More than a hundred fifty thousand women are organized in unions and are among the most active troops in the economic struggle of the proletariat. Many thousands of politically organized women have rallied to the banner of Social Democracy: the Social Democratic women's paper [*Die Gleichheit*, edited by Clara Zetkin] has more than one hundred thousand subscribers; female suffrage (the right to vote) is one of the vital issues in the platform of Social Democracy.

Exactly these facts might lead one to underrate the importance of the fight for women's right to vote. One might think: even without equal political rights for women we have made enormous progress in educating and organizing women. Hence, women's right to vote is not urgently necessary. Anyone who thinks so is deceived. The political and trade-union rousing of the masses of the female proletariat during the last 15 years has been magnificent. But it has been possible only because working women took a lively interest in the political and parliamentary struggles of their class in spite of being deprived of their rights. So far, proletarian women are sustained by male suffrage, which they indeed take part in, though only indirectly. Large masses of both men and women of the working class already consider the election campaigns a cause they share in common. In all Social Democratic election meetings, women make up a large segment, sometimes the majority. They are always interested and passionately involved. In all districts where there is a firm Social Democratic organization, women help with the campaign. And it is women who have done invaluable work distributing leaflets and getting subscribers to the Social Democratic press, this most important weapon in the campaign.

The capitalist state has not been able to keep women from taking on all these duties and efforts of political life. Step by step, the state has indeed been forced to grant and guarantee them this possibility by allowing them union and assembly rights. Only the last political right is denied women: the right to vote, to decide directly on the people's representatives in legislature and administration, to be an elected member of these bodies. But here, as in all other areas of society, the motto is: “Don't let things get started!” But things have been started. The present state gave in to the women of the proletariat when



Rosa Luxemburg

it admitted them to public assemblies, to political associations. And the state did not grant this voluntarily, but out of necessity, under the irresistible pressure of the rising working class. It was not least the passionate pushing ahead of the proletarian women themselves which forced the Prusso-German police state to give up the famous “women's section”<sup>1</sup> in gatherings of political associations and to open wide the doors of political organizations to women. This really set the ball rolling. The irresistible progress of the proletarian class struggle has swept working women right into the whirlpool of political life. Using their right of union and assembly, proletarian women have taken a most active part in parliamentary life and in election campaigns. It is only the inevitable consequence, only the logical result of the movement that today millions of proletarian women call defiantly and with self-confidence: *We demand women's right to vote!*

<sup>1</sup> The “women's section” was instituted in 1902 by the Prussian Minister von Hammerstein, requiring that women be segregated in a special section of the room at political meetings.



**Rosa Luxemburg addressing crowd during Congress of the Second International in Stuttgart, Germany, 1907.**

Once upon a time, in the beautiful era of pre-1848 absolutism, the whole working class was said not to be “mature enough” to exercise political rights. This cannot be said about proletarian women today, because they have demonstrated their political maturity. ... At any rate, the working class has always had to prove its maturity for political freedom by a successful revolutionary uprising of the masses. Only when Divine Right on the throne and the best and noblest men of the nation actually felt the calloused fist of the proletariat on their eyes and its knee on their chests, only then did they suddenly feel confidence in the political “maturity” of the people. Today, it is the proletarian woman’s turn to make the capitalist state conscious of her maturity. This is done through a constant, powerful mass movement which has to use all the means of proletarian struggle and pressure.

Women’s right to vote is the goal. But the mass movement to bring it about is not a job for women alone, but is a common class concern for women and men of the proletariat. Germany’s present lack of rights for women is only one link in the chain of the reaction that shackles the people’s lives. And it is closely connected with the other pillar of the reaction: the monarchy. In advanced capitalist, highly industrialized, 20th-century Germany, in the age of electricity and airplanes, the absence of women’s political rights is as much a reactionary remnant of the dead past as the reign by Divine Right on the throne. Both phenomena – the instrument of heaven as the leading political power, and woman, demure by the fireside, unconnected with the storms of public life, with politics and class struggle – both phenomena have their roots in the rotten circumstances of the past, in the times of serfdom in the countryside and guilds in the towns. In those times, they were

justifiable and necessary. But both monarchy and women’s lack of rights have been uprooted by the development of modern capitalism, have become ridiculous caricatures. They continue to exist in our modern society, not just because people forgot to abolish them, not just because of the persistence and inertia of circumstances. No, they still exist because both – the monarchy and women without rights – have become powerful tools of interests inimical to the people. The worst and most brutal advocates of the exploitation and enslavement of the proletariat are entrenched behind throne and altar as well as behind the political enslavement of women. Monarchy and women’s lack of rights have

become the most important tools of the ruling capitalist class.

In truth, our state is interested in keeping the vote from working women and from them alone. It rightly fears they will threaten the traditional institutions of class rule, for instance militarism (of which no thinking proletarian woman can help being a deadly enemy), monarchy, the systematic theft constituted by duties and taxes on groceries, etc. Women’s suffrage is a horror and abomination for the present capitalist state because behind it stand millions of women who would strengthen the enemy within, i.e., revolutionary Social Democracy. If it were a matter of bourgeois ladies voting, the capitalist state could expect nothing but effective support for the reaction. Most of those bourgeois women who act like lionesses in the struggle against “male prerogatives” would trot like docile lambs in the camp of conservative and clerical reaction if they had suffrage. Indeed, they would certainly be a good deal more reactionary than the male part of their class. Aside from the few who have jobs or professions, the women of the bourgeoisie do not take part in social production. They are nothing but co-consumers of the surplus value their men extort from the proletariat. They are parasites of the parasites of the social body. And consumers are usually even more rabid and cruel in defending their “right” to a parasite’s life than the direct agents of class rule and exploitation. The history of all great revolutionary struggles confirms this in a horrible way. Take the great French Revolution. After the fall of the Jacobins, when Robespierre was driven in chains to the place of execution the naked whores of the victory-drunk bourgeoisie danced in the streets, danced a shameless dance of joy around the fallen hero of the Revolution. And in 1871, in Paris, when the heroic workers’ Commune was defeated by machine guns, the raving bourgeois females surpassed





**“For Women’s Right to Vote!” Leaflet issued by Clara Zetkin for the third annual International Women’s Day, March 1913.**

even their bestial men in their bloody revenge against the suppressed proletariat. The women of the property-owning classes will always fanatically defend the exploitation and enslavement of the working people by which they indirectly receive the means for their socially useless existence.

Economically and socially, the women of the exploiting classes are not an independent segment of the population. Their only social function is to be tools of the natural propagation of the ruling classes. By contrast, the women of the proletariat are economically independent. They are productive for society like the men. By this I do not mean their bringing up children or their housework which helps men support their families on scanty wages. This kind of work is not productive in the sense of the present capitalist economy no matter how enormous an achievement the sacrifices and energy spent, the thousand little efforts add up to. This is but the private affair of the worker, his happiness and blessing, and for this reason nonexistent for our present society. As long as capitalism and the wage system rule, only that kind of work is considered productive which produces surplus value, which creates capitalist profit. From this point of view, the music-hall dancer whose legs sweep profit into her employer’s pocket is a productive worker, whereas all the toil of the proletarian women and mothers in the four walls of their homes is considered unproductive.

This sounds brutal and insane, but corresponds exactly to the brutality and insanity of our present capitalist economy. And seeing this brutal reality clearly and sharply is the proletarian woman’s first task.

For, exactly from this point of view, the proletarian women’s claim to equal political rights is anchored in firm economic ground. Today, millions of proletarian women create capitalist profit like men – in factories, workshops, on farms, in home industry, offices, stores. They are therefore productive in the strictest scientific sense of our present society. Every day enlarges the hosts of women exploited by capitalism. Every new progress in industry or technology creates new places for women in the machinery of capitalist profiteering. And thus, every day and every step of industrial progress adds a new stone to the firm foundation of women’s equal political rights. Female education and intelligence have become necessary for the economic mechanism itself. The narrow, secluded woman of the patriarchal “family circle” answers the needs of industry and commerce as little as those of politics. ...

Considering all this, the proletarian woman’s lack of political rights is a vile injustice, and the more so for being by now at least half a lie. After all, masses of women take an active part in political life. However, Social Democracy does not use the argument of “injustice.” This is the basic difference between us and the earlier sentimental, utopian socialism. We do not depend on the justice of the ruling classes, but solely on the revolutionary power of the working masses and on the course of social development which prepares the ground for this power. Thus, injustice by itself is certainly not an argument with which to overthrow reactionary institutions. If, however, there is a feeling of injustice in large segments of society – says Friedrich Engels, the co-founder of scientific socialism – it is always a sure sign that the economic bases of the society have shifted considerably, that the present conditions contradict the march of development. The present forceful movement of millions of proletarian women who consider their lack of political rights a crying wrong is such an infallible sign, a sign that the social bases of the reigning system are rotten and that its days are numbered.

A hundred years ago, the Frenchman Charles Fourier, one of the first great prophets of socialist ideals, wrote these memorable words: In any society, the degree of female emancipation is the natural measure of the general emancipation. This is completely true for our present society. The current mass struggle for women’s political rights is only an expression and a part of the proletariat’s general struggle for liberation. In this lies its strength and its future. Because of the female proletariat, general, equal, direct suffrage for women would immensely advance and intensify the proletarian class struggle. This is why bourgeois society abhors and fears women’s suffrage. And this is why we want and will achieve it. Fighting for women’s suffrage, we will also hasten the coming of the hour when the present society falls in ruins under the hammer strokes of the revolutionary proletariat. ■

# Lenin on the Liberation of Women

## Excerpts

*The following are excerpts from the works of V.I. Lenin relating to the oppression and emancipation of women.*

### The International Socialist Congress in Stuttgart (1907)

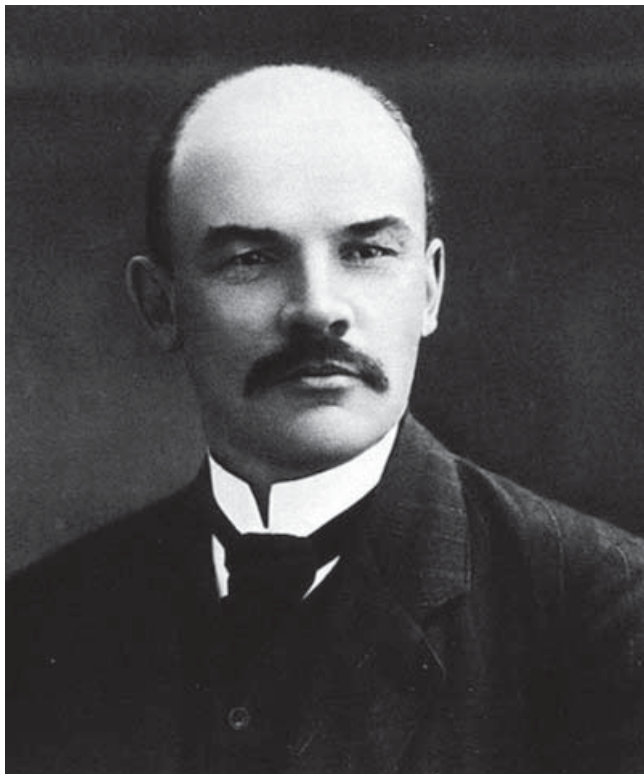
The resolution on women's suffrage was also adopted unanimously. Only one Englishwoman from the semi-bourgeois Fabian Society<sup>1</sup> defended the admissibility of a struggle not for full women's suffrage but for one limited to those possessing property. The Congress rejected this unconditionally and declared in favor of women workers campaigning for the franchise, not in conjunction with the bourgeois supporters of women's rights, but in conjunction with the class parties of the proletariat. The Congress recognized that in the campaign for women's suffrage it was necessary to uphold fully the principles of socialism and equal rights for men and women without distorting those principles for the sake of expediency.

In this connection an interesting difference of opinion arose in the Commission. The Austrians (Viktor Adler,<sup>2</sup> Adelheid Popp<sup>3</sup>) justified their tactics in the struggle for universal manhood suffrage: for the sake of winning this suffrage, they thought it expedient in the campaign not to put the demand for women's suffrage, too, in the foreground. The German Social-Democrats, and especially Clara Zetkin, had protested against this when the Austrians were campaigning for universal suffrage. Zetkin declared in the press that they should not under any circumstances have neglected the demand for women's suffrage, that the Austrians had opportunistically sacrificed principle to expediency, and that they would not have narrowed the scope of their agitation, but would have widened it and increased the force of the popular movement had they fought for women's suffrage with the same energy. In the Commission Zetkin was supported whole-heartedly by another prominent

<sup>1</sup> The Fabian Society is a right-wing social-democratic grouping, founded in 1884, which advocated "socialism" by gradual reform, meaning "welfare-state" capitalism, while supporting imperialism. Sydney and Beatrice Webb, two of the leading Fabians, were vicious anti-communists and opponents of the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia. Sydney was minister of colonies in the Labour Party cabinet under Ramsay MacDonald (1929-30).

<sup>2</sup> Viktor Adler was a right-wing "moderate" leader of Austrian Social Democracy who supported the Austro-Hungarian imperial government's declaration of war in 1914. He should not be confused with his son, Friedrich Adler, who was a leader of the left (actually centrist) wing of the Social Democratic Party of Austria (SPÖ), who opposed the war on pacifist grounds and in 1916 assassinated the Austrian prime minister. From the mid-1920s on he was the leader of the reformist Second International.

<sup>3</sup> Adelheid Popp was a leading spokesman of the Austrian Social Democracy on issues of women's rights, who in 1892 organized the first strike of women garment workers in Vienna.



Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, in Paris, 1910.

German woman Social-Democrat, Zietz.<sup>4</sup> Adler's amendment, which indirectly justified the Austrian tactics, was *rejected* by 12 votes to 9 (this amendment stated only that there should be no abatement of the struggle for a suffrage that would really extend to all citizens, instead of stating that the struggle for the suffrage should always include the demand for equal rights for men and women). The point of view of the Commission and of the Congress may be most accurately expressed in the following words of the above-mentioned Zietz in her speech at the International Socialist Women's Conference (this Conference took place in Stuttgart at the same time as the Congress):

"In principle we must demand all that we consider to be correct," said Zietz, "and only when our strength is inadequate for more, do we accept what we are able to get. That has always been the tactics of Social-Democracy. The more modest our demands the more modest will the government be in its concessions...."

This controversy between the Austrian and German women Social-Democrats will enable the reader to see how severely the best Marxists treat the slightest deviation from the principles of consistent revolutionary tactics. ■

<sup>4</sup> Luise Zietz and Clara Zetkin were elected in 1908 as the first women members of the Social Democratic Party's leadership (and the first women members of the leadership of any German party). Both were in the SPD's left wing. In 1910 Zietz put forward the motion at the Conference of the Second (Socialist) International to organize an International Women's Day. Zetkin seconded it.

# Speech at the First All-Russia Congress of Working Women (November 1918)

Comrades, in a certain sense this Congress of the women's section of the workers' army has a special significance, because one of the hardest things in every country has been to stir the women into action. There can be no socialist revolution unless very many working women take a big part in it.

In all civilized countries, even the most advanced, women are actually no more than domestic slaves. Women do not enjoy full equality in any capitalist state, not even in the freest of republics.

One of the primary tasks of the Soviet Republic is to abolish all restrictions on women's rights. The Soviet government has completely abolished divorce proceedings, that source of bourgeois degradation, repression and humiliation.

It will soon be a year now since complete freedom of divorce was legislated. We have passed a decree annulling all distinction between legitimate and illegitimate children and removing political restrictions. Nowhere else in the world have equality and freedom for working women been so fully established.

We know that it is the working-class woman who has to bear the full brunt of antiquated codes.

For the first time in history, our law has removed everything that denied women rights. But the important thing is not the law. In the cities and industrial areas this law on complete freedom of marriage is doing all right, but in the countryside it all too frequently remains a dead letter. There the religious marriage still predominates. This is due to the influence of the priests, an evil that is harder to combat than the old legislation.

We must be extremely careful in fighting religious prejudices; some people cause a lot of harm in this struggle by offending religious feelings. We must use propaganda and education. By lending too sharp an edge to the struggle we may only arouse popular resentment; such methods of struggle tend to perpetuate the division of the people along religious lines, whereas our strength lies in unity. The deepest source of religious prejudice is poverty and ignorance; and that is the evil we have to combat.

The status of women up to now has been compared to that of a slave; women have been tied to the home, and only socialism can save them from this. They will only be completely emancipated when we change from small-scale individual farming to collective farming and collective working of the land. That is a difficult task. But now that Poor Peasants' Committees are being formed, the time has come when the socialist revolution is being consolidated.

The poorest part of the rural population is only now beginning to organize, and socialism is acquiring a firm foundation in these organizations of poor peasants.

Before, often the town became revolutionary and then the countryside.



**“Women Workers, Take Up Your Rifles!” 1918 Soviet poster during the Civil War when thousands of women joined the Red Guards to defend the revolution.**

But the present revolution relies on the countryside, and therein lie its significance and strength. The experience of all liberation movements has shown that the success of a revolution depends on how much the women take part in it. The Soviet government is doing everything in its power to enable women to carry on independent proletarian socialist work.

The Soviet government is in a difficult position because the imperialists of all countries hate Soviet Russia and are preparing to go to war with her for kindling the fire of revolution in a number of countries and for taking determined steps towards socialism.

Now that they are out to destroy revolutionary Russia, the ground is beginning to burn under their own feet. You know how the revolutionary movement is spreading in Germany. In Denmark the workers are fighting their government. In Switzerland and Holland the revolutionary movement is getting stronger. The revolutionary movement in these small countries has no importance in itself, but it is particularly significant because there was no war in these countries and they had the most “constitutional” democratic system. If countries like these are stirring into action, it makes us sure the revolutionary movement is gaining ground all over the world.

No other republic has so far been able to emancipate woman. The Soviet government is helping her. Our cause is invincible because the invincible working class is rising in all countries. This movement signifies the spread of the invincible socialist revolution.

# The Tasks of the Working Women's Movement in the Soviet Republic

(September 1919)

## Speech Delivered at the Fourth Moscow City Conference of Non-Party Working Women

Comrades, it gives me pleasure to greet a conference of working women. I will allow myself to pass over those subjects and questions that, of course, at the moment are the cause of the greatest concern to every working woman and to every politically-conscious individual from among the working people; these are the most urgent questions – that of bread and that of the war situation. I know from the newspaper reports of your meetings that these questions have been dealt with exhaustively by Comrade Trotsky as far as war questions are concerned and by Comrades Yakovleva and Svidersky<sup>5</sup> as far as the bread question is concerned; please, therefore, allow me to pass over those questions.

I should like to say a few words about the general tasks facing the working women's movement in the Soviet Republic, those that are, in general, connected with the transition to socialism, and those that are of particular urgency at the present time. Comrades, the question of the position of women was raised by Soviet power from the very beginning. It seems to me that any workers' state in the course of transition to socialism is faced with a double task. The first part of that task is relatively simple and easy. It concerns those old laws that kept women in a position of inequality as compared to men.

Participants in all emancipation movements in Western Europe have long since, not for decades but for centuries, put forward the demand that obsolete laws be annulled and women and men be made equal by law, but none of the democratic European states, none of the advanced republics have succeeded in putting it into effect, because wherever there is capitalism, wherever there is private property in land and factories, wherever the power of capital is preserved, the men retain their privileges. It was possible to put it into effect in Russia only because the power of the workers has been established here since October 25, 1917 [7 November 1917 by the Western calendar]. From the very onset Soviet power set out to be the power of the working people, hostile to all forms of exploitation. It set itself the task of doing away with the possibility of the exploitation of the working people by the landowners and capitalists, of doing away with the rule of capital. Soviet power has been trying to make it

<sup>5</sup> Varvara Yakovleva was a Bolshevik since before the 1905 Revolution. In 1918, she was part of the initial leadership of the Cheka, whose task was to suppress counterrevolutionary opposition. In 1919 she was part of the leadership of the Commissariat of Food, and by 1923 she joined the pro-Trotsky Left Opposition to the bureaucratic *troika* led by Stalin that then seized political power upon Lenin's death. In 1938 she was arrested on charges of being a Trotskyist and later executed. Aleksandr Svidersky was part of the Famine Relief Committee and later a member of the Right Opposition led by Nikolai Bukharin.



**ЧТО ДАЛА  
ОКтябрьская РЕВОЛЮЦИЯ  
РАБОТНИЦЕ и КРЕСТЬЯНКЕ**

**“What the October Revolution Gave Worker and Peasant Women”: Soviet power, libraries, cafeterias, maternity and children's homes, kindergartens, women workers' clubs, adult education.**

possible for the working people to organize their lives without private property in land, without privately owned factories, without that private property that everywhere, throughout the world, even where there is complete political liberty, even in the most democratic republics, keeps the working people in a state of what is actually poverty, and wage-slavery, and women in a state of double slavery.

Soviet power, the power of the working people, in the first months of its existence effected a very definite revolution in legislation that concerns women. Nothing whatever is left in the Soviet Republic of those laws that put women in a subordinate position. I am speaking specifically of those laws that took advantage of the weaker position of women and put them in a position of inequality and often, even, in a humiliating position, i.e., the laws on divorce and on children born out of wedlock and on the right of a woman to summon the father of a child for maintenance.

It is particularly in this sphere that bourgeois legislation, even, it must be said, in the most advanced countries, takes advantage of the weaker position of women to humiliate them and give them a status of inequality. It is particularly in this sphere that Soviet power has left nothing whatever of the old, unjust laws that were intolerable for working people. We may now say proudly and without any exaggeration that apart from Soviet Russia there is not a country in the world where women enjoy full equality and where women are not placed in the humiliating position felt particularly in day-to-day family life. This was one of our first and most important tasks.

If you have occasion to come into contact with parties that are hostile to the Bolsheviks, if there should come into your hands newspapers published in Russian in the regions occupied by Kolchak or Denikin,<sup>6</sup> or if you happen to talk to people who share the views of those newspapers, you may often hear from them the accusation that Soviet power has violated democracy.

We, the representatives of Soviet power, Bolshevik communists and supporters of Soviet power are often accused of violating democracy and proof of this is given by citing the fact that Soviet power dispersed the Constituent Assembly.<sup>7</sup> We usually answer this accusation as follows: that democracy and that Constituent Assembly which came into being when private property still existed on earth, when there was no equality between people, when the one who possessed his own capital was the boss and the others worked for him and were his wage-slaves – that was a democracy on which we place no value. Such democracy concealed slavery even in the most advanced countries. We socialists are supporters of democracy only insofar as it eases the position of the working and oppressed people. Throughout the world socialism has set itself the task of combating every kind of exploitation of man by man. That democracy has real value for us which serves the exploited, the under-privileged. If those who do not work are disfranchised that would be real equality between people. Those who do not work should not eat.

In reply to these accusations we say that the question must be presented in this way – how is democracy implemented in various countries? We see that equality is proclaimed in

<sup>6</sup> During the Civil War launched by counterrevolutionary White generals following the October 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, naval commander Aleksander Kolchak set up an anti-communist “government” in Siberia. Anton Denikin was a tsarist general who supported attempted putsch by the Russian Army commander Kornilov in August 1917. After fleeing to the Caucasus, Denikin became a leading general of the White army. The forces of Kolchak and Denikin, as well as the invading imperialist armies, were crushed by the victorious Red Army founded and led by Leon Trotsky.

<sup>7</sup> The Russian Constituent Assembly sought to become the counterrevolutionary pole of opposition to the victorious Soviet power. When the Assembly, meeting in January 1918, refused to recognize the Soviet government led by the Bolsheviks and Left Social Revolutionaries, and also refused to call new elections to accurately reflect the will of the population, the Soviet regime let the gabfest run its course, then declared the impotent bourgeois talk shop dissolved and immediately called the Third Congress of Soviets which produced a large Bolshevik majority. That was the end of this pseudo-democratic pseudo-parliament, since the real opposition to the Soviet power was led by the would-be dictators of the White Armies and their imperialist backers.

all democratic republics but in the civil laws and in laws on the rights of women, those that concern their position in the family and on divorce, we see inequality and the humiliation of women at every step, and we say that this is a violation of democracy specifically in respect of the oppressed. Soviet power has implemented democracy to a greater degree than any of the other, most advanced countries because it has not left in its laws any trace of the inequality of women. Again I say that no other state and no other legislation has ever done for women a half of what Soviet power did in the first months of its existence.

Laws alone, of course, are not enough, and we are by no means content with mere decrees. In the sphere of legislation, however, we have done everything required of us to put women in a position of equality and we have every right to be proud of it. The position of women in Soviet Russia is now ideal as compared with their position in the most advanced states. We tell ourselves, however, that this is, of course, only the beginning.

Owing to her work in the house, the woman is still in a difficult position. To effect her complete emancipation and make her the equal of the man it is necessary for housework to be socialized and for women to participate in common productive labor. Then women will occupy the same position as men.

Here we are not, of course, speaking of making women the equal of men as far as productivity of labor, the quantity of labor, the length of the working day, labor conditions, etc., are concerned; we mean that the woman should not, unlike the man, be oppressed because of her economic position. You all know that even when women have full rights, they still remain downtrodden because all housework is left to them. In most cases housework is the most unproductive, the most barbarous and the most arduous work a woman can do. It is exceptionally petty and does not include anything that would in any way promote the development of the woman.

In pursuance of the socialist ideal we want to struggle for the full implementation of socialism, and here an extensive field of labor opens up before women. We are now making serious preparations to clear the ground for the building of socialism, but the building of socialism will begin only when we have achieved the complete equality of women and undertake the new work together with women who have been emancipated from that petty, stultifying, unproductive work. This is a job that will take us many, many years.

This work cannot show any rapid results and will not produce a scintillating effect.

We are setting up model institutions, dining rooms and nurseries, that will emancipate women from housework. And the work of organizing all these institutions will fall mainly to women. It has to be admitted that in Russia today there are very few institutions that would help woman out of her state of household slavery. There is an insignificant number of them, and the conditions now obtaining in the Soviet Republic – the war and the food situation about which comrades have already given you the details – hinder us in this work. Still, it must be said that these institutions that liberate women from their position as household slaves are springing up wherever it is in any way possible.

We say that the emancipation of the workers must be effected by the workers themselves, and in exactly the same way the emancipation of working women is a matter for the working women themselves. The working women must themselves see to it that such institutions are developed, and this activity will bring about a complete change in their position as compared with what it was under the old, capitalist society.

In order to be active in politics under the old, capitalist regime special training was required, so that women played an insignificant part in politics, even in the most advanced and free capitalist countries. Our task is to make politics available to every working woman. Ever since private property in land and factories has been abolished and the power of the landowners and capitalists overthrown, the tasks of politics have become simple, clear and comprehensible to the working people as a whole, and to working women as well. In capitalist society the women's position is marked by such inequality that her participation in politics is only an insignificant fraction of man's participation. The power of the working people is necessary for a change to be wrought in this situation, for then the main tasks of politics will consist of matters directly affecting the fate of the working people themselves.

Here, too, the participation of working women is essential – not only of Party members and politically conscious women, but also of the non-party women and those who are least politically conscious. Here Soviet power opens up a wide field of activity to working women.

We have had a difficult time in the struggle against the forces hostile to Soviet Russia that have attacked her. It was difficult for us to fight on the battlefield against those forces who went to war against the power of the working people and in the field of food supplies against the profiteers, because the number of people, the number of working people, who came whole-heartedly to our aid with their own labor was much too small. Here, too, there is nothing Soviet power can appreciate as much as the help given by masses of non-party working women. They may know that in the old, bourgeois society, perhaps, a complicated training was necessary for participation in politics and that this was not available to women. The political activity of the Soviet Republic is mainly the struggle against the landowners and capitalists, the struggle for the elimination of exploitation; political activity, therefore, is made available to the working woman in the Soviet Republic and it will consist in the working woman using her organizational ability to help the working man.

What we need is not only organizational work on a scale involving millions; we need organizational work on the smallest scale and this makes it possible for women to work as well. Women can work under war conditions when it is a question of helping the army or carrying on agitation in the army. Women should take an active part in all this so that the Red Army sees that it is being looked after, that solicitude is being displayed. Women can also work in the sphere of food distribution, on the improvement of public catering and everywhere opening dining rooms like those that are so numerous in Petrograd.

It is in these fields that the activities of working women acquire the greatest organizational significance. The participation of working women is also essential in the organization and running of big experimental farms which should not be a task



**“Down with Kitchen Drudgery! Let There Be a New Household Life.” Background shows factory cafeteria, nursery, workers’ club.**

for individuals. This is something that cannot be carried out without the participation of a large number of working women. Working women will be very useful in this field in supervising the distribution of food and in making food products more easily obtainable. This work can well be done by non-party working women and its accomplishment will do more than anything else to strengthen socialist society.

We have abolished private property in land and almost completely abolished the private ownership of factories; Soviet power is now trying to ensure that all working people, non-party as well as party members, women as well as men, should take part in this economic development. The work that Soviet power has begun can only make progress when, instead of a few hundreds, millions and millions of women throughout Russia take part in it. We are sure that the cause of socialist development will then become sound. Then the working people will show that they can live and run their country without the aid of the landowners and capitalists. Then socialist construction will be so soundly based in Russia that no external enemies in other countries and none inside Russia will be any danger to the Soviet Republic.

The second anniversary of the Soviet power is a fitting occasion for us to review what has, in general, been accomplished during this period, and to probe into the significance and aims of the revolution which we accomplished. ■



Lenin and Trotsky with Red Army soldiers celebrate 2nd anniversary of the Bolshevik October Revolution.

## Soviet Power and the Status of Women (November 1919)

The bourgeoisie and its supporters accuse us of violating democracy. We maintain that the Soviet revolution has given an unprecedented stimulus to the development of democracy both in depth and breadth, of democracy, moreover, distinctly for the toiling masses, who had been oppressed under capitalism; consequently, of democracy for the vast majority of the people, of socialist democracy (for the toilers) as distinguished from bourgeois democracy (for the exploiters, the capitalists, the rich).

Who is right?

To probe deeply into this question and to understand it well will mean studying the experience of these two years and being better prepared to further follow up this experience.

The position of women furnishes a particularly graphic elucidation of the difference between bourgeois and socialist democracy, it furnishes a particularly graphic answer to the question posed.

In no bourgeois republic (i.e., where there is private ownership of the land, factories, works, shares, etc.), be it even the most democratic republic, nowhere in the world, not even in the most advanced country, have women gained a position of complete equality. And this, notwithstanding the fact that

more than one and a quarter centuries have elapsed since the Great French (bourgeois-democratic) Revolution.

In words, bourgeois democracy promises equality and liberty. In fact, not a single bourgeois republic, not even the most advanced one, has given the feminine half of the human race either full legal equality with men or freedom from the guardianship and oppression of men.

Bourgeois democracy is democracy of pompous phrases, solemn words, exuberant promises and the high-sounding slogans of freedom and equality. But, in fact, it screens the non-freedom and inferiority of women, the non-freedom and inferiority of the toilers and exploited.

Soviet, or socialist, democracy sweeps aside the pompous, bullying, words, declares ruthless war on the hypocrisy of the “democrats,” the landlords, capitalists or well-fed peasants who are making money by selling their surplus bread to hungry workers at profiteering prices.

Down with this contemptible fraud! There cannot be, nor is there nor will there ever be “equality” between the oppressed and the oppressors, between the exploited and the exploiters. There cannot be, nor is there nor will there ever

be real “freedom” as long as there is no freedom for women from the privileges which the law grants to men, as long as there is no freedom for the workers from the yoke of capital, and no freedom for the toiling peasants from the yoke of the capitalists, landlords and merchants.

Let the liars and hypocrites, the dull-witted and blind, the bourgeois and their supporters hoodwink the people with talk about freedom in general, about equality in general, about democracy in general.

We say to the workers and peasants: Tear the masks from the faces of these liars, open the eyes of these blind ones. Ask them:

“Equality between what sex and what other sex?

“Between what nation and what other nation?

“*Between what class and what other class?*”

“Freedom from what yoke, or from the yoke of what class? Freedom for what class?”

Whoever speaks of politics, of democracy, of liberty, of equality, of socialism, and does not at the same time *ask* these questions, does not put them in the foreground, does not fight against concealing, hushing up and glossing over these questions, is one of the worst enemies of the toilers, is a wolf in sheep’s clothing, is a bitter opponent of the workers and peasants, is a servant of the landlords, tsars, capitalists.

In the course of two years Soviet power in one of the most backward countries of Europe did more to emancipate women and to make their status equal to that of the “strong” sex than all the advanced, enlightened, “democratic” republics of the world did in the course of 130 years.

Enlightenment, culture, civilization, liberty – in all capitalist, bourgeois republics of the world all these fine words are combined with extremely infamous, disgustingly filthy and brutally coarse laws in which woman is treated as an inferior being, laws dealing with marriage rights and divorce, with the inferior status of a child born out of wedlock as compared with that of a “legitimate” child, laws granting privileges to men, laws that are humiliating and insulting to women.

The yoke of capital, the tyranny of “sacred private property,” the despotism of philistine stupidity, the greed of petty proprietors – these are the things that prevented the most democratic bourgeois republics from infringing upon those filthy and infamous laws.

The Soviet Republic, the republic of workers and peasants, promptly wiped out these laws and left not a stone in the structure of bourgeois fraud and bourgeois hypocrisy.

Down with this fraud! Down with the liars who are talking of freedom and equality *for all*, while there is an oppressed sex, while there are oppressor classes, while there is private ownership of capital, of shares, while there are the well-fed with their surplus of bread who keep the hungry in bondage. Not freedom for all, not equality for all, but a *fight* against the oppressors and exploiters, the *abolition of every possibility* of oppression and exploitation – that is our slogan!

Freedom and equality for the oppressed sex!

Freedom and equality for the workers, for the toiling peasants!

A fight against the oppressors, a fight against the capitalists, a fight against the profiteering kulaks!

That is our fighting slogan, that is our proletarian truth, the truth of the struggle against capital, the truth which we flung in the face of the world of capital with its honeyed, hypocritical, pompous phrases about freedom and equality *in general*, about freedom and equality *for all*.

And for the very reason that we have torn down the mask of this hypocrisy, that we are introducing with revolutionary energy freedom and equality for the oppressed and for the toilers, against the oppressors, against the capitalists, against the kulaks – for this very reason the Soviet government has become so dear to the hearts of workers of the whole world.

It is for this very reason that, on the second anniversary of the Soviet power, the sympathies of the masses of the workers, the sympathies of the oppressed and exploited in every country of the world, are with us.

It is for this very reason that, on this second anniversary of the Soviet power, despite hunger and cold, despite all our tribulations, which have been caused by the imperialists’ invasion of the Russian Soviet Republic, we are full of firm faith in the justice of our cause, of firm faith in the inevitable victory of Soviet power all over the world.

## On International Women’s Day (March 1920)

Capitalism combines formal equality with economic and, consequently, social inequality. This is one of the principal distinguishing features of capitalism, one that is mendaciously screened by the supporters of the bourgeoisie, the liberals, and that is not understood by the petty-bourgeois democrats. Out of this distinguishing feature of capitalism, by the way, the necessity arises, while fighting resolutely for economic equality, openly to recognize capitalist inequality and, under certain conditions, even to include this open recognition of inequality as a basis for the proletarian state organization (the Soviet Constitution).<sup>8</sup>

But capitalism *cannot* be consistent even with regard to formal equality (equality before the law, “equality” between the well-fed and the hungry, between the property-owner and the propertyless). And one of the most flagrant manifestations of this inconsistency

<sup>8</sup> Thus in contrast to the empty phrases about freedom and equality in general bandied about by the bourgeoisie in order to mask the actual oppression and inequality, the 1918 Constitution of the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic decreed “that all workers be armed ... and the propertied class disarmed”; it granted “all political rights of Russian citizens to foreigners who live in the territory of the Russian Republic and are engaged in work and who belong to the working class”; that the right to vote and be elected to the soviets is enjoyed by “citizens of both sexes” who “have acquired the means of livelihood through labor that is productive and useful to society, and also persons engaged in housekeeping which enables the former to do productive work,” as well as soldiers and non-citizen workers, while “persons who employ hired labor in order to obtain from it an increase in profits” as well as “persons who have an income without doing any work” were denied the right to vote. At the time this Constitution was enacted, women in almost every capitalist country in the world were still denied the right to vote.



is the *inferior position* of woman compared with man. Not a single bourgeois state, not even the most progressive, republican democratic state, has brought about complete equality of rights.

But the Soviet Republic of Russia promptly wiped out, *without any exception*, every trace of inequality in the legal status of women, and secured her complete equality in its laws.

It is said that the level of culture is best characterized by the legal status of woman. There is a grain of profound truth in this saying. From this point of view, only the dictatorship of the proletariat, only the socialist state, could achieve and did achieve a higher level of culture. Therefore, the foundation (and consolidation) of the first Soviet Republic – and alongside and in connection with this, the Communist International – inevitably lends a new, unparalleled, powerful impetus to the working women’s movement.

For, when we speak of those who, under capitalism, were directly or indirectly, wholly or partially oppressed, it is precisely the Soviet system, and the Soviet system only, that secures democracy. This is clearly demonstrated by the position of the working class and the poor peasants. It is clearly demonstrated by the position of women.

But the Soviet system represents the final decisive conflict for the *abolition of classes*, for economic and social equality. *For us*, democracy, even democracy for those who were oppressed under capitalism, including democracy for the oppressed sex, *is inadequate*.

The working women’s movement has for its objective the fight for the economic and social, and not merely formal, equality of woman. The main task is to draw the women into socially productive labor, extricate them from “domestic slavery,” free them of their stultifying and humiliating resignation to the perpetual and exclusive atmosphere of the kitchen and nursery.

It is a long struggle, requiring a radical remaking both of social technique and of customs. But this struggle will end with the complete triumph of communism.

## International Working Women’s Day (March 1921)

The gist of Bolshevism and the Russian October Revolution is getting into politics the very people who were most oppressed under capitalism. They were downtrodden, cheated and robbed by the capitalists, both under the monarchy and in the bourgeois-democratic republics. So long as the land and the factories were privately owned this oppression and deceit and the plunder of the people’s labor by the capitalists were inevitable.

The essence of Bolshevism and the Soviet power is to expose the falsehood and mummery of bourgeois democracy, to abolish the private ownership of land and the factories and concentrate all state power in the hands of the working and exploited masses. They, these masses, get hold of politics, that is, of the business of building the new society. This is no easy task: the masses are downtrodden and oppressed by capitalism,

but there is no other way – and there can be no other way – out of the wage slavery and bondage of capitalism.

But you cannot draw the masses into politics without drawing the women into politics as well. For the female half of the human race is doubly oppressed under capitalism. The working woman and the peasant woman are oppressed by capital, but over and above that, even in the most democratic of the bourgeois republics, they remain, firstly, deprived of some rights because the law does not give them equality with men; and secondly – and this is the main thing – they remain in “household bondage,” they continue to be “household slaves,” for they are overburdened with the drudgery of the most squalid and backbreaking and stultifying toil in the kitchen and the family household.

No party or revolution in the world has ever dreamed of striking so deep at the roots of the oppression and inequality of women as the Soviet, Bolshevik revolution is doing. Over here, in Soviet Russia, no trace is left of any inequality between men and women under the law. The Soviet power has eliminated all there was of the especially disgusting, base and hypocritical inequality in the laws on marriage and the family and inequality in respect of children.

This is only the first step in the liberation of woman. But none of the bourgeois republics, including the most democratic of them, has dared to take even this first step. The reason is awe of “sacrosanct private property.”

The second and most important step is the abolition of the private ownership of land and the factories. This and this alone opens up the way towards a complete and actual emancipation of woman, her liberation from “household slavery” through the transition from petty individual housekeeping to a large-scale socialized domestic services.

This transition is a difficult one, because it involves the remolding of the most deep-rooted, inveterate, hidebound and rigid “order” (indecent and barbarity, would be nearer the truth). But the transition has been started, the thing has been set in motion, we have taken the new path.

And so on this international working women’s day countless meetings of working women in all countries of the world will send greetings to Soviet Russia, which first tackled this unparalleled and incredibly hard but great task, a task that is universally great and truly liberatory. There will be bracing calls not to lose heart in face of the fierce and frequently savage bourgeois reaction. The “freer” or “more democratic” a bourgeois country is, the wilder the rampage of its gang of capitalists against the workers’ revolution, an example of this being the democratic republic of the United States of North America. But the mass of workers have already awakened. The dormant, somnolent and inert masses in America, Europe and even in backward Asia were finally roused by the imperialist war.

The ice has been broken in every corner of the world.

Nothing can stop the tide of the peoples’ liberation from the imperialist yoke and the liberation of working men and women from the yoke of capital. This cause is being carried forward by tens and hundreds of millions of working men and women in town and countryside. That is why this cause of labor’s freedom from the yoke of capital will triumph all over the world. ■

# From the Old Family to the New

(July 1923)

By Leon Trotsky

*In the following article, Trotsky observes the growing tensions in the family in the early years of the Soviet Union. Resulting from the enormous upheaval of the revolution, they also reflected the growth of a nascent bureaucracy. As Stalin's bureaucratic domination took hold, this led to an enormous rollback of women's gains, on everything from the rights to abortion and divorce to glorification of the family. For Trotsky's analysis of this see his chapter on "Thermidor in the Family," from *The Revolution Betrayed* (1937). That chapter is reprinted in the *Internationalist pamphlet*, *Bolsheviks and the Liberation of Women*.*

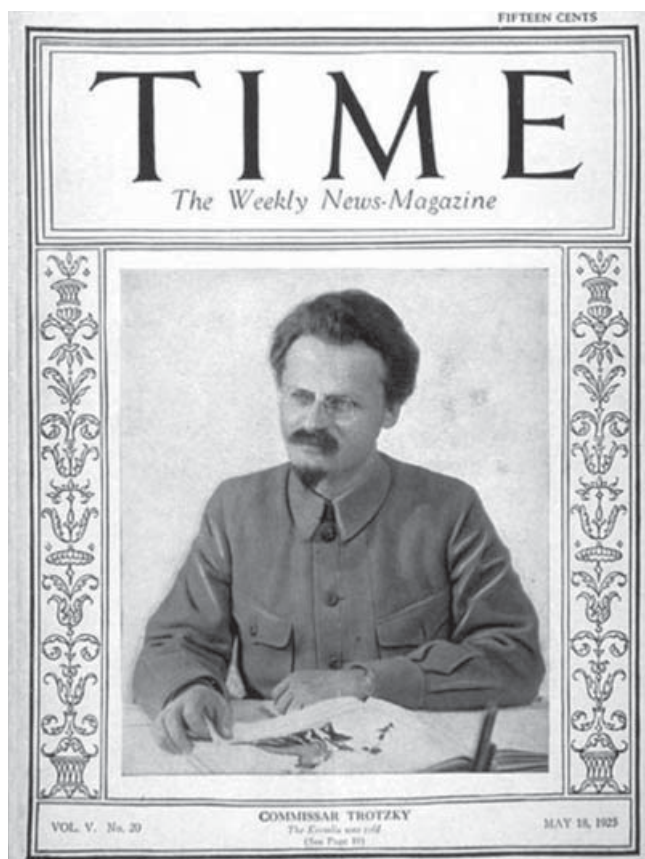
The inner relations and happenings within the family are by their very nature the most difficult to investigate, the least subject to statistics. It is not easy, therefore, to say how far family ties are more easily and frequently broken nowadays (in actual life, not merely on paper) than formerly. To a great extent we must be content to judge by eye. The difference, moreover, between prerevolutionary times and the present day is that formerly all the troubles and dramatic conflicts in working-class families used to pass unnoticed by the workers themselves; whereas now a large upper part of the workers occupy responsible posts, their life is much more in the limelight, and every domestic tragedy in their life becomes a subject of much comment and sometimes of idle gossip.

Subject to this serious reservation, there is no denying, however, that family relations, those of the proletarian class included, are shattered. This was stated as a firmly established fact at the conference of Moscow party propagandists, and no one contested it. They were only differently impressed by it – all in their own way. Some viewed it with great misgivings, others with reserve, and still others seemed perplexed. It was, anyhow, clear to all that some great process was going on, very chaotically assuming alternatively morbid or revolting, ridiculous or tragic forms, and which had not yet had time to disclose its hidden possibilities of inaugurating a new and higher order of family life.

Some information about the disintegration of the family has crept into the press, but just occasionally, and in very vague, general terms. In an article on the subject, I had read that the disintegration of the family in the working class was represented as a case of "bourgeois influence on the proletariat."

It is not so simple as this. The root of the question lies deeper and is more complicated. The influence of the bourgeois past and the bourgeois present is there, but the main process consists in a painful evolution of the proletarian family itself, an evolution leading up to a crisis, and we are witnessing now the first chaotic stages of the process.

The deeply destructive influence of the war on the family is well known. To begin with, war dissolves the family automatically, separating people for a long time or bringing people together by chance. This influence of the war was continued and strengthened by the revolution. The years of the war shat-



tered all that had stood only by the inertia of historic tradition. They shattered the power of tsardom, class privileges, the old traditional family. The revolution began by building up the new state and has achieved thereby its simplest and most urgent aim.

The economic part of its problem proved much more complicated. The war shook the old economic order; the revolution overthrew it. Now we are constructing a new economic state – doing it as yet mostly from the old elements, reorganizing them in new ways. In the domain of economics we have but recently emerged from the destructive period and begun to ascend. Our progress is still very slow, and the achievement of new socialistic forms of economic life is still very distant. But we are definitely out of the period of destruction and ruin. The lowest point was reached in the years 1920-21.<sup>1</sup>

The first destructive period is still far from being over in the life of the family. The disintegrating process is still in full swing. We must bear that in mind. Family and domestic life are still passing, so to speak, their 1920-21 period and have

<sup>1</sup> In the aftermath of the Civil War, with hundreds of thousands of proletarians killed by the White reactionaries, millions felled by typhus and hunger, and when the economy of the young Soviet republic lay in ruins. By 1922 there were an estimated 7 million homeless and parentless children living on the streets.

not reached the 1923 standard. Domestic life is more conservative than economic, and one of the reasons is that it is still less conscious than the latter. In politics and economics the working class acts as a whole and pushes on to the front rank its vanguard, the Communist Party, accomplishing through its medium the historic aims of the proletariat. In domestic life the working class is split into cells constituted by families. The change of political regime, the change even of the economic order of the state – the passing of the factories and mills into the hands of the workers – all this has certainly had some influence on family conditions, but only indirectly and externally, and without touching on the forms of domestic traditions inherited from the past.

A radical reform of the family and, more generally, of the whole order of domestic life requires a great conscious effort on the part of the whole mass of the working class, and presumes the existence in the class itself of a powerful molecular force of inner desire for culture and progress. A deep-going plough is needed to turn up heavy clods of soil. To institute the political equality of men and women in the Soviet state was one problem and the simplest. A much more difficult one was the next – that of instituting the industrial equality of men and women workers in the factories, the mills, and the trade unions, and of doing it in such a way that the men should not put the women to disadvantage. But to achieve the actual equality of man and woman within the family is an infinitely more arduous problem. All our domestic habits must be revolutionized before that can happen. And yet it is quite obvious that unless there is actual equality of husband and wife in the family, in a normal sense as well as in the conditions of life, we cannot speak seriously of their equality in social work or even in politics. As long as woman is chained to her housework, the care of the family, the cooking and sewing, all her chances of participation in social and political life are cut down in the extreme.

The easiest problem was that of assuming power. Yet just that problem alone absorbed all our forces in the early period of the revolution. It demanded endless sacrifices. The civil war necessitated measures of the utmost severity. Philistine vulgarians cried out about the barbarization of morality, about the proletariat becoming bloody and depraved, and so on. What was actually happening was that the proletariat, using the means of revolutionary violence forced into its hands, started to fight for a new culture, for genuine human values.

In the first four or five years we have passed economically through a period of terrific breakdown. The productivity of labor collapsed, and the products were of an appallingly low quality. Enemies saw, or chose to see, in such a situation a sign of the rottenness of the Soviet regime. In reality, however, it was but the inevitable stage of the destruction of the old economic forms and of the first unaided attempts at the creation of new ones.

In regard to family relations and forms of individual life in general, there must also be an inevitable period of disintegration of things as they were, of the traditions, inherited from the past, which had not passed under the control of thought. But in this domain of domestic life the period of criticism and destruction begins later, lasts very long, and assumes morbid and

painful forms, which, however, are complex and not always perceptible to superficial observation. These progressive landmarks of critical change in state conditions, in economics and life in general, ought to be very clearly defined to prevent our getting alarmed by the phenomena we observe. We must learn to judge them in their right light, to understand their proper place in the development of the working class, and consciously to direct the new conditions towards socialist forms of life.

The warning is a necessary one, as we already hear voices expressing alarm. At the conference of the Moscow party propagandists some comrades spoke with great and natural anxiety of the ease with which old family ties are broken for the sake of new ones as fleeting as the old. The victims in all cases are the mother and children. On the other hand, who in our midst has not heard in private conversations complaints, not to say lamentations, about the “collapse” of morality among Soviet youth, in particular among Young Communists? Not everything in these complaints is exaggeration – there is also truth in them. We certainly must and will fight the dark sides of this truth – this being a fight for higher culture and the ascent of human personality. But in order to begin our work, to tackle the ABC of the problem without reactionary moralizing or sentimental downheartedness, we must first make sure of the facts and begin to see clearly what is actually happening.

Gigantic events, as we said above, have descended on the family in its old shape, the war and the revolution. And following them came creeping slowly the underground mole – critical thought, the conscious study and evaluation of family relations and the forms of life. It was the mechanical force of great events combined with the critical force of the awakened mind that generated the destructive period in family relations that we are witnessing now. The Russian worker must now, after the conquest of power, make his first conscious steps towards culture in many departments of his life. Under the impulse of great collisions, his personality shakes off for the first time all traditional forms of life, all domestic habits, church practices and relationships.

No wonder that, in the beginning, the protest of the individual, his revolt against the traditional past, is assuming anarchic, or to put it more crudely, dissolute forms. We have witnessed it in politics, in military affairs, in economics; here anarchic individualism took on every form of extremism, partisanship, public-meeting rhetoric. And no wonder also that this process reacts in the most intimate and hence most painful way on family relationships. There the awakened personality, wanting to reorganize in a new way, removed from the old beaten tracks, resorts to “dissipation,” “wickedness” and all the sins denounced in the Moscow conference.

The husband, torn away from his usual surroundings by mobilization, changed into a revolutionary citizen at the civic front. A momentous change. His outlook is wider, his spiritual aspirations higher and of a more complicated order. He is a different man. And then he returns to find everything there practically unchanged. The old harmony and understanding with the people at home in family relationships is gone. No new understanding arises. The mutual wondering changes into mutual discontent, then into ill will. The family is broken up.

The husband is a Communist. He lives an active life, is engaged in social work, his mind grows, his personal life is absorbed by his work. But his wife is also a Communist. She wants to join in social work, attend public meetings, work in the soviet or the union. Home life becomes practically non-existent before they are aware of it, or the missing of home atmosphere results in continual collisions. Husband and wife disagree. The family is broken up.

The husband is a Communist, the wife is nonparty. The husband is absorbed by his work; the wife, as before, only looks after her home. Relations are "peaceful," based, in fact, on customary estrangement. But the husband's committee – the Communist "cell" – decrees that he should take away the icons hanging in his house. He is quite willing to obey, finding it but natural. For his wife it is a catastrophe. Just such a small occurrence exposes the abyss that separates the minds of husband and wife. Relations are spoiled. The family is broken up.

An old family. Ten to fifteen years of common life. The husband is a good worker, devoted to his family; the wife lives also for her home, giving it all her energy. But just by chance she comes in touch with a Communist women's organization. A new world opens before her eyes. Her energy finds a new and wider object. The family is neglected. The husband is irritated. The wife is hurt in her newly awakened civic consciousness. The family is broken up.

Examples of such domestic tragedies, all leading to one end – the breaking up of the family – could be multiplied endlessly. We have indicated the most typical cases. In all our examples the tragedy is due to a collision between Communist and nonparty elements. But the breaking up of the family, that is to say, of the old-type family, is not confined to just the top of the class as the one most exposed to the influence of new conditions. The disintegrating movement in family relationships penetrates deeper. The Communist vanguard merely passes sooner and more violently through what is inevitable for the class as a whole. The censorious attitude towards old conditions, the new claims

upon the family, extend far beyond the border line between the Communist and the working class as a whole.

The institution of civil marriage was already a heavy blow to the traditional consecrated family which lived a great deal for appearances. The less personal attachment there was in the old marriage ties, the greater was the binding power of the external forces, social traditions and more particularly religious rites. The blow to the power of the church was also a blow to the family. Rites, deprived of binding significance and of state recognition, still remain in use through inertia, serving as one of the props to the tottering family. But when there is no inner bond within the family, when nothing but inertia keeps the family itself from complete collapse, then every push from outside is likely to shatter it to pieces, while, at the same time, it is a blow at the adherence to church rites. And pushes from the outside are infinitely more likely to come now than ever before. That is the reason why the family totters and fails to recover and then tumbles again. Life sits in judgment on its conditions and does it by the cruel and painful condemnation of the family. History fells the old wood – and the chips fly in the wind.

But is life evolving any elements of a new type of family? Undoubtedly. We must only conceive clearly the nature of these elements and the process of their formation. As in other cases, we must separate the physical conditions from the psychological, the general from the individual. Psychologically the evolution of the new family, of new human relationships in general, for us means the advancement in culture of the working class, the development of the individual, a raising of the standard of his requirements and inner discipline. From this aspect, the revolution in itself has meant, of course, a big step forward, and the worst phenomena of the disintegrating family signify merely an expression, painful in form, of the awakening of the class and of the individual within the class. All our work relating to culture, the work we are doing and the work we ought to be doing, becomes, from this viewpoint, a preparation for new relationships and a new family. Without a raising of the standard of the culture

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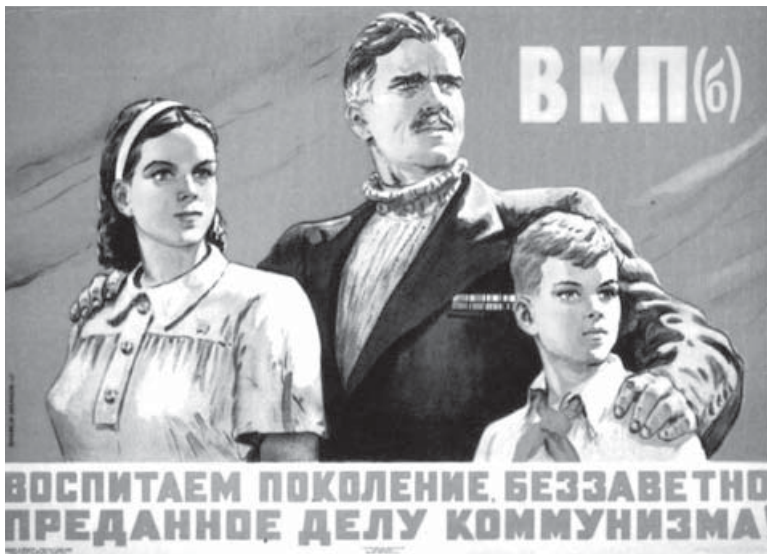
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**Soviet family life belied this idyllic Stalinist poster about “selflessly bringing up the family devoted to communism”.**

of the individual working man and woman, there cannot be a new, higher type of family, for in this domain we can only, of course, speak of inner discipline and not of external compulsion. The force then of the inner discipline of the individual in the family is conditioned by the tenor of the inner life, the scope and value of the ties that unite husband and wife.

The physical preparations for the conditions of the new life and the new family, again, cannot fundamentally be separated from the general work of socialist construction. The workers' state must become wealthier in order that it may be possible seriously to tackle the public education of children and the releasing of the family from the burden of the kitchen and the laundry. Socialization of family housekeeping and public education of children are unthinkable without a marked improvement in our economics as a whole. We need more socialist economic forms. Only under such conditions can we free the family from the functions and cares that now oppress and disintegrate it. Washing must be done by a public laundry, catering by a public restaurant, sewing by a public workshop. Children must be educated by good public teachers who have a real vocation for the work. Then the bond between husband and wife would be freed from everything external and accidental, and the one would cease to absorb the life of the other. Genuine equality would at last be established. The bond will depend on mutual attachment. And on that account particularly, it will acquire inner stability, not the same, of course, for everyone, but compulsory for no one.

Thus the way to the new family is twofold: (a) the raising of the standard of culture and education of the working class and the individuals composing the class; (b) an improvement in the material conditions of the class organized by the state. The two processes are intimately connected with one another.

The above statements do not, of course, imply that at a given moment in material betterment the family of the future will instantly step into its rights. No. A certain advance towards the new family is possible even now. It is true that the state cannot as yet undertake either the education of children or the establishment of public kitchens that would be an improve-

ment on the family kitchen, or the establishment of public laundries where the clothes would not be torn or stolen.<sup>2</sup> But this does not mean that the more enterprising and progressive families cannot group themselves even now into collective housekeeping units. Experiments of this kind must, of course, be made carefully; the technical equipment of the collective unit must answer to the interests and requirements of the group itself, and should give manifest advantages to every one of its members, even though they be modest at first.

“This task,” Comrade Semashko recently wrote of the necessity of reconstructing our family life, “is best performed practically; decrees and moralizing alone will have little effect. But an example, an illustration of a new form, will do more than a thousand excellent pamphlets. This practical propaganda is best conducted on the method surgeons in their practice call transplantation. When a big surface is bare of skin either as the result of wound or burn, and there is no hope that the skin will grow sufficiently to cover it, pieces of skin are cut off from healthy places of the body and attached in islets on the bare surface; these islets adhere and grow until the whole surface is covered with skin.

“The same thing happens in practical propaganda. When one factory or works adopts communist forms, other factories will follow.”

– N. Semashko, “The Dead Holds on to the Living,” *Izvestia*, No. 81, 14 April 1923

The experience of such collective family housekeeping units representing the first, still very incomplete approximations to a communist way of life, should be carefully studied and given attentive thought. The combination of private initiative with support by the state power – above all, by the local soviets and economic bodies – should have priority. The building of new houses – and, after all, we are going to build houses! – must be regulated by the requirements of the family group communities. The first apparent and indisputable success in this direction, however slight and limited in extent, will inevitably arouse a desire in more widespread groups to organize their life on similar lines. For a thought-out scheme, initiated from above, the time is not yet ripe, either from the point of view of the material resources of the state or from that of the preparation of the proletariat itself. We can escape the deadlock at present only by the creation of model communities. The ground beneath our feet must be strengthened step by step; there must be no rushing too far ahead or lapsing into bureaucratic fanciful experiments. At a given moment, the state will be able, with the help of local soviets, cooperative units, and so on, to socialize the work done, to widen and deepen it. In this way the human family, in the words of Engels, will “jump from the realm of necessity to the realm of freedom.” ■

<sup>2</sup> While the Bolshevik government had begun establishing communal kitchens, childcare centers (*crèches*) and other institutions aimed at overcoming household drudgery, these efforts were incipient and limited given the economic backwardness of Russia, exacerbated by the devastation caused by WWI and the Civil War.

# Feminism vs. Marxism: Origins of the Conflict

*The following article is reprinted from Women and Revolution No. 5, Spring 1974, published by the Women's Commission of the Spartacist League/U.S.*

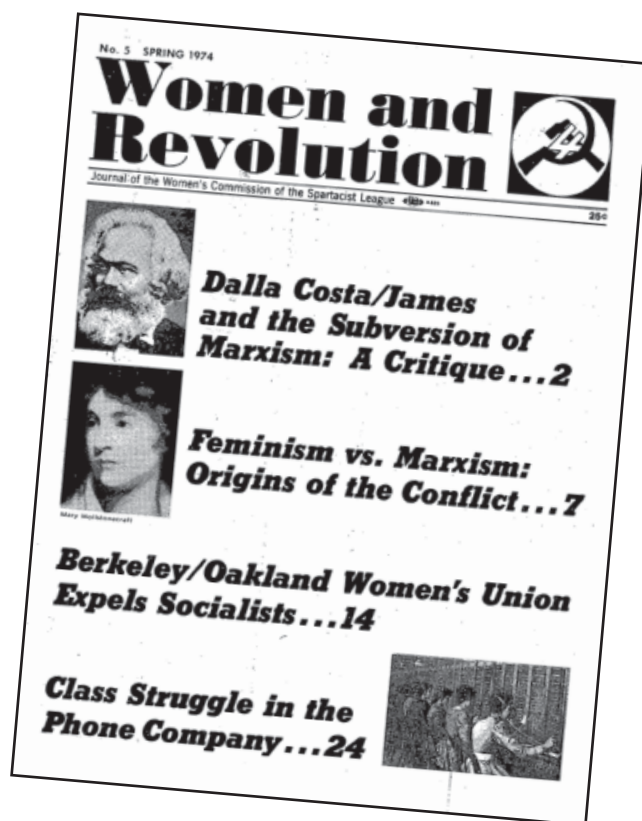
Contrary to an opinion still subscribed to in certain circles, modern feminism did not emerge full-grown from the fertile womb of the New Left, but is in fact an ideological offspring of the utopian egalitarianism of the early nineteenth century, which was in turn a product of the bourgeois democratic revolution. It is noteworthy that the most original theorist of utopian socialism, Charles Fourier, was also the first advocate of women's liberation through the replacement of the nuclear family by collective child rearing. Since utopian socialism (including its solution to the problem of the oppression of women) represented the ideals of the bourgeois-democratic revolution breaking through the barriers of private property, it was historically progressive. However, with the genesis of Marxism and the recognition that an egalitarian society can emerge only out of the rule of the working class, feminism (like other forms of utopian egalitarianism) lost its progressive aspect and became an ideology of the left wing of liberal individualism, a position which it continues to occupy to this day.

## Women in the Bourgeois-Democratic Vision

Without question, the most important bourgeois-democratic work on women's liberation was Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* written in 1792. Wollstonecraft was part of a circle of English radical democrats which included William Blake, Tom Paine and William Godwin, whose political lives came to be dominated by the French Revolution. A year before she wrote her classic on sexual equality, Wollstonecraft wrote *A Vindication of the Rights of Man*, a polemic against Edmund Burke's counterrevolutionary writings. A few years after, she was to attempt a history of the French Revolution.

While informed and imbued with moral outrage as a result of her own experiences as an unmarried, middle-class woman (she worked as a school teacher and governess), *Vindication* is essentially an extension of the principles of the Enlightenment and French Revolution to women. The first chapter, entitled "Rights and Duties of Mankind," sets the theoretical framework. *Vindication* rests heavily on analogies between the basis for the equality of women and general social equality:

For a contemporary reader, *Vindication* seems a highly unbalanced work. While the description of the role of women continues to be relevant, Wollstonecraft's solutions appear pallid. Her main programmatic demand, to which she devotes the concluding chapter, is uniform education for girls and boys. Even when she wrote *Vindication* this was only a moderately radical proposal. In fact in the very year that *Vindication* was written, a similar educational program was proposed in the French Assembly. Yet generations after the establishment of



The issues of *Women and Revolution* are available online in the Marxists Internet Archive at: <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/w&r/index.htm>

coeducation and the even more radical reform of women's suffrage, Wollstonecraft's depiction of women's role in society continues to ring true.

Although Wollstonecraft was one of the most radical political activists of her day (shortly after writing her classic on women's rights, she crossed the Channel to take part in the revolutionary French government), *Vindication* has an unexpectedly moralizing and personalist character. Like many feminists of our day, she appeals to men to recognize the full humanity of women and to women to stop being sex objects and develop themselves. And there is the same conviction that if only men and women would really believe in these ideals and behave accordingly, then women would achieve equality.

The emphasis on individual relationships is not peculiar to Wollstonecraft, but arises from the inherent contradiction within the bourgeois-democratic approach to women's oppression. Wollstonecraft accepted the nuclear family as the central institution of society and argued for sexual equality within that framework.

By accepting the basic role of women as mothers,



**Mary Wollstonecraft, c. 1797**

Wollstonecraft accepted a division of labor in which women were necessarily economically dependent on their husbands. Therefore, women's equality was essentially dependent on how the marriage partners treated one another. In good part, *Vindication* is an argument that parents and particularly fathers should raise their daughters more like their sons in order to bring out their true potential. But if fathers reject education for their daughters, there is no other recourse. Here we have the limits both of bourgeois democracy and of Wollstonecraft's vision.

### **Charles Fourier and the Abolition of the Family**

The status of women in the nineteenth century represented the most acute and manifest expression of the contradiction between capitalist society and its own ideals. It was this contradiction that gave birth to utopian socialism. Early in the nineteenth century it became apparent to those still committed to the ideals of the French Revolution that liberty, equality and fraternity were not compatible with private property in a competitive market economy. As the most incisive of the pioneer socialists, Charles Fourier, put it:

“Philosophy was right to vaunt *liberty*; it is the foremost desire of all creatures. But philosophy forgot that in civilized society liberty is illusory if the common people lack wealth. When the wage-earning classes are poor, their independence is as fragile as a house without foundations. The free man who lacks wealth immediately sinks back under the yoke of the rich.”

—Jonathan Beecher and Richard Bienvenu (eds.), *The Utopian Vision of Charles Fourier* (1971)

And when Fourier applied the same critical concepts to the status of women, he reached equally radical, anti-bourgeois conclusions. The importance that Fourier attributed to the



**Charles Fourier**

condition of women is well known:

“Social progress and changes of period are brought about by virtue of the progress of women toward liberty, and social retrogression occurs as a result of a diminution in the liberty of women.... In summary, the extension of the privileges of women is the fundamental cause of all social progress.”  
—*Ibid.*

What is of decisive importance about Fourier's concern for women's oppression is that he put forth a program for the total reconstruction of society that would end the historic division of labor between men and women. In Fourier's projected socialist community, children were raised collectively with no particular relation to their biological parents, men and women performed the same work and total sexual liberty was encouraged. (He regarded heterosexual monogamy as the extension of bourgeois property concepts to the sexual sphere.)

Fourier's intense hostility to the patriarchal family in good part derived from his realization that it was inherently sexually repressive. In this he anticipated much of radical Freudianism. For example, he observed, “There are still many parents who allow their unmarried daughters to suffer and die for want of sexual satisfaction” (*ibid.*).

Despite the fantastic nature of his projected socialist communities or “phalanxes,” Fourier's program contained the rational core for the reorganization of society needed to liberate women. He was uniquely responsible for making the demand for the liberation of women through the abolition of the nuclear family an integral part of the socialist program which the young Marx and Engels inherited. Engels was more than willing (for example, in *Socialism, Utopian and Scientific*) to pay homage to the primary author of the socialist program for women's liberation.

## Utopian Egalitarianism and Women's Liberation

While not giving the woman question the centrality it had in Fourierism, the two other major currents of early nineteenth century socialism, Owenism and Saint-Simonism, were also unambiguously committed to sexual equality and opposed to legally enforced monogamy. The political life of the early nineteenth century was characterized by the *complete interpenetration* of the struggle for women's liberation and the general struggle for an egalitarian society. Those women advocating women's rights (no less than the men who did so) did not view this question as distinct from, much less counterposed to, the general movement for a rational social order. Those women who championed sexual equality were either socialists or radical democrats whose activity on behalf of women's rights occupied only a fraction of their political lives. The most radical women advocates of sexual equality – the Americans Frances Wright and Margaret Fuller and the Frenchwoman Flora Tristan – all conform to this political profile.

Frances Wright began her political career as a liberal reformer with a tract in favor of the abolition of slavery. She was won to socialism by Robert Dale Owen, Robert Owen's son, who immigrated to the U.S. to become its most important radical socialist in the 1820-30's. Wright established an Owenite commune in Tennessee modeled on the famous one at New Harmony, Indiana. In 1828-29, she and Robert Dale Owen edited the *Free Enquirer*, a newspaper associated with the New York Workingman's Party which championed universal suffrage, free public education, "free love" and birth control.

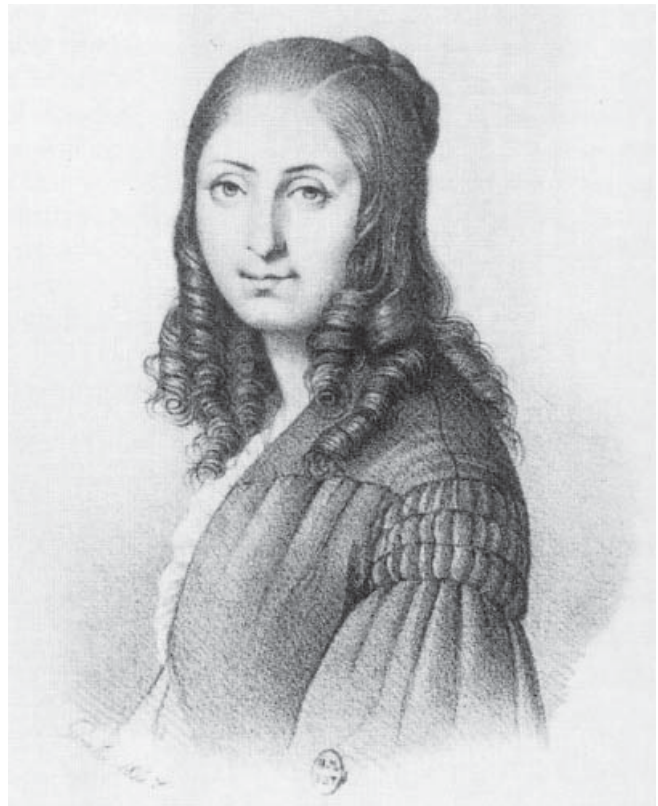
Margaret Fuller, whose *Women in the Nineteenth Century* was the most influential women's rights work of her generation, was a product of New England Transcendentalism<sup>1</sup> and had edited a journal with Ralph Waldo Emerson. Like Wollstonecraft, Margaret Fuller approached the woman question from the standpoint of religious radicalism (the equality of souls).

Fuller was associated with the Transcendentalist commune, Brook Farm, about the time it was transformed into a Fourierist community or "phalanx," the year before she wrote her classic on women's equality. Shortly after that she went to Europe and became involved in the democratic nationalist movements that were a mainspring in the revolutions of 1848. In that momentous year, she went to Italy to run a hospital for Giuseppe Mazzini's<sup>2</sup> Young Italy movement.

The most important woman socialist of the pre-1848 era was Flora Tristan. She began her revolutionary career with a tract in favor of legalized divorce, which had been outlawed in France following the reaction of 1815. (As a young woman Tristan had left her husband, an act which resulted in social ostracism and continual hardship throughout her life.) Her work on divorce led

<sup>1</sup> Transcendentalism was a religious/philosophical movement in the eastern U.S. which broke from Protestant Calvinism to embrace a variety of religious sources, including Hinduism, and emphasized individual self-reliance.

<sup>2</sup> Giuseppe Mazzini was a bourgeois liberal politician who was one of the leaders of the movement for the unification of Italy from foreign domination. In 1848 he established a short-lived republic in Milan in a rebellion against Austrian occupation. Mazzini was a "moderate" compared to the radical Giuseppe Garibaldi.



**Flora Tristan**

to a correspondence with the aging Fourier and a commitment to socialism. Among the most cosmopolitan of socialists, Tristan had crisscrossed the Channel playing an active role in both the Owenite and Chartist movements. Summing up her political situation in a letter to Victor Considerant, leader of the Fourierist movement after the master's death, she wrote: "Almost the entire world is against me, men because I am demanding the emancipation of women, the propertied classes because I am demanding the emancipation of the wage earners" (Margaret Goldsmith, *Seven Women Against the World* [1935]).

In the 1840's the ancient French craft unions ... were transforming themselves into modern trade unions. This process produced an embryonic revolutionary socialist labor movement whose main leaders were Pierre Joseph Proudhon, August Blanqui and Etienne Cabet. Flora Tristan was part of this nascent proletarian socialist movement. Her *The Workers Union* written in 1843, was the most advanced statement of proletarian socialism up to its day. Its central theme was the need for an *international* workers' organization. (Marx met Tristan while he was in Paris and was undoubtedly influenced by her work.) The concluding passage of *The Workers Union* affirms: "Union is power if we unite on the social and political field, on the ground of equal rights for both sexes, if we organize labor, we shall win welfare for all."

*The Workers Union* devotes a section to the problems of women and its concluding passage indicates the integral role that sexual equality had in Tristan's concept of socialism: "We have resolved to include in our Charter woman's sacred and inalienable rights. We desire that men should give to their wives and mothers the liberty and absolute equality which they enjoy themselves."



Flora Tristan died of typhoid in 1844 at the age of 41. Had she survived the catastrophe of 1848 and remained politically active, the history of European socialism might well have been different, for she was free of the residual Jacobinism of Blanqui and the artisan philistinism of Proudhon.

Contemporary feminists and bourgeois historians tend to label all early nineteenth-century female advocates of sexual equality feminists. This is a wholly illegitimate analysis – a projection of current categories back into a time when they are meaningless. As a delimited movement and distinctive ideology feminism did not exist in the early nineteenth century. Virtually *all* the advocates of full sexual equality considered this an integral part of the movement for a generally free and egalitarian society rooted in Enlightenment principles and carrying forward the American and particularly the French Revolutions. The American Owenite Frances Wright was no more a feminist than the English Owenite William Thompson, who wrote *An appeal of one half the Human Race, Women, against the pretensions of the other Half, Men, to keep them in Civil and Domestic Slavery*. Flora Tristan was no more a feminist than was Fourier.

In the 1840's, a Transcendentalist radical like Margaret Fuller, a nationalist democrat like Giuseppe Mazzini and a socialist working class organizer like Etienne Cabet could consider themselves part of a common political movement whose program was encapsulated in the slogan, "Liberty, Equality and Fraternity." In its most radical expression, this movement looked forward to a single, total revolution which would simultaneously establish democracy, eliminate classes, achieve equality for women and end national oppression.

This vision was defeated on the barricades in 1848. And with that defeat, the component elements of early nineteenth-century radicalism (liberal democracy and socialism, trade unionism, women's equality and national liberation) separated and began to compete and conflict with one another. After 1848, it seemed that bourgeois society would continue for some time and that the interests of the oppressed, be they workers, women or nations, would have to be realized within its framework. Feminism (like trade unionism and national liberation) emerged as a delimited movement with its own constituency, ideology and organization only after the great catastrophe of 1848 had temporarily dispelled the vision of a fundamentally new social order.

### Marx Against Utopian Egalitarianism

It is sometimes written that Fourier regarded socialism more as a means of overcoming women's oppression than class oppression. This is a post-Marx way of looking at politics and not how Fourier would have viewed it. He would have said that he projected a society which would satisfy human needs and that the most striking thing about it was the radical change in the role of women. As opposed to the materialist view that different political movements represent the interests of different classes, utopian socialism shared the rational idealistic conception of political motivation characteristic of the Enlightenment – i.e., that different political movements reflect different conceptions of the best possible social organization. The idealism of early socialism was probably inevitable since

it was produced by those revolutionary bourgeois democrats who maintained their principles after the actual bourgeoisie had abandoned revolutionary democracy. The social base of early socialism was those petty-bourgeois radicals who had gone beyond the interests and real historic possibilities of their class. This was most true of German "True Socialism"<sup>3</sup> which, in a nation with virtually no industrial workers and a conservative, traditionalist petty bourgeoisie, was purely a literary movement. It was least true of English Owenism, which had intersected the embryonic labor movement while retaining a large element of liberal philanthropism.

By the 1840's a working-class movement had arisen in France, Belgium and England which was attracted to socialist ideas and organization. However, the relationship of the new-fledged socialist workers' organizations to the older socialist currents, as well as to liberal democracy and the political expressions of women's rights and national liberation, remained confused in all existing socialist theories. It was Marx who cut the Gordian knot and provided a coherent, realistic analysis of the social basis for the socialist movement within bourgeois society.

Marx asserted that the working class was the social group which would play the primary and distinctive role in establishing socialism. This was so because the working class was that social group whose interests and condition were most in harmony with a collectivist economy or, conversely, which had the least stake in the capitalist mode of production.

Marx's appreciation of the role of the proletariat was not deduced from German philosophy, but was the result of his experience in France in the 1840's. Socialism had manifestly polarized French society along class lines, the main base for socialism being the industrial working class, the propertied classes being implacably hostile and the petty bourgeoisie vacillating, often seeking a utopian third road.

For Marx the predominance of intellectuals in the early socialist movement was not proof that the socialist movement could be based on universal reason. Rather, it was necessarily a phenomenon partly reflecting the contradictions of the bourgeois democratic revolution and partly anticipating the new alignment of class forces: "A portion of the bourgeoisie goes over to the proletariat and in particular, a portion of bourgeois ideologists, who have raised themselves to the level of comprehending theoretically the historical movement as a whole" (Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* [1848]).

The propertied, educated classes could not be won to socialism on the basis of rational and democratic ideals even though objectively those ideals could only be realized under socialism. Along the same lines, women of the privileged class and the ruling stratum of oppressed nationalities cannot in general be won to socialism even though objectively sexual equality and national liberation can only be realized under socialism.

Closely related to the question of the class basis of the socialist movement is the question of the material conditions under which socialism can be established. Reflecting on pre-Marxist socialism in his later years, Engels quipped that the utopians believed that the reason socialism hadn't been es-

<sup>3</sup> The foremost exponents of True Socialism were Karl Grün and Moses Hess in Germany and Hermann Kriege in the U.S.

established before was that nobody had ever thought of it. That Engels' witticism was only a slight exaggeration is shown by the importance of communal experiments in the early socialist movement, indicating a belief that socialism could be established under any and all conditions if a group really wanted it. The primacy of voluntarism for the early socialists again reflected the fact that their thinking was rooted in eighteenth-century, individualistic idealism which, in turn, derived from Protestantism, an earlier bourgeois ideology.

In sharp and deliberate contrast to the utopians, Marx asserted that inequality and oppression were necessary consequences of economic scarcity and attempts to eliminate them through communal escapism or political coercion were bound to fail:

“[T]his development of productive forces (which itself implies the actual empirical existence of men in their *world-historic*, instead of local, being) is an absolutely necessary practical premise because without it *want* is merely made general, and with *destitution* the struggle for necessities and all the old filthy business would necessarily be reproduced....”

—Karl Marx, *The German Ideology* [1847] [emphasis in original]

Marx's assertion that inequality and oppression are historically necessary and can be overcome only through the *total* development of society, centering on the raising of the productive forces, represents his most fundamental break with *progressive* bourgeois ideology. Therefore, to this day, these concepts are the most unpalatable aspects of Marxism for those attracted to socialism from a liberal humanist outlook:

“...[A]lthough at first the development of the capacities of the human species takes place at the cost of the majority of human individuals and even classes, in the end it breaks through this contradiction and coincides with the development of the individual; the higher level of individuality is thus only achieved by a historical process in which individuals are sacrificed....”

“[I]t is only possible to achieve real liberation in the real world and by employing real means.... Slavery cannot be abolished without the steam-engine and the mule and spinning-jenny, serfdom cannot be abolished without improved agriculture, and ... in general people cannot be liberated as long as they are unable to obtain food and drink, housing and clothing in adequate quality and quantity. ‘Liberation’ is an historical and not a mental act, and it is brought about by historical conditions, the development of industry, commerce, agriculture, the conditions of intercourse....”

—Karl Marx, *Theories of Surplus Value* [Vol. 4 of *Capital* (1861)]

It is evident that “women” can replace “individuals” and “classes” in these passages without doing damage to their meaning, since Marx regarded women's oppression as a *necessary* aspect of that stage in human development associated with class society.

Marx's programmatic differences with the utopians were encapsulated in the concept of the “dictatorship of the proletariat” which he regarded as one of his few original, important contributions to socialist theory. The dictatorship of the pro-

letariat is that period after the overthrow of the capitalist state when the working class administers society in order to create the economic and cultural conditions for socialism.

During the dictatorship of the proletariat, the restoration of capitalism remains a possibility. This is not primarily due to the machinations of die-hard reactionaries but arises rather out of the conflicts and tensions generated by the continuation of global economic scarcity.

This economic scarcity is caused not only by inadequate physical means of production. Even more importantly it derives from the inadequate and extremely uneven cultural level inherited from capitalism. Socialist superabundance presupposes an enormous raising of the cultural level of mankind. The “average” person under socialism would have the knowledge and capacity of several learned professions in contemporary society.

However, in the period immediately following the revolution, the administration of production will necessarily be largely limited to that elite trained in bourgeois society, since training their replacements will take time. Therefore, skilled specialists such as the director of an airport, chief of surgery in a hospital or head of a nuclear power station will have to be drawn from the educated, privileged classes of the old capitalist society. Although in a qualitatively diminished way, the dictatorship of the proletariat will continue to exhibit economic inequality, a hierarchic division of labor and those aspects of social oppression rooted in the cultural level inherited from bourgeois society (e.g., racist *attitudes* will not disappear the day after the revolution).

These general principles concerning the dictatorship of the proletariat likewise apply to the woman question. To the extent that it rests on the cultural level inherited from capitalism, certain aspects of sexual inequality and oppression will continue well into the dictatorship of the proletariat. The population cannot be totally re-educated nor can a psychological pattern instilled in men and women from infancy be fully eliminated or reversed.

The rejection of the dictatorship of the proletariat as a necessary transition period to socialism is the central justification for utopian egalitarianism (including radical or “socialist” feminism) in the era of Marxism.

## The Battle over Protective Labor Legislation

Feminism was one of the three major extensions of utopian egalitarianism into the post-1848 era, the other two being anarchism and artisan cooperativism (Proudonism). In fact, during the later nineteenth century radical feminism and anarchism heavily interpenetrated one another both as regards their position on the woman question and in personnel. The decisive element in common among feminism, anarchism and cooperativism was a commitment to a level of social equality and individual freedom impossible to attain not only under capitalism, but in the period following its overthrow. At a general ideological level, feminism was bourgeois individualism in conflict with the realities and limits of bourgeois society.

During their lifetimes, Marx and Engels had two notable conflicts with organized feminism – continual clashes in the

context of the struggle for protective labor legislation and a short faction fight in the American section of the First International. While the question of protective labor legislation covered a great deal of ground at many levels of concreteness, the central difference between the Marxists and feminists over this issue was also the central difference between Marxism and utopian egalitarianism – i.e., the question of the primacy of the material well-being of the masses and the historical interests of the socialist movement vis-à-vis formal equality within bourgeois society.

The feminist opposition to protective labor legislation argued and continues to argue that it would mean legal inequality in the status of women and that it was partly motivated by paternalistic, male-chauvinist prejudices. Marx and Engels recognized these facts but maintained that the physical well-being of working women and the interests of the entire class in reducing the intensity of exploitation more than offset this formal and ideological inequality. Writing to Gertrud Guillaume-Schack, a German feminist who later became an anarchist, Engels stated his case:

“That the working woman needs special protection against capitalist exploitation because of her special physiological functions seems obvious to me. The English women who championed the formal right of members of their sex to permit themselves to be as thoroughly exploited by the capitalists as the men are mostly, directly or indirectly, interested in the capitalist exploitation of both sexes. I admit I am more interested in the health of the future generation than in the absolute formal equality of the sexes in the last years of the capitalist mode of production. It is my conviction that real equality of women and men can come true only when exploitation of either by capital has been abolished and private housework has been transformed into a public industry.”

–Marx and Engels, *Selected Correspondence*, Letter to Guillaume-Schack of 5 June 1855

Thus Engels recognized in feminism the false consciousness of the privileged classes of women who believe that since they themselves are oppressed only as women, sexual inequality is the only significant form of oppression.

Guillaume-Schack’s conversion to anarchism was not accidental, for the anarchists also opposed protective labor legislation for women as an inconsistent, unequalitarian reform. Writing a polemic against the Italian anarchists in the early 1870’s, Marx ridiculed the “logic” that one “must not take the trouble to obtain legal prohibition of the employment of girls under 10 in factories because a stop is not thereby put to the exploitation of boys under 10” – that this was a “compromise which damages the purity of eternal principles” (quoted in Hal Draper, *International Socialism*, July–August 1970).

### **Woodhull versus Sorge in the First International**

Because of the catch-all nature of the First International, the Marxist tendency had to wage major internal factional struggles against the most characteristic left currents in the various countries (e.g., trade-union reformism in Britain, Proudhon’s cooperativism in France, Lasalle’s state social-



**Victoria Woodhull**

ism in Germany and anarchism in Eastern and Southern Europe). It is therefore highly symptomatic that the major factional struggle within the American section centered around feminism, a variant of petty-bourgeois radicalism. In the most general sense, the importance of the Woodhull tendency reflected the greater political weight of the American liberal middle class relative to the proletariat than in European class alignments. Historically petty-bourgeois moralism has been more influential in American socialism than in virtually any other country. This was particularly pronounced in the period after the Civil War when abolitionism served as the model for native American radicalism.

The relative political backwardness of the American working class is rooted primarily in the process of its development through successive waves of immigration from different countries. This created such intense ethnic divisions that it impeded even elementary trade-union organization. In addition, many of the immigrant workers who came from peasant backgrounds were imbued with strong religious, racial and sexual prejudices and a generally low cultural level which impeded class – much less socialist – consciousness. In general the discontent of American workers was channeled by the petty bourgeoisie of the various ethnic groups into the struggle for their own place in the parliamentary-state apparatus.

The American working class’s lack of strong organization, its ethnic electoral politics and relatively backward social attitudes created a political climate in which “enlightened middle-class socialism” was bound to flourish. Not least important in

this respect was the fact that the liberal middle classes were Protestant while the industrial working class was heavily Roman Catholic. Indeed, an important aspect of the Woodhull/Sorge fight was over an orientation toward Irish Catholic workers.

Victoria Woodhull was the best-known (more accurately notorious) “free love” advocate of her day, ambitious and with a gift for political showmanship. Seeing that the First International was becoming fashionable, she organized her own section of it (Section 12) along with remnants of the New Democracy, a middle-class, electoral-reformist organization, led by Samuel Foot Andrews, a former abolitionist. The Woodhullites thus entered the First International as a radical liberal faction, with an emphasis on women’s rights and an electoralist strategy.

Section 12 rapidly retranslated the principles of the First International into the language of American liberal democracy. Needless to say, it came out for total organizational federalism with each section free to pursue its own activities and line within the general principles of the International. Section 12’s political line and organizational activities (its official paper, *Woodhull and Claflin’s Weekly* preached spiritualism among other things) quickly brought it into conflict within the Marxist tendency, led by the German veteran of the 1848 revolution, Friedrich Sorge. Section 12 was able to cause much factional trouble, not only in the U.S. but abroad, because its radical liberalism fed into the growing anarchist, electoral-reformist and federalist currents in the International. The Woodhullites were part of a rotten bloc which coalesced against the Marxist leadership of the First International in 1871-72. Woodhull enjoyed a short stay in the anarchist International in 1873 on her way to becoming a wealthy eccentric.

The immediate issue of the faction fight was the priority of women’s rights, notably suffrage, over labor issues, particularly the eight-hour day. That for the Woodhullites what was involved was not a matter of programmatic emphasis, but a counterposition to proletarian socialism was made explicit after the split with Sorge: “The extension of equal citizenship to women, the world over, must *precede* any general change in the subsisting relation of capital and labor” [emphasis in original] (*Woodhull and Claflin’s Weekly*, 18 November 1871).

After splitting with the Sorge wing, while still claiming loyalty to the First International, Section 12 organized the Equal Rights Party in order to run Woodhull for president in 1872. The program was straight left-liberalism without any proletarian thrust. It called for “...a truly republican government which shall not only recognize but guarantee equal political and social rights to men and women, and which shall secure equal opportunities of education for all children” (*Woodhull and Claflin’s Weekly*, 20 April 1872).

The general political principles of the Woodhullites were clearly expressed in their appeal to the General Council of the First International against the Sorge wing:

“It [the object of the International] involves, first, the Political Equality and Social Freedom of men and women alike.... Social Freedom means absolute *immunity* from the impertinent intrusion in all affairs of exclusively personal concernment, such as religious belief, *sexual relations*, *habits*



**Woodhull’s campaign for president, February 1871.**

*of dress*, etc.” [emphasis in original]

—*Documents of the First International*, The General Council; Minutes 1871-72

This appeal was answered by a resolution written by Marx, which suspended Section 12. After cataloguing the organizational abuses and rotten politics, Marx concluded by reasserting the central difference between democratic egalitarianism and proletarian socialism – namely, that the end to all forms of oppression must run through the victory of the working class over capitalism. Marx called attention to past international documents:

“[R]elating to ‘sectarian sections’ or ‘separatist bodies pretending to accomplish special missions’ distinct from the common aim of the Association [First International], viz. to emancipate the mass of labour from its ‘economical subjection to the monopolizer of the means of labour’ which lies at the bottom of servitude in all its forms, of social misery, mental degradation and political dependence.”

—*Ibid.*

While the Marxist case against the Woodhullites centered on their electoralism, middle-class orientation and quackery, the role of “free love” in the socialist movement had a definite significance in the fight. While including personal sexual freedom in their program, the Marxists insisted on a cautious approach to this question when dealing with more backward sections of the working class. By flaunting a sexually “liberated” life-style, the Woodhullites would have created a nearly impenetrable barrier to winning over conventional and religious workers. One of the main charges that Sorge brought against Section 12 at the Hague Conference in 1872 was that its activities had made it much more difficult for the International to reach the strategically placed Irish Catholic workers.

The historic relevance of the Woodhull/Sorge faction fight is that it demonstrated, in a rather pure way, the basis of feminism in classic bourgeois-democratic principles, particularly individualism. It further demonstrated that feminist currents tend to be absorbed into liberal reformism or anarchistic petty-bourgeois radicalism, both of which invariably unite against revolutionary proletarian socialism. ■

# Foundations of Communist Work Among Women: The German Social Democracy

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## Part 1: 1875-1900

“The beginnings of the class-conscious organized proletarian women’s movement in Germany are indissolubly bound up with the coming into being and maturing of the socialist conception of society in the proletariat, with the process of its being welded together as a class, politically and socially represented by a class party which is ideologically and organizationally sound. The beginnings of the women’s movement are a part, and in fact a very characteristic part of this entire path of development, giving an index to its increasing depth. The first efforts to gather proletarian women on the ground of the proletarian class struggle take place especially in close connection with the rising trade-union movement. They are consequently social-democratic in essence, for in contrast to other countries, such as Great Britain, the trade unions were summoned into life by political parties.”

—Clara Zetkin, *Zur Geschichte der proletarischen Frauenbewegung Deutschlands* [On the History of the Proletarian Women’s Movement in Germany] (1928)

Between 1875 when it was founded and its historic betrayal over support to the imperialist war in 1914, the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) became the recognized theoretical and organizational leadership of the world proletarian movement. During those years it succeeded in fusing the Marxist theoretical approach to the woman question with the strategy and tactics which continue to this day to serve as models for communist work among women. Far from occurring spontaneously, this fusion was the product of some 40 years of arduous struggle by and within the German party in the course of its pioneering work among women.

Debates on the woman question were intricately tied to industrial/political developments in Germany (and thus all of Europe), as well as to the many-sided factional struggle which festered within the German party as early as the 1890’s.

Germany’s industrial boom in the second half of the 19th century, which coincided with its national consolidation under the chancellorship of Otto von Bismarck, brought whole new layers of the population – including women – into industrial production for the first time and placed the woman question in the forefront of the young socialist movement. These were the years when both the SPD and the Free Trade Unions (which were allied with the socialists, as opposed to the company unions and non-socialist unions) developed into mass organizations.



**Imperial chancellor Otto von Bismarck**

Bismarck attempted to disguise his fundamentally reactionary and repressive regime with a few fragments of democratic reform and social welfare legislation. But the Reichstag [the imperial parliament], aptly dubbed by Wilhelm Liebknecht<sup>1</sup> “a fig leaf for absolutism,” possessed no political power. The so-

<sup>1</sup> Wilhelm Liebknecht was, together with August Bebel, the leader of the Marxist wing of the German workers movement, which founded the Socialist Workers Party of Germany (SDAP) in 1869. Liebknecht strongly opposed the government of Count Bismarck, while his main rival, Ferdinand Lassalle, sought social reforms in alliance with the reactionary imperial chancellor. In 1872 Wilhelm was jailed on charges of high treason for opposing Bismarck’s war on France and then hailing the Paris Commune. His son Karl was a leader who, together with Rosa Luxemburg, of the left wing of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), was likewise jailed on charges of high treason in 1916 for his revolutionary opposition to the imperialist First World War. Karl and Rosa went on to found the Spartakusbund (Spartacus League) and in December 1918 the Communist Party of Germany (KPD), only to be assassinated on the orders of the SPD government in January 1919.



**Ferdinand Lassalle**

called “universal” suffrage which Bismarck enacted excluded broad sections of the proletariat, including, of course, women. Laws of Association severely restricted the operation of political parties (and were particularly enforced against radical parties); women and youth were forbidden to join *any* political parties or, until 1890, any trade unions. The labor movement was thus required from its inception to participate in a struggle for political democracy as a precondition for its very existence. This fact put the Social Democracy in the leadership of the greater part of the union movement in the early years.

In 1878, only three years after the founding of the SPD at Gotha, Bismarck enacted the Exceptional or Anti-Socialist Laws, which illegalized the organization, forcing it underground, while allowing individual socialists to run for office and sit in the Reichstag. During the 12 years that the laws were in effect, 1,500 persons were imprisoned and 900 deported. This period of clandestine operation proved to be one of great expansion for the socialist parties (as well as for the trade unions). Electoral support for the SPD grew from a half million votes in 1877 (nine percent of the total vote) to one and a half million in 1890 (20 percent of the total), despite Bismarck’s attempts to upstage the Social Democrats with wide-reaching social security reforms during the 1880s. But the organizational preconditions for the degeneration of the SPD were laid in this period when its only public manifestations were the Reichstag fraction, functioning almost autonomously from the party leadership, and the trade unions.

The Anti-Socialist Laws were especially repressive toward women. For instance, when, in the mid-1880s, clubs for the “self-education of women” were established by women



**Wilhelm Liebknecht**

close to the SPD (the first “special work among women”), an extraordinary decree was passed outlawing such groups. However, the political victimization of the *entire* workers movement was sufficiently severe to foster a close political working relationship between the men and women within it, born of shared oppression and shared aspirations.

The early battles over the rights of German working women were fought out not in the feminist movement, which limited itself to bourgeois demands, but in the embryonic socialist parties and trade unions. Working-class women were therefore traditionally bound up in the struggle of the working class as a whole against capitalist oppression.

Questions posed by the growth of the female proletariat, such as those dealing with protective labor legislation for women, the role of the family in society and women’s suffrage, had been hotly debated within the German socialist movement since the 1860’s, particularly between the Marxian and the Lassallean wings, which fused in 1875 to form the SPD.

Ferdinand Lassalle’s “socialism” was a society based on state producer cooperatives which were to be achieved by the introduction of democracy (i.e., universal suffrage) and a unified Germany under the Prussian sword. Clara Zetkin made a fundamental criticism of the Lassalleans in her book, *Zur Geschichte der proletarischen Frauenbewegung Deutschlands*, which exposes, at least partially, the reason for their inability to come to a correct position on the woman question. Commenting on the “iron law of wages” theory mechanically upheld by the Lassalleans, she said:

“Marx recognized it neither as ‘iron’ nor as a law. It was more a stumbling block for the Lassalleans than an asset. Lassalle had attempted to prove by means of it that the continuing rise

in the income of the proletariat above and beyond the absolute minimum for survival was impossible under the wage system. Occasional adherents of Lassalle may have maintained, following this, that wage-earning by women did not signify a continuing improvement in the position of the proletarian family, but rather merely the competition over the 'wage fund' by labor power that was in itself cheap for the capitalist. The position of women could only be improved through the improvement of workers, that is, through abolition of the wage system. This assertion is based on a correctly felt but incorrectly proven historical truth: that, as the liberation of the proletariat is possible only through the abolition of the capitalist productive relation, so too the emancipation of women is possible only through doing away with private property. However from this truth it is still a long way to the fundamental exclusion of women from all political and economic movements."

At its Sixth General Meeting in 1867 the Lassallean General German Workers Association adopted the position that:

"The employment of women in the workshops of modern industry is one of the most scandalous abuses of our time. Scandalous, because it does not improve the material situation of the working class but makes it worse, and because the destruction of the family in particular reduces the working class population to a wretched state in which even the last remnants of its ideal possessions are taken from it. This gives us all the more reason to reject the current efforts to increase even further the market for female labour. Only the abolition of the rule of capital can ensure the remedy, through which positive organic institutions will abolish the wage-relationship and give every worker the full proceeds of his labour."

—quoted in Werner Thönnessen, *The Emancipation of Women – The Rise and Decline of the Women's Movement in German Social Democracy 1863–1933* [1973]

At the same time, the Lassalleans raised a demand for wages for housework and, flowing from this, issued a call for male workers to *strike* to keep women out of industry in order to keep men's wages up, in the hope that this would economically strengthen the family and thus encourage women to marry instead of going to work.

The Marxians themselves did not have a clear view of the woman question at each historical moment. Marx correctly analyzed the necessity of female labor for the capitalists:

"In so far as machinery does away with the need for any considerable expenditure of muscular power, it becomes a means for the utilization of workers with comparatively little strength, and those whose bodily growth is immature but whose limbs are all the more supple. The labour of women and children was, therefore, the first word in the capitalist utilization of machinery. This mighty substitute for work and workers speedily transformed itself into a means for increasing the number of wage workers by enlisting all the members of the working-class family, without distinction of sex or age, to them under the direct sway of capital. Forced labour for the capitalist usurped the place, not only of the children's play, but also of free labour in the domestic circle, carried on for the family itself, and within moderate limits."

—Marx, *Capital*, Vol. I

Furthermore, he had commented in the *Communist Manifesto*

on the "nauseating" "bourgeois phrase-making" about the "intimate relations between parents and children," and had derided the hoax of bourgeois marriage and the family, saying: "Just as in grammar two negatives make an affirmative, so we may say that in the marriage mart two prostitutions make a virtue" (*The Holy Family*). Nevertheless, the embryonic German section of the Marxist International Workers Association (First International) published the following in a discussion document of 1866:

"The rightful work of women and mothers is in the home and family, caring for, supervising, and providing the first education for the children, which, it is true, presupposed that the women and children themselves receive an adequate training. Alongside the solemn duties of the man and father in public life and the family, the woman and mother should stand for the cosiness and poetry of domestic life, bring grace and beauty to social relations and be an ennobling influence in the increase of humanity's enjoyment of life."

—quoted in Thönnessen, *The Emancipation of Women*

The desire of socialists to protect women from the real brutality of the factory and confine them to the "cosiness and poetry" of the home is understandable. During this period of rapid industrial expansion in Germany, working conditions, particularly for unorganized women and children, were abominable. And while parents worked, proletarian children were left to raise themselves on the streets. High infant mortality, crowded city housing, disease and starvation were the hallmarks of emergent capitalism. Furthermore, the influx of women, who normally received lower wages than men for the same work, presented a clear and immediate threat to the workers movement. Therefore, although the integration of women into industry was later to become an unquestioned position in the Marxist–Leninist program, its correctness appeared less than obvious at the time.

Marx had argued in *Capital* that:

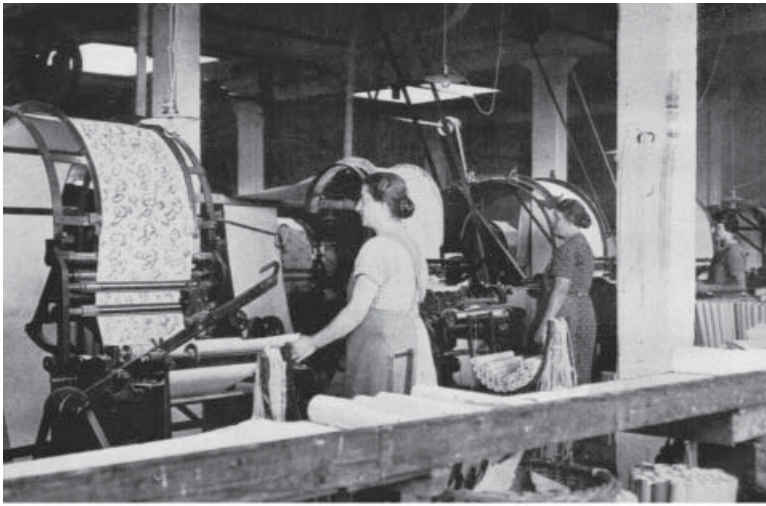
"However terrible, however repulsive, the break-up of the old family system within the organism of capitalist society may seem; none the less, large-scale industry, by assigning to women and young persons and children of both sexes, a decisive role in the socially organised process of production, and a role which has to be fulfilled outside the home, is building the new economic foundation for a higher form of the family and of the relations between the sexes."

—Marx, *Capital*, Vol. I

It was this materialist analysis, which saw beyond immediate conditions and recognized that *wage labor opened the door to the only real possibility of fundamental social change through the wielding of industrial power*, which enabled Marxists over a period of time to develop a correct revolutionary perspective, whereas the positions of the Lassalleans remained grounded in the bourgeois prejudices of the day.

## Protective Labor Legislation

The question of protective labor legislation for women in many ways paralleled the dispute on the integration of women into industry. Here again, the facts were that conditions of work among women were inferior even to those of men at the time. Women, who possessed few skills and little education and who had been schooled in docility since infancy, were



**Marxists fought for protective legislation for child and female labor. Women workers at wallpaper factory (top) and women and child laborers at jute bag factory, both near Mannheim, Germany.**

susceptible to the worst exploitation. Thus there developed a widespread demand for special protective labor laws for women workers – a demand which was quite radical in that it was a direct challenge to the employers’ right to determine the conditions of work.

At the Eisenach Conference of 1869 the question of protective laws was discussed in the newly founded Social Democratic Labor Party, the first organized Marxist group in Germany. Led by August Bebel and Wilhelm Liebknecht, in opposition to a Lassallean tendency within the party, a successful struggle was waged for the restriction of female labor and the prohibition of child labor. While this still did not represent a revolutionary stand on the subject, it nonetheless recognized that the drawing of women into the labor force was progressive – the question for socialists after this time was *how* to do it.

At the unification of the Lassalleans and the Eisenachers at Gotha in 1875, a program was adopted representing a compromise which generally favored the theories of the Lassalleans over the Marxians, but which was closer to the Marxist position in favor of protective legislation on child and

female labor. This remained the official position of the SPD until its legalization with the expiration of the oppressive Anti-Socialist Laws in 1890.

At the Halle Party Conference of that year, the leaders of the party’s work among women – Emma Ihrer, Luise Zietz and Clara Zetkin – put forth a position *rejecting* special privileges for women while *demanding* protection for *all* workers. But this position, which correctly resolved the question of protective labor legislation for women, was rejected by the party.

### Women’s Suffrage

The suffrage issue was particularly important for the socialist movement in Germany because of the arbitrary and class-oppressive suffrage laws which remained in force until 1918. Even as late as 1908, when the SPD won six seats in the Prussian Diet for the first time, the six socialist deputies were elected with 600,000 votes while 418,000 votes gained the Conservatives 212 seats!

But even on the suffrage issue, there were years of dispute before the position of clear and unequivocal support for women’s suffrage emerged. The Lassalleans had held a position in favor of equal and direct suffrage for *men* from the age of twenty. At the Eisenach Conference in 1869, the Marxist proposal of voting rights for “all citizens” was defeated.

At the Gotha unification conference six years later, Bebel and Liebknecht fought vigorously for equal suffrage:

“Admittedly, opponents of female suffrage often maintain that women have no political education. But there are plenty of men in the same position, and by this reasoning they ought not to be allowed to vote either. The ‘herd of voters’ which has figured at all the elections did not consist of women. A party which has inscribed ‘equality’ on its banner flies in the face of its own words if it denies political rights to half the human race.”

–quoted in Thönnessen, *The Emancipation of Women*

Liebknecht’s amendment was voted down, but a proposal for “general equal and direct suffrage with secret and obligatory voting for all citizens over twenty years of age” was incorporated into the program. This formulation neatly skirted the issue of whether or not women were part of the citizenry. Finally in 1891 the positive and unambiguous support of the SPD for women’s suffrage was proclaimed in the Erfurt Program, which included a demand for “universal, equal and direct suffrage, with secret ballot, for all citizens of the Reich over twenty years of age without distinction as to sex.” It further demanded:

“the abolition of all laws which discriminate against women as compared with men in the public or private legal sphere, free educational materials, and free care for those girls and boys who, because of their abilities, are considered suitable for further education.”

–quoted in Thönnessen, *The Emancipation of Women*

After 15 years of struggle, the party had finally taken a



strong stand in favor of women's emancipation, but the Erfurt Program in which it appeared also encapsulated the growing political rifts which already had begun to divide the party. The revolutionary-sounding theoretical section of the program was barely reflected in the essentially reformist programmatic section. As became clear later, the right wing of the party viewed the suffrage issue merely as an aid to its parliamentary aspirations. Women's suffrage, which was for revolutionists a means of educating the whole class for revolutionary struggles, was for the revisionists simply another vote-getting gimmick within the bourgeois order.

### Clara Zetkin

An outstanding milestone in the clarification of the SPD's position on work among women was Clara Zetkin's pamphlet, *The Question of Women Workers and Women at the Present Time* (1889), which synthesized the key components of the Marxist position on this widely disputed question. The positions which she set forth – above all her insistence that the socialist women's movement could not exist outside the socialist workers movement as a whole – were later adopted by the Third International in 1919-22 and remain fundamentally the positions of Marxists today.

Zetkin's pamphlet – which argued that “women must remain in industry despite all narrow-minded caterwauling; in fact the circle of their industrial activity must become broader and more secure daily” – was grounded in the writings not only of Marx, but also in the Marxist position on the woman question set forth in August Bebel's *Women and Socialism* (1879) and Frederick Engels' *Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884). She demonstrated how industrialization was already forcing capitalism to take over some of the functions of the family (education, for instance), but she insisted that only socialism could guarantee the possibility of the socialization of *all* essential family functions and thus lay the basis for the liberation of women.

Against those who objected that female labor should be abolished because it was harmful to women, Zetkin argued that the expulsion of women from industry was a reactionary proposal which would result in their relegation to their previous position of powerlessness and that the destructive effects of labor on women would be overcome only through its socialization, i.e., through socialist revolution. Toward that end, she maintained, the industrialization and education of women as part of the organized working class was *essential*:

“The organization and enlightenment of working women, the struggle to attain their economic and political equal rights is not only desirable for the socialist movement. It is and will become more and more a life-and-death question for it; the more the further development of industry forces men out of production, the more the huge army of the female proletariat swells. *A socialist movement that is carried out not only by the male proletariat but by the millions of industrial women workers as well, is bound to be victorious, to lead to the political and economic liberation of the whole working class twice as fast.*”

—Clara Zetkin, *The Question of Women Workers and Women at the Present Time*



### The second issue (1892) of *Die Gleichheit* (Equality), edited by SPD leftists Clara Zetkin and Emma Ihrer.

In 1891, the year of the Erfurt Conference, Zetkin and Emma Ihrer became the editors of a special SPD newspaper addressed specifically to the question of women's emancipation. It was called *Die Gleichheit* (Equality). The editors wrote that *Die Gleichheit* would:

“...fight with all energy and sharpness for the full social liberation of the world of proletarian women, because this is possible only in a socialist society. For only in such a society, along with the disappearance of the property and economic relations presently dominant, will the social contradiction disappear between those who own property and those who do not, between man and woman, between intellectual and physical labor. The elimination of these contradictions can however only come through class struggle: the liberation of the proletariat can only be the work of the proletariat itself. If the proletarian woman wants to be free, she must join forces with the common socialist movement.... But the characteristic standpoint, the standpoint of the class struggle, must be sharply and unambiguously emphasized in an organ for the interests of proletarian women. And this must be done all the more sharply, the more the bourgeois women's righters make it their business, by the use of general humanitarian phrases and petty concessions to women workers' demands for reform, to throw up obstructions in the world of proletarian women and to seek to draw them away from the class struggle. But the schooling of proletarian women precisely for the class struggle will also in the future continue to be the foremost task of *Die Gleichheit*.”

—Thönnessen, *Die Frauenemanzipation*

The following ten years were enormously successful for the SPD and for its work among women, in particular, but its functioning was overshadowed by the growing political differentiation within the party which was to lead, in 1914, to an open split. Thus the party's intervention into the mass movement through the medium of *Die Gleichheit*, although congruent with the theoretical position of the party, contradicted the main momentum of the party leaders under Karl Kautsky, who sought to appease the purely parliamentary and trade-unionist appetites of their constituency. For a shift was taking place toward ever more confidence in the possibility of effecting fundamental social change through parliamentary activity. Since the party's base rested mainly on the northern industrial proletariat and its trade-union leadership, there was strong pressure for concessions to pure trade unionism. Furthermore, during this period, membership in the trade unions was quickly outdistancing that of the SPD. In accordance with the “two pillars” theory (that the trade unions deal with economic issues and the party handles “political” questions),

the trade unions adopted a politically “neutral” stand. It was only in the next decade that this illusory compromise broke down as the trade-union leaderships demonstrated their fundamentally reformist intentions. The party leadership under Kautsky, forced to choose, capitulated.

The central leadership of the work among women, notably Zetkin, fought the rightward drift of the party majority. Throughout this period, and in fact until 1916 when Zetkin was finally removed from editorship, *Die Gleichheit* was continually attacked by the right wing for being too theoretical, too inaccessible, not “popular” enough. Attempts were made to liquidate the paper and print instead a Sunday supplement dealing with women, written to be “understandable to all.” Zetkin, Zietz, Ihrer and others in the left wing argued that the paper was not intended to be a family newspaper, but an instrument for the theoretical instruction of revolutionists; that it was a form of special work among politically conscious women primarily directed at female members and sympathizers of the SPD. Year after year, the leftists blocked these attempts to “simplify” (depoliticize) the newspaper, and managed to resist liquidation until 1916, two years after the decisive political betrayal by the party majority.

It is notable that the growing revisionist currents within the party were considerably weaker among readers and supporters of *Die Gleichheit*. When the Socialist Caucus of the SPD voted for war credits in 1914, *Die Gleichheit* went into open opposition. It was a measure of the systematic political education that had been carried on and the intransigent leadership of the party’s work among women that most of the experienced comrades involved in this work did not side with the reformist SPD majority. From this point until Zetkin’s final removal as editor, *Die Gleichheit* was known as the international women’s publication opposing the imperialist war. It served as one of the few voices of the antiwar left wing of the Second International and – through ties with left-wing socialists in Russia, Austria, England, Belgium, the U.S. and elsewhere – became a political lifeline for many women who later found their way into the Third International.

## Part 2: 1900-1917

“The collapse of the Second International is the collapse of socialist opportunism. The latter has grown as a product of the preceding ‘peaceful’ period in the development of the labour movement. That period taught the working class to utilise such important means of struggle as parliamentarianism and all legal opportunities, create mass economic and political organisations, a widespread labour press, etc.; on the other hand, the period engendered a tendency to repudiate the class struggle and to preach a class truce, repudiate the socialist revolution, repudiate the very principle of illegal organisations, recognise bourgeois patriotism, etc. Certain strata of the working class...as well as petty-bourgeois sympathisers within the socialist parties, have proved the social mainstay of these tendencies, and channels of bourgeois influence over the proletariat.”

–V.I. Lenin, *Conference Resolutions*, Conference of the R.S.D.L.P. groups abroad, February 1915

By the second half of the 1890’s, the German Social

Democratic Party (SPD), based on the powerful industrial trade unions, had become a real social force capable of leading whole sections of the German proletariat and had thus gained preeminence in the world socialist movement. This growing social weight was a strong motive force behind both the reformist and revolutionary wings of the party; the left envisioned as a real possibility the party’s leading the proletariat in socialist revolution, while the right sought increasingly simply to maintain its powerful bargaining position *within* capitalist society.

A study of this history sheds light on the woman question partly because of the ground-breaking theoretical and practical work done by the SPD in the pre-war period. But, just as importantly, the history demonstrates, in life, that a genuine solution to the oppression of women is inseparable from a revolutionary world view and that the struggle for women’s liberation must be linked to a truly revolutionary party.

It was no accident that those, like Zetkin, who fought unswervingly for special, high-level, agitational and propagandistic work among women, were among the leading radicals in the SPD who staunchly defended their revolutionary proletarian vision against *all* forms of narrowness and chauvinism, from trade unionism, parliamentarianism and nationalism to male chauvinism and feminism. Many of these comrades were among those who formed the Spartacist group in 1916 and the German Communist Party (KPD) in 1919, the organizations which carried forward revolutionary work among women.

### The Foundations are Established

Following years of debate on the woman question, the 1896 Gotha Congress made major steps forward by passing a lengthy memorandum on the woman question and codifying the approach of the SPD to the organization of the female proletariat in an eight-point program including demands for equality in suffrage, education and wages. The same congress passed resolutions affirming the need for special work among women and established the organizational rudiments for the work. This approach was reaffirmed at an international gathering the same year attended by about thirty socialist women from England, Germany, America, Holland, Belgium and Poland, which was held in conjunction with the International Congress of Socialist Workers and Trade Unions. The 1896 conferences underscored the essential counterposition of the bourgeois-feminist to the proletarian-socialist women’s movement, proclaiming that the latter must be organized as part of the revolutionary proletarian movement because of the unbreakable connection between women’s human and social position and the private ownership of property. These resolutions, embodying a revolutionary perspective, laid the basis for the work of the SPD on the woman question at the turn of the twentieth century and stood as models for the rest of the world socialist movement.

### Special Organization for Women

The German party was particularly admired for its unique resolution of the organization question which reconciled the need for special work among women with the overriding importance of a unified proletarian party. It developed the conception of an internal division of labor in the party, con-



**Clara Zetkin (left) and Rosa Luxemburg in 1910, two leaders of the left wing of German Social Democracy who later founded the Communist Party.**

sisting of a Woman's Commission or Bureau to oversee the work, combined with a separate organization or "section" led and organized by the party. Through special work directed at women, the section could extend the influence of the party to layers of proletarian women who might otherwise not join the movement. This form of organization had been developed after much discussion and was instituted only after much heated debate within the party. Because of the Laws of Association, which severely restricted the political activity of women and youth until 1908, separate socialist women's organizations, usually under the guise of "women's self-education societies," had been established; but leaders of this work insisted that special attention to work among women was necessary even in the absence of such oppressive legislation.

"If they [the woman comrades] wanted to bring socialism to the mass of proletarian women, they had to take into account these women's political backwardness, their emotional peculiarities, their two-fold burden at home and in the factory, in short, all the special features of their existence, actions, feelings and thoughts. Accordingly, they had in part to adopt different ways and means in their work, and seek other points of contact, than the male comrades did in their educational and organizational work among the male proletariat."

—O. Baader, *Report for the First International Conference of Socialist Women*, Stuttgart, 1909

Later, members of the Russian Bolshevik tendency and

socialist parties of other countries argued within their groups for special work on the German model consisting of a Women's Bureau, Committee or Commission to direct research, agitation and propaganda and produce special publications directed at women like the SPD newspaper *Die Gleichheit*.

"However, in all countries the vital victory in this argument goes to the defenders of the German way of working – the fusion of the male and female halves of the working class in the party organization, while retaining *the separation and autonomy* of agitation among the women of the working class."

—Aleksandra Kollantai, *Women Workers Struggle for their Rights* [1919]

The entire party organization was in the process of being strengthened and centralized during the late 1890's and early 1900's as the SPD became transformed from a small, illegal organization to a mass party. Partly as an expression of the growing preoccupation with electoral work, the loosely federated local groupings were urged to consolidate into regional organizations, generally contiguous with voting districts; however this was also a healthy attempt to construct a national party capable of united action. Representatives, known as *Vertauensmänner*, had the task of linking the local groups to the Central Executive, and, as part of the organization of the female proletariat, provision was made in 1892 for specially elected female representatives in each area and a central representative to direct the work nationally and sit on the Central Executive. Because, in German, the word *Vertauensmann* grammatically can refer only to a male representative, the party official changed the word to *Vertauensperson*.

### **Debate Over Bernstein's Revisionism**

During this period of relative prosperity and social peace in Germany, debate in the party centered on Eduard Bernstein's revisionist theory of evolutionary socialism. Abandoning a materialist view, Bernstein regarded the democratic capitalist state not as an organ of class oppression to be overthrown but as an instrument to be mastered and utilized for the realization of socialism. According to this theory the need for the organization of the working class *in particular* disappeared, since members of all classes were deemed equally capable of developing their finer ethical instincts toward the achievement of socialism. In Bernstein's view, revolution was simply a disruption to flourishing, prosperous, democratic capitalism which, left undisturbed, could provide the proper environment for the development of man. Though Bernsteinism was voted down at the party congresses of 1899 and 1901, a tendency within the party continued to support his theoretical framework. Rosa Luxemburg, Clara Zetkin and Karl Liebknecht were in the vanguard of the fight against the revisionists, and they were joined at this point by the main party leadership, including even the members of the Reichstag fraction.

At the first of a series of bi-annual SPD women's conferences held in 1900, the revisionist minority again attempted to "popularize" *Die Gleichheit* and generally depoliticize the party's work among women, advocating emphasis on agitation around issues such as protection, the eight-hour day and social welfare legislation. These efforts were vigorously and successfully fought by *Die Gleichheit* editors and other leaders of the

work among women, who advocated, not the exclusion of this type of agitational activity, but its combination with general political education and the continuation of *Die Gleichheit* as a highly political journal for the development of party cadre.

Since the party's efforts were totally mobilized for the 1903 Reichstag elections, women, who were still denied suffrage, were specially organized for door-to-door and factory electioneering under the slogan "If we can't vote we can still stir." This work was viewed by the revisionist minority as the main task of the women's movement, especially after the resounding success achieved by the party in the elections that year. Eighty-one seats were gained with over three million voters, or 32 percent of the electorate, casting votes for the Social Democracy. The revisionist wing fought hard for a policy of reconciliation with the Liberal Party in the Reichstag but was opposed by the majority of the party, including the executive, at the party conference that year.

### The Rift Widens

The impact of the 1905 Russian Revolution and the concurrent downturn in the economy brought strikes of unheard-of breadth, with half a million workers engaged in work stoppages during the year 1905 alone – more strikes than for the previous five years taken together and greater than the total for the 1890's. In this context issues dividing the lefts from the revisionists, such as the use of the mass strike tactic, were debated as life-and-death questions. The trade unions, breaking with their former neutral stance, reacted openly against the spectre of "red revolution" and its advocates in the SPD, even to the point of urging those advocates to seek an outlet for their revolutionary energies in Russia! But still the anti-revisionists maintained a majority and the party passed a resolution at the 1905 congress at Jena declaring itself ready "under certain conditions" to resort to the use of general strike action. This conference was to be the last at which the anti-revisionist left wing included most of the party executive and was therefore able to win a majority on an important issue. One year later, the executive betrayed its own membership by concluding a secret pact with the trade-union leaders which not only denied any intention of fomenting a mass strike but further promised to try actively to prevent one to the best of its abilities.

Following a year of massive political strikes throughout Germany centering on suffrage reform, the executive pulled back in fear of the mass movement and maneuvered the passage of a motion at the 1906 Mannheim Congress, which profoundly altered the relationship of the trade unions to the party. The resolution, declaring "parity" between the trade unions and the party on "matters of mutual interest," in fact gave the trade unions veto power over the party's actions and represented a decisive capitulation of the executive to the pressures of trade-union conservatism. As Luxemburg observed, the arrangement was reminiscent of that by which one spouse would seek to regulate life with the other: "On matters of question between us, when we agree, you will decide; when we disagree, I shall decide." Thus the tension between the party's leftist heritage and the pressures of trade unionism was officially resolved in favor of the trade unions, bringing the debate over reform or revolution back into the party – with a vengeance.

### The Right Wing and the Woman Question

Not surprisingly, coincident with this rightward consolidation, debate on the woman question was renewed in the revisionist publication *Sozialistische Monatshefte*. Edmund Fischer, spokesman for the revisionists, innocently posed the question "...is it unnatural, socially unhealthy and harmful for women generally to work, a capitalist evil which will and must disappear with the abolition of capitalism?" In the guise of a new theoretical contribution, he answers: "The so-called emancipation of women goes against the nature of women and of mankind as a whole. It is unnatural and hence impossible to achieve." Fischer, resurrecting the old, worn-out arguments from the 1860's as if the debate had never taken place, concluded: "Men's dependence on women must thus be at least as great as vice versa. ... [W]omen's primary and highest aim in life, which is deeply embedded in their nature as women, is: to be mothers, and to live for the care and raising of children, while as a rule only unmarried women want to have economic independence." This regressive, reactionary drivel was a clear reflection of the ascendancy of the reformist, conciliationist right wing of the party and, although these positions were ruthlessly excoriated in the party press and particularly by Zetkin in the pages of *Die Gleichheit*, they served as the theoretical justification for the party's inevitable official reversal on the woman question which took place gradually in the years after the split.

Other conciliationist tendencies, connected with leaders who sided with Bernstein's revisionism or, later, with Kautsky's center position, manifested themselves on the woman question. Luise Kautsky, for example, considered the matter of protection for women workers important primarily because the demand would act as "a battering ram for the protection of men."

Lily Braun, though a supporter of the revisionist wing, was the author of a fairly orthodox book, *Die Frauenfrage (The Woman Question)*, published in 1901. Her rightward bent, however, went hand in hand with her actual approach to the work among women where she stressed collaboration with bourgeois women in the establishment of household cooperatives. A hostile relationship existed for years between her and Zetkin who, after 1906, refused to print her articles in *Die Gleichheit*.

### The Battle Full Blown

But the right wing had little time for theoretical discussion on the woman question since the main battlefield, in its eyes, was the electoral arena where the party had recently achieved marvelous results. The left, in contrast, looked to the model of the Russian revolution and its reflections in the upswing of proletarian combativeness in Germany. For the left, the real success of the suffrage fight lay "not in the positive result but rather in the ever greater unification of the laboring masses, a unification which prepares the ultimate victory" (Zetkin quoted in Carle E. Schorske, *German Social Democracy 1905-1917: The Development of the Great Schism* [1955]).

In the following years the factions debated methods of opposition to militarism and nationalism and the organization of the youth who, under the leadership of Karl Liebknecht, represented another intractable section of the party. Behind the

right wing stood the trade-union leaderships who used as a club their manifest ability to win significant gains for (and thus lead large sections of) the working class. They played a decisive, conservative role not only in the mass strike debate and later in the party's abandonment of the anti-militarist struggle, but also in its suppression of the radical youth movement.

### The Women's Work and the Radicals

The left maintained posts on the leading party bodies: Zetkin was a member of the powerful Control Commission; Luise Zietz was the representative of the women's organization on the executive and was the sole spokesman for the radical left in that important body; Karl Liebknecht was a member of the Reichstag fraction. *Die Gleichheit* was one of the major weapons of the left in these battles, as the radical grouping which later became the Spartacists crystallized within the heterogeneous anti-revisionist wing. The journal and the women's organization, firmly under the control of the radicals, were in the main responsible for the recruitment, education and development of female party cadres, and thus served as effective factional organizers. In fact, it was *only* the radical wing that devoted any energy to the special work among women although the importance of the work was still officially recognized by the SPD.

The years following the Mannheim "parity" resolution, 1905-1910, were politically stagnant for the proletarian movement as a whole, but for the women's movement they were years of dynamic growth. Female membership in the SPD grew from 4,000 in 1905 to almost 11,000 in 1907, although in these years official membership was still illegal for women and was therefore defined as participation in a study group or support group led by the SPD. After the modification of the laws in 1908 female membership spurted from around 25,500 to 82,700 in two years, while male membership almost doubled between 1905 and 1910. During the same period the circulation of *Die Gleichheit* rose from 23,000 to 82,000 subscribers. These dramatic successes were due in good part to the rapid increase in the number of women in the workforce, providing a fruitful arena for the energetic work of the Woman's Section, which recruited through agitation around such questions as militarism and war, the growth of the military budget, rising food prices and suffrage, combined with revolutionary propaganda.

When the first International Women's Conference was held in Stuttgart in 1907, the German form of organization was extended internationally with the establishment of an International Bureau of Socialist Women of All Countries and the recognition of *Die Gleichheit* as the official organ of the international women's movement. While most of the debate was over war and militarism, a heated discussion also took place on the question of suffrage, indicating that the political polarization of the SPD was also becoming manifest in social-democratic parties of other countries. The Austrian representatives advocated delaying a struggle for female suffrage until universal manhood suffrage had been achieved. The German comrades led the fight against this conservative position, which was defeated at the Women's Conference and also at the International Socialist Congress held at the same



Luise Zietz

time. Lenin, who followed the discussion carefully, commented on the debate and quoted from Luise Zietz's speech:

"In principle we must demand all that we consider to be correct," said Zietz, "and only when our strength is inadequate for more, do we accept what we are able to get. That has always been the tactics of Social Democracy. The more modest our demands the more modest will the government be in its concessions...." This controversy between the Austrian and German women Social Democrats will enable the reader to see how severely the best Marxists treat the slightest deviation from the principles of consistent revolutionary tactics."

—V.I. Lenin, "The International Socialist Congress In Stuttgart," *Collected Works*, Volume 13<sup>2</sup>

At the Stuttgart International Congress there were sharp lines of demarcation between the left, represented notably by Luxemburg and Lenin, and the right wing, led mainly by Bebel of the SPD. Through a process of a compromising amendment, a resolution on war, containing the following memorable points, was passed:

"...first, that militarism was the chief weapon of class oppression; second, the task of agitation among the youth was pointed out; and, third, it was emphasized that the task of the Social Democrats was not only to struggle against the outbreak of war or for an early termination of a war which had already broken out but also to utilize the crisis caused by the war to hasten the downfall of the bourgeoisie."

—Lenin, *Proletarii*, No. 17, 2 November 1907

Enormous suffrage demonstrations once again rocked Germany in 1910 and were met with aggressive agitation by the SPD. As before, the upheaval posed most strikingly the question of whether the SPD would attempt to lead the mass movement beyond the suffrage issue through general strikes and possibly insurrection or would pull back. This was the breaking point of Karl Kautsky, formerly a left ally, albeit to the right of the future Spartacists. The political geography of the SPD was now further complicated by the emergence of a center tendency led by Kautsky.

*Die Gleichheit* raised strong objection in 1912 when the SPD leaders effected an underhanded, opportunist electoral bloc with a bourgeois party that blurred "the clear lines of the principal struggle." Such open criticism of the party leadership's activity also appeared in Luxemburg's *Leipziger*

<sup>2</sup> See page 18 of this publication for the excerpts from Lenin's article.

*Volkszeitung*. But these dissonant voices were drowned by the enthusiasm generated in the wake of the successful 1912 elections which gained the SPD 112 Reichstag seats.

Directly following this wave of enthusiasm, the party went into a slump from which it did not emerge until after the split of the broad left wing. Demoralization swept over the party rapidly since the ranks had learned to understand success in terms of votes, Reichstag seats and trade-union bureaucratic support. Party membership had increased from about 400,000 in 1906 to almost one million in 1912 with 34.8 percent of the electorate supporting the party at the polls that year. The comrades were shocked when the executive reported that the party had grown by only 1.3 percent in the year 1912-1913. Furthermore, the growth that did occur was due largely to the work of the women's organization (10,000 of the 12,000 recruits that year were women) and thus also represented a numerical strengthening of the left wing. The party press also suffered in the downturn, losing 12,830 subscribers that year. The only official party newspaper to show a circulation increase was *Die Gleichheit*, which had attained a circulation of 112,000 by 1912. In 1913-1914 there were 23,000 new subscribers to the official press of which 13,000 were new subscribers to *Die Gleichheit*.

1913 marked the *de facto* end of a unified SPD; it was the last year a unified party congress was held; it was the year the broad left wing established its own newspaper, *Sozialdemokratische Korrespondenz*.

But this by no means ended the hegemony of the SPD over the advanced proletarian layers of Germany. The SPD was a mass party with 4,000 paid functionaries and 11,000 salaried employees publishing over 4,000 periodicals. The confidence of the working masses in "their" party could be threatened only by a felt betrayal of historic import; the reformist grip of the SPD could have been challenged only by an organized force of demonstrated leadership capacity. The betrayal came with the first gunshots of World War I; the challenge was the building of the Communist Party of Germany, part of the new Third International.

### The Historic Betrayal

The outbreak of the First World War internationalized the political divisions in the Second International by posing before the sections of all countries an identical problem of overriding importance: how will the social democrats respond to the call for military defense of "their own" countries?

The decision of the SPD Reichstag fraction – supported by the executive and opposed within the fraction by only Liebknecht and one other delegate – to vote for war credits on 4 August 1914, was therefore a decision which deeply affected the response of the world proletarian movement to the war. The International majority, betraying its own speeches and proclamations (such as that of the 1907 Stuttgart congress) chose the path of "national defense."

A minority of the Second International, however, maintained a proletarian internationalist stance, though the pressures of world events soon revealed the fissures within this minority. It was, above all, Lenin and the Bolsheviks who fought to



**Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg, founders of the Communist Party of Germany, murdered in January 1919 on orders of the Social Democratic Party leadership.**

organize the radical, antiwar social democrats of all countries under the slogan "Turn the imperialist war into a civil war!"

As the struggle developed, the centrists' positions were less and less appreciated, especially by Lenin, who wrote in 1914: "At present I hate and scorn Kautsky more than anyone else. What vile, cheap, self-conceited hypocrisy; nothing has happened, he says, principles have not been violated, everyone has a right to defend his fatherland; internationalism, don't you see, consists in having the workers of all countries shoot at each other 'in the name of the defense of the fatherland.'" –Letter of Lenin to Shliapnikov, 27 October 1914

### Socialist Women Oppose the War

The women's movement played an important role in the faction fight. A majority of *Die Gleichheit* readers in Germany and a large proportion of women from other sections of the social democracy were sympathetic to the antiwar left. With this in mind, the Bolshevik Central Committee, through the editorial board of the women's paper *Rabotnitsa*, proposed to Zetkin in November of 1914 the calling of an unofficial socialist women's conference with the purpose of "draw[ing] the working women into the struggle against every kind of civil peace and in favor of a war against war, a war closely connected with civil war and socialist revolution." In January Zetkin replied, favoring a conference but protesting:

“First of all, it will be *difficult to draw a line between the Lefts and the Rights, among the women*. Many of them do not know themselves on which side they are; others will hesitate to make a decision; whereas still *others will definitely refuse to take part in a conference of ‘Left’ women only* [original emphasis].”

Zetkin, Secretary of the Women’s International, did call the conference and, along the lines suggested by the Bolsheviks, invited only those groups known to be antiwar. The conference took place in Berne, Switzerland in March 1915, three weeks after a conference of Bolshevik exile groups held in the same place.

### Berne Women’s Conference

It was at the Berne conference that the political differences among the antiwar social democrats became clarified, particularly the divergence between the “goody-goody pacifism of the English and Dutch” (as Krupskaya put it) and the revolutionary militancy of the Bolsheviks under Lenin’s leadership. But even more striking was the intense battle that was led by Zetkin, recognized leader of the socialist women’s movement, on one side, and Krupskaya, behind whom stood the authority of Lenin and the Bolsheviks, on the other side. Zetkin, assuming the role Kautsky played in the SPD dispute, acted as mediator between right and left and thus came under the heaviest fire of all.

“The English delegation, with an obvious feministic tinge, asserted that all women in England, even bourgeois women and suffragettes, were against the war and wished for peace.”

—Report of the Berne conference by Olga Ravich, member of the Bolshevik delegation

Clearly it was impossible to “mediate” between this position and that of the Bolsheviks which called for *class war!* It was therefore Zetkin, acting as the compromiser, who assured the defeat of the Bolshevik positions at the conference while, as Krupskaya reports, “everyone criticized our [the Bolshevik delegation’s] ‘splitting’ policy.”

The Bolshevik resolution (written by Lenin who closely followed the proceedings from nearby) included a call for legal and illegal revolutionary activity by the masses, exposing the lies of the national chauvinists and an open break with the official social-democratic leaders. But the manifesto which was adopted declared in part:

“In these difficult days the socialist women of Germany, England, France and Russia have assembled. Your miseries and your sufferings have touched their hearts. For the sake of the future of your loved ones they call upon you to act for peace. As the will of the socialist women is united across the battle fields, so you in all countries must close your ranks in order to sound the call: peace, peace!”

—Manifesto of the International Conference of Socialist Women, Berne, 1915

Naturally the Bolsheviks were disappointed with the outcome of the conference though, as the first truly international meeting of antiwar socialists to take place since the war’s beginning, it was also recognized as an historic event. The Bolsheviks evaluated the conference as “only a timid, irresolute step, but life will push them ahead and will take what is due it.” This proved to be prophetic.

## The State and the SPD Move Against the Left

During the year 1916 most of the leaders of the left, including the 70-year-old Franz Mehring, were jailed on various charges. The same year, Liebknecht was expelled from the Reichstag fraction for breaking discipline by voting against war credits; Zietz was expelled from the executive; Zetkin was forced to resign her post as *Die Gleichheit* editor. The last was an enormous victory for the right wing which for years had tried to silence this powerful mouthpiece of the opposition. A letter was published in issue No. 16 which gloatingly related:

“In our area *Die Gleichheit* has lost almost all its subscribers.

Our women don’t want it at all. Even before the war, the articles were unpalatable for the great majority of women workers. We need a popular women’s magazine.”

Later the new style of the publication was defended in the following manner:

“Generally speaking, the magazine was also eagerly read, but it became increasingly evident as time passed that the majority of women, especially the new ones streaming in, did not understand it, since the style of *Die Gleichheit* presupposed great intellectual experience on the part of the reader. Comrade Zetkin, who is owed a great deal by the women’s movement, wrote the magazine in a manner that did not do justice to the needs of the masses who had no intellectual or political background. Only a relatively small number of women comrades could entirely follow Comrade Zetkin’s style and thought processes. Ultimately, however, a large number also came to disapprove of her political views. The result was a decline in women’s interest in *Die Gleichheit*, and a simultaneous drop in the circulation of the magazine.”

—*Die Gleichheit*, No. 20, 1919

The “popularization” of *Die Gleichheit* did not go unnoticed by the Women’s International movement. At the Informal Socialist Women’s Conference at Stockholm in September 1917

“A strong protest was raised against the shameful suppression of *Gleichheit*, a blow against the Women’s Socialist International. That this was not a Platonic protest could be seen from the fact that according to reports from various countries the women comrades have begun to raise money for a new *Gleichheit*.”

—Official Report of the Sessions, 14-15 September

On New Year’s Day 1916, the first national conference of the Spartacus group was held. Its program drew sharp lines between its policies and those of the official SPD.

“Not unity, but rather clarity on every point. No gentle tolerance – not even in the ‘opposition,’ rather the sharpest criticism, an accounting down to the last penny. Through merciless disclosure and discussion of differences, to unanimity on principles and tactics, and therewith to capacity for action and to unity.”

After the second congress of the lefts, the SPD expelled its entire left wing in January 1917. Having abandoned the struggle against capital, the social democracy also necessarily abandoned the struggle for the liberation of women and all the oppressed. It was left to the inheritors of revolutionary Marxism to carry forward the battle in the Third (Communist) International, 1919-1923. ■

# Early Communist Work Among Women: The Bolsheviks

*The following two-part article is reprinted from Women and Revolution Nos. 10 and 11, Winter 1975-76 and Spring 1976. The article was written by Dale Ross, who edited W&R from its first issue in 1971 until 1979. Dale's groundbreaking research was the subject of her PhD dissertation on "The Role of the Women of Petrograd in War, Revolution and Counterrevolution, 1914-1921" (Rutgers University, 1973).*

## Part 1

The Soviet Union provides the classic illustration of Fourier's observation that the progress of any society can be gauged by the social position of the women within it. To the extent that the Bolshevik Revolution was victorious, Soviet women were liberated from their traditional subservient social positions; to the extent that the Revolution degenerated, the position of the women degenerated. The fact that this degeneration has been incomplete – that Soviet women continue to enjoy advantages and opportunities unknown in the West – is precisely because the degeneration of the Soviet workers state has also been incomplete, i.e., capitalism has not been restored.<sup>1</sup>

### **The Old Order: "I Thought I Saw Two People Coming, But It Was Only a Man and His Wife"**

Russian folklore testifies to the fact that women in pre-revolutionary Russian society were commonly considered generically defective to the point of being subhuman. But such attitudes had *not* prevailed in Russia from time immemorial. In ancient times, women had had the right to rule their own estates, choose their own husbands, speak in the community councils and compete for athletic and military honors. Epic songs are still sung in some provinces about mighty female warriors called *polnitsy* – a word derived from the Russian *pole*, meaning "field" and, in a secondary sense, "battlefield." These women warriors, according to folk tradition, wandered alone throughout the country, fought with men whom they encountered on their way and chose their own lovers as they pleased: "Is thy heart inclined to amuse itself with me?" the so-called Beautiful Princess asks the Russian folk hero Iliia Muromets.

But the centuries which witnessed the growth of the patriarchal family, the rise of Byzantine Christianity with its doctrine of the debased nature of women, the brutal Tatar invasion and the consolidation of dynastic power, also witnessed the obliteration of these ancient privileges.

During these centuries Russian women were progressively

<sup>1</sup> The counterrevolution that destroyed the Soviet Union in 1991-92 and restored capitalist rule obliterated many of the remaining gains of the 1917 October Revolution described here, which today are still a beacon pointing the way to women's liberation through international socialist revolution.

excluded from politics, education and social life in general. Those of the lower classes became beasts of burden who might be driven with a stick if it pleased their husbands. Those of the upper classes were physically removed from society and imprisoned in the *terem* or "tower room" – an upper chamber of the house built expressly for the lifelong seclusion of women. Peter the Great (1672-1725), in his determination to transform Russia into a modern commercial and industrial state, holds the distinction of releasing women from the *terem* and compelling them to mingle with men at public social functions, as they did in the West.

The Empresses Elizabeth and Catherine the Great (1729-1796) continued to encourage more progressive attitudes toward women, and they constructed academies for their education. On the eve of the Russian Revolution, women constituted 30,000, or almost one quarter, of the 125,000 students enrolled in Russian universities.

Despite these reform measures, however, women continued to be severely oppressed in pre-revolutionary Russia. Not only was the number of educated women only a tiny fraction of the total population (the illiteracy rate for women was 92 percent in 1897), but the lack of educational opportunities had a much more stultifying effect on women than on their male counterparts, because they were far more isolated.

Peasant women grew old early from overwork and maltreatment. Even when elementary education was available to girls, it remained customary for them to stay at home to care for the younger children until they were old enough to work in the fields. Husbands were generally chosen by the fathers, who sold their daughters to the highest bidder. Tradition decreed that the father of the bride present the bridegroom with a whip, the symbol of the groom's authority over his new wife.

Those peasant women who sought to escape to the cities found that they were paid lower wages than their male co-workers and that all skilled trades were closed to them. Outside of domestic service and the textile industry, marriage constituted grounds for immediate discharge.

Life was somewhat more comfortable, of course, for women of the middle and upper classes, but not much more fulfilling. While educational opportunities were more accessible to them, the kind of education deemed appropriate for women was limited. Husbands, as among the lower classes, were chosen by the fathers, and the law bound women to obey their husbands in all things.

### **Equal Rights for Women**

The radical notion of equal rights for women was originally introduced into Russia by army officers who had been stationed in France after the defeat of Napoleon and who brought back to Russia many of the new liberal, republican and democratic ideas to which they had been exposed.



# Alexandra Kollontai: Communism vs. Feminism

“The feminists seek equality in the framework of the existing class society, in no way do they attack the basis of this society. They fight for prerogatives for themselves, without challenging the existing prerogatives and privileges.”

—Alexandra Kollontai, “The Social Basis of the Woman Question” (1909)

“Under capitalism children were frequently, too frequently, a heavy and unbearable burden on the proletarian family. Communist society will come to the aid of the parents.... We already have homes for very small babies, creches, kindergartens, children’s colonies and homes, hospitals and sanatoria for sick children, restaurants, free lunches at school and free distribution of text books, warm clothing and shoes to schoolchildren.”

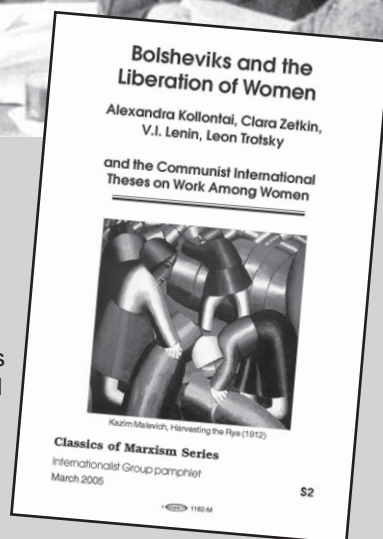
—Alexandra Kollontai, “Communism and the Family” (1920)

These articles by Alexandra Kollontai, a leading Bolshevik theorist and fighter for the emancipation of women from the exploitation and oppression of capitalism, are reprinted in this Internationalist Group pamphlet, along with articles by Lenin, Trotsky, Zetkin and resolutions of the Communist International.



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Male intellectuals continued to participate in this movement for the next hundred years. They championed higher education for women and entered into fictitious marriages with them in order to provide them with the passports they needed to study abroad. Well-known authors such as Belinsky, Herzen, Dobroliubov and Chernyshevsky encouraged women in their struggle for equal rights.

The active participation of men in the struggle for women’s liberation and the fact that prior to 1906 the masses of Russian men and women *did* possess equal political rights – that is, no rights at all – meant that at a time when women’s suffrage organizations were on the rise in the West, Russian men and women continued to engage in united political struggle.

Equality of political oppression broke down only after the Revolution of 1905. On 17 October of that year Tsar Nicholas II issued a manifesto which provided for the summoning of a state duma<sup>2</sup> based on male suffrage only. A group of the newly-enfranchised men immediately appealed to the author

<sup>2</sup> Historically, the dumas were advisory councils called by the tsar. Under the pressure of the 1905 Revolution, a duma was called that according to the October Manifesto issued by Count Sergei Witte, then the prime minister, would supposedly have legislative power. However, that was negated by a set of laws in 1906 stipulating that the government would be appointed by and responsible to the tsar alone, who could also dismiss the duma at will.

of the manifesto, Count Witte, for female suffrage, but this was refused. Out of this defeat arose the first feminist organizations in Russia – the League of Equal Rights for Women and the Russian Union of Defenders of Women’s Rights.

Like all feminist organizations, these groups sought to achieve their goals through reforming the social system. At the first meeting of the League of Equal Rights for Women, which was held in St. Petersburg (later renamed Petrograd and presently Leningrad) in 1905, a number of working women put forward a resolution demanding measures to meet their needs and the needs of peasant women, such as equal pay for equal work and welfare for mothers and children, but the bourgeois women who constituted the majority of the membership rejected this proposal in favor of one which called only for the unity of all women in the struggle for a republican form of government and for universal suffrage.

One of the League’s first actions was the presentation to the First State Duma of a petition for female suffrage signed by 5,000 women. This petition was presented three times between 1906 and 1912 but was never accepted. Minister of Justice Shcheglovitov commented:

“Careful observation of reality shows that there is a danger of women being attracted by the ideals of the revolutionaries, and this circumstance, in my opinion, obliges us to regard

with extreme care the question of encouraging women to take up political activity.”

—Vera Bilshai, *The Status of Women in the Soviet Union* [1957]

### Feminism or Bolshevism?

Side by side with the burgeoning feminist movement, the pre-revolutionary years witnessed the development of work among women by the Bolsheviks and other avowed socialists – work which was greatly accelerated by the entrance of masses of women into industrial production.

The programs and strategies of feminism and Bolshevism were counterposed from the outset. The feminists declared that women’s most pressing need was political equality with men, including participation at every level of government. Only when women were in a position to influence all governmental policies, they said, would cultural and economic equality be possible. To achieve their political goal, the feminists created multi-class organizations of women united around the struggle for equal rights.

Socialist organizations also struggled for equal rights for all women. “We hate and want to obliterate,” said V.I. Lenin, “everything that oppresses and harasses the working woman, the wife of the working man, the peasant woman, the wife of the little man, and even in many respects the women from the wealthy classes.” But socialist organizations from the beginning rejected the feminist reform strategy and insisted that full sexual equality could not be achieved short of a socialist society. Far from leading them to abandon special work among women under capitalism, however, this position encouraged them to pursue it more ardently in the knowledge that “the success of the revolution depends upon how many women take part in it” (Lenin).

As early as 1899 Lenin insisted that Clause 9 of the first draft program of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party (RSDLP) contain the words: “establishment of complete equality of rights between men and women.” The program adopted by the Second Congress of the RSDLP in 1903 included this demand as well as the following special provisions:

“With a view to safeguarding the working class from physical and moral degeneration, and also with the view to promoting its capacity for waging a struggle for liberation, women should not be employed in industries harmful to the female organism, they should receive four weeks paid pre-natal and six weeks post-natal leave; all enterprises employing women should have nurseries for babies and small children, nursing mothers should be allowed to leave their work for at least half an hour at intervals of not longer than three hours, and male factory inspectors should be replaced by women in industries with a female labor force.”

— *VKP(b) v rezoliutsiiakh*, quoted in William M. Mandel, “Soviet Women and Their Self-Image,” *Science and Society*, Vol. 35, No. 3 (1971)

Throughout the entire pre-revolutionary period the Bolsheviks pressed their demands for complete sexual equality as they carried out educational and organizational work among women through every possible vehicle – cultural and educational organizations, evening schools, trade unions. Centers of Bolshevik agitation and propaganda also took the form of women’s clubs. In 1907, such a club was opened in St. Petersburg under the

name “The Working Women’s Mutual Aid Society,” while in Moscow a similar club was called “The Third Women’s Club.”

Through this special work the Bolsheviks were able to recruit many working women to communist politics. One of these recruits, Alexandra Artiukhina,<sup>3</sup> later recalled:

“When we began to attend the Sunday and evening schools, we began to make use of books from the library and we learned of the great Russian democrat, Chernyshevsky. Secretly, we read his book, *What Is to Be Done?* and we found the image of the woman of the future, Vera Pavlovna, very attractive.

“The foremost democratic intelligentsia of our time played a considerable role in our enlightenment, in the growth of revolutionary attitudes and in women’s realization of their human dignity and their role in public. They acquainted us with the names of Russian revolutionary women, like Sofia Perovskaya and Vera Figner.

“Later, in underground political circles, we read the works of Marx, Engels and Lenin. We understood that the enslavement of women occurred together with the establishment of private ownership of the means of production and the beginning of exploitation of man by man and that real equality and real freedom for women would be found only in socialism, where there would be no exploitation of man by man. Therefore, the most reliable path for the liberation of women was the path of political struggle against capitalism in the ranks of the proletariat.”

—A. Artiukhina, “Proidennyi put,” in A. Artiukhina et al. (eds.), *Zhenschchina v revoliutsii* (Women in Revolution)

### Women and the War

The outbreak of World War I in 1914 precipitated a dramatic transformation in the lives of Russian women, ripping them away from their private family roles and throwing them into entirely new social roles in factories, hospitals, at the front and in the streets.

During the very first months of the war, military mobilizations took approximately 40 percent of Russian working men out of industrial jobs, many of which had to be filled by women. Between 1913 and 1917 the percentage of women working in the metal trades in Petrograd rose from 3.2 percent to 20.3 percent. In the woodworking industries, the number of women increased sevenfold. In papermaking, printing and the preparation of animal products and foodstuffs their number doubled.

This entrance of large numbers of Russian women into industrial production was a profoundly progressive step because it laid the basis for their economic and political organization. By the time of the October Revolution, women constituted about ten percent of the membership of the Bolshevik Party and were represented at every level of the party organization.

While many female comrades took a special interest in party work among women, it was always clear that this important arena of work was the responsibility of the party as a whole and not solely of the women within it. This Bolshevik refusal to differentiate political functioning on the basis of sex is also illustrated by the fact that neither in the party nor in its

<sup>3</sup> Alexandra Artiukhina was a former garment factory worker in St. Petersburg who became active in the textile workers and metal workers unions. From 1924 to 1931 she was editor of *Rabotnitsa* (Woman Worker).

youth section did women ever constitute a male exclusionist faction or caucus. There were, at times, women's commissions and departments to oversee special work among women, but these always remained under the control of higher party bodies composed of comrades of both sexes.

The absence of women's caucuses was not, of course, an indication that the party was entirely free of sexist attitudes; only that the struggle against such attitudes was carried out by the party as a whole on the basis of communist consciousness, which was expected to transcend sexual distinctions.

One of the foremost Bolshevik leaders in the struggle against reactionary attitudes toward women within the party was V.I. Lenin. In an interview with Clara Zetkin of the German Social Democratic Party, he said:

"...Unfortunately it is still true to say of many of our comrades 'scratch a Communist and find a philistine.' Of course you must scratch the sensitive spot, their mentality as regards women. Could there be a more damning proof of this than the calm acquiescence of men who see how women grow worn out in petty, monotonous household work, their strength and time dissipated and wasted, their minds growing narrow and stale, their hearts beating slowly, their will weakened? Of course, I am not speaking of the ladies of the bourgeoisie who shove onto servants the responsibilities for all household work, including the care of children. What I am saying applies to the overwhelming majority of women, to the wives of workers and to those who stand all day in a factory.

"So few men – even among the proletariat – realize how much effort and trouble they could save women, even quite do away with, if they were to lend a hand in 'women's work.' But no, that is contrary to the 'right and dignity of a man.' They want their peace and comfort. The home life of the woman is a daily sacrifice to a thousand unimportant trivialities. The old master-right of the man still lives in secret. His slave takes her revenge, also secretly. The backwardness of women, their lack of understanding for the revolutionary ideals of the man, decrease his joy and determination in fighting. They are like little worms which, unseen, slowly but surely rot and corrode. I know the life of the worker and not only from books. Our Communist work among the women, our political work, embraces a great deal of educational work among men. We must root out the old 'master' idea to its last and smallest trace. In the Party and among the masses. That is one of our political tasks, just as it is the urgently necessary task of forming a staff of men and women well trained in theory and practice, to carry on Party activity among working women."

—Clara Zetkin, *Reminiscences of Lenin* [1924]<sup>4</sup>

### International Women's Day

A great deal of radical agitation and propaganda among working women centered around the observance of International Women's Day, a proletarian women's holiday which had originated in 1908 among the female needle trades workers in Manhattan's Lower East Side and which was later officially adopted by the Second International.

The holiday was first celebrated in Russia on February 23,

<sup>4</sup> An excerpt from Zetkin's pamphlet is reprinted under the title "Lenin on the Woman Question" in the Internationalist pamphlet, *Bolsheviks and the Liberation of Women* (see ad p. 49).



**Rabotnitsa editorial board in 1917. Top row: Klavdia Nikolaeva, Praskovia Kudelli, Konkordiia Samoilova. Bottom row: Anna Yelizarova Ulianova, Alexandra Kollontai, Liudmila Stal, Vera Velichkina (Bonch-Bruевич).**

1913, and the Bolshevik newspaper, *Pravda*, devoted a great deal of space to publicizing it. Beginning in January, *Pravda* initiated a special column entitled "Labor and the Life of the Working Woman," which provided information about the various meetings and rallies held in preparation for the holiday and about the resolutions which were passed at them.

The first International Women's Day in Russia drew tremendous attention in St. Petersburg and Moscow. *Pravda* published a special holiday edition, greeting the working women and congratulating them upon entering the ranks of the fighting proletariat. In opposition to the Mensheviks, who wanted the celebration of International Women's Day confined to women, the Bolsheviks insisted that it was a holiday of the entire working class. Bolshevik speakers around the country took the opportunity to put forward the Marxist analysis of the oppression of women and to explain the Party's strategy for women's liberation through socialist revolution.

Bolshevik work among women was so successful in fact that by the winter of 1913 *Pravda* was receiving more correspondence than it could handle on the special problems facing working women. The solution, Lenin urged, was another journal aimed specifically at proletarian women. It was entitled *Rabotnitsa* (The Working Woman). *Rabotnitsa* played a crucial role in organizing

women and rallying them to the Bolshevik Party. (For a detailed account of its development, see “How the Bolsheviks Organized Working Women: History of the Journal *Rabotnitsa*,” *Women and Revolution* No. 4, Fall 1973.)

The Bolsheviks’ major political competitors, the Mensheviks, attempted to counter the influence of *Rabotnitsa* with a women’s journal of their own called *Golos Rabotnitsi* (Voice of the Working Woman), but it appeared only twice and failed to win much support.

Menshevik attempts to organize women through mass meetings seem to have fared badly also. Klavdia Nikolaevna, who later became an editor of *Rabotnitsa*, described one such meeting as follows:

“At the meeting there were many women and frontline soldiers. Suddenly, a group of Bolshevik working women burst into the hall and pushed their way to the speakers’ platform. The first and second to reach the platform collided with it, but the third was able to gain a foothold on it, and she made such a fiery speech about the aims of the revolution, that all the women and soldiers left the meeting singing the ‘International’ and only one Menshevik was left in the auditorium.” – K. Nikolaevna, “Slovo k molodim rabotnitsam,” in A. Artiukhina et al. (eds.), *Zhenshchina v revoliutsii*

### “The First Day of the Revolution – That is the Women’s Day”

As the war dragged on, the daily life of the Russian working class grew steadily worse. By 1916, bread lines in Petrograd were often over a mile long with the women, who constituted the great majority of them, standing four abreast. In this situation of massive social unrest, the intervention of the Bolsheviks, who placed the blame for the war and the high cost of living squarely on the shoulders of the autocracy, evoked a deep response from the war-weary masses. The Bolshevik slogan, “Bring back our men!” was frequently found scrawled across factory walls, and Bolshevik proclamations, such as the following, appeared in underground newspapers and were posted on walls:

“The black scourge of war has destroyed...our workers’ organizations.... The government has dealt treacherously with our deputies – class-conscious working women and working men – and our sons, husbands and brothers are bleeding profusely on foreign fields, paying with their lives to procure new markets, new lands for triumphant capital....

“Thus is it possible not to raise our voices in protest, the voices of hundreds of thousands of unfortunate mothers, wives and sisters, is it possible that we will shed only inaudible tears, sigh only secret sighs for the pain of the men? This cannot be, comrade working women. In all countries workers are rising up against their oppression by capital; we rise up and our voices demonstrate that we are also able to defend our children, husbands and brothers....

“Enough bloodshed! Down with the war! A people’s court for the criminal autocratic government.”

–Bolshevik International Women’s Day proclamation (23 February 1915), quoted in A.P. Konstantinov and E.P. Serebrovskaia (eds.), *Zhenshchiny Goroda Lenina*

Pitirim Sorokin, who was an eyewitness to the February

Revolution, has written:

“If future historians look for the group that began the Russian Revolution, let him [sic] not create any involved theory. The Russian Revolution was begun by hungry women and children demanding bread and herrings.”

–Pitirim Sorokin, *Leaves from a Russian Diary* [1950]

Sorokin is correct in pointing out the importance of the women in the streets in the series of events which led to the downfall of the autocracy, but this is only half the story.

Street demonstrations by women had been occurring in the major cities for several months, but they had generally been no more than local disturbances leading at most to the looting of one or two shops. The demonstrations of 23 February – International Women’s Day – 1917 were of another order. These were massive city-wide actions involving thousands of people who struck their factories, raised political banners, turned over railroad cars and attacked the police who attempted to restrain them.

All radical parties had intended to celebrate International Women’s Day in the customary manner – that is, with rallies, speeches, and the distribution of leaflets. Not a single organization had called for labor strikes. When on the eve of the holiday a group of working women met with a representative of the Bolshevik Party, V. Kayurov, to discuss the next day’s activities, he specifically cautioned them to refrain from isolated actions and to follow the instructions of the party.

Despite his advice, however, a few hundred women textile workers assembled in their factories early on the morning of the 23rd and resolved to call a one-day political strike. They elected delegates and sent them around to neighboring factories with appeals for support. Kayurov happened to be engaged in an emergency conference with four workers in the corridor of the Erikson Works when the women delegates came through that plant. It was only by this chance encounter that the Bolshevik representative learned of the forthcoming strike action. He was furious:

“I was extremely indignant about the behavior of the strikers, both because they had blatantly ignored the decision of the District Committee of the Party, and also because they had gone on strike after I had appealed to them only the night before to keep cool and disciplined. There appeared to be no reason for their action, if one discounted the ever-increasing bread queues, which had indeed touched off the strike.”

– V. Kayurov, *Proletarskaia Revoliutsia* No. 1, 1923, quoted in George Katkov, *Russia 1917: The February Revolution* [1967]

The strike was thus unauthorized by any political group. It was, as Trotsky said, “a revolution begun from below, overcoming the resistance of its own revolutionary organizations, the initiative being taken of their own accord by the most oppressed and downtrodden part of the proletariat – the women textile workers, among them no doubt, many soldiers’ wives.”

By noon of the 23rd an estimated 90,000 workers had followed the working women out on strike. “With reluctance,” writes Kayurov, “the Bolsheviks agreed to this.”

As the striking workers, who came mostly from the Viborg District on the north side of the city, began their march into the center, they were joined by thousands of women who had been standing all morning in the bread lines, only to be informed



**Contingent of soldiers' wives at International Women's Day march in Petrograd in 1917 that brought out tens of thousands of women textile workers demanding increased rations and peace. They were joined by Putilov metal workers, who launched a mass strike. The strikes and protests led to the overthrow of the tsar, marking the beginning of the Russian Revolution.**

that there was to be no bread in the shops on that day. Together they made their way to the Municipal Duma to demand bread.

For the remainder of the day the streets swarmed with people. Spontaneous meetings were held everywhere, and here and there hastily improvised red banners rose above the crowd, demanding bread, peace and higher wages. Other demands were scrawled on the sides of streetcars: "Give us bread!" and "No bread, no work!" One woman streetcar conductor later recalled:

"[W]hen we conductors turned in our money for the night, we saw soldiers with rifles standing to one side of the gate, and on the following day they were still in the conductors' room and walking about the yard. Leonov [a Bolshevik who had been one of the leaders of a successful streetcar conductors' strike the previous year] quietly said to us: 'This is all for us; you see today in Petrograd 200,000 workers are on strike!' 'We began to leave the yard to embark in the municipal streetcars when suddenly we saw a crowd of workers coming at us, shouting: 'Open the gate to the yard!' There were 700 people. They stood on the rails and on the steps of the Gornyi Museum opposite the yard. The workers were from a pipe plant, a tannery and a paper factory. They told us that today all the plants in our city were on strike and the streetcars were not running. The strikers were taking the streetcar drivers out of the hands of management. From all sides we heard: 'Down with the war!' 'Bread!' and a woman shouted: 'Return our husbands from the front!'

"The strikers swept over the city. A demonstration of workers from the Putilov Factory marched to the center of the city and into it, like a flood, merged again and again the crowds of workers...."

—K. Iakovlevoi in *Vsegda s Vami: Sbornik posviashchennyi 50-letiiu zhurnala "Rabotnitsa"*

All in all, the day passed with relatively little violence. A few troops were called out to assist the police, but it was determined that they were unnecessary, and they were returned to their barracks. In the evening the audience at the long-awaited premiere of Meyerhold's production of "Lermontov's Masquerade" heard some gunshots through the red and gold drapes of the Alexandrinskii Theater, but there were no casualties and no one suspected that anything especially out of the ordinary was taking place.

They were mistaken. During the days which followed, the general agitation not only continued but assumed an ever more violent character until the hollow shell of the once-powerful Romanov dynasty crumbled.

One week after the strike, which had set off this chain of events, *Pravda* editorialized:

"The first day of the revolution – that is the women's day, the day of the Women Workers' International. All honour to the International! The women were the first to tread the streets of Petrograd on their day."

—Fanina W. Halle, *Women in Soviet Russia* [1934]

## Toward October

“The tasks of the Proletariat In Our Revolution: Draft Program for the Proletarian Party,” written immediately upon Lenin’s return to Russia in April 1917, stated:

“Unless women are brought to take an independent part not only in political life generally, but also in daily and universal public service, it is no use talking about full and stable democracy, let alone socialism. And such ‘police’ functions as care of the sick and of homeless children, food inspection, etc., will never be satisfactorily discharged until women are on an equal footing with men, not merely nominally but in reality.”  
– V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 24

Throughout the spring and summer of 1917 the Bolsheviks intensified their work among women. The first working women’s conference, which took place at Lenin’s suggestion and which was attended by Mensheviks, Social Revolutionaries and feminists as well as Bolsheviks, demonstrated the influence which the Bolsheviks had gained among working women.

In her address to the conference, Konkordiia Samoilova, a leading member of the Bolshevik Party, proposed that all political work among women in industry be carried out henceforth under the guidance of Bolshevik organizations. Naturally, this proposal met with the fierce resistance of the representatives of other radical organizations. A Menshevik, Bakasheva, argued that the women’s movement was independent and must not be subordinated to the influence of *any* political party. But although three or four women expressed solidarity with the Menshevik resolution affirming the non-partisan character of the women’s movement, it was defeated, while Samoilova’s proposal for Bolshevik leadership was accepted.

Under the mounting pressure of events in the months preceding October, animosities on the left became more intense than ever. In July an abortive uprising took place. Although the Bolsheviks had counseled against such a move at this time, when the class lines were drawn they took their places in the front ranks of the proletariat. A Russian working woman recalls:

“I remember how we went to the July demonstration. Our organized working men and working women arose under the Bolshevik signs. Loudly and mightily our voices resounded: ‘We who were nothing and have become everything shall construct a new and better world.’

“As the demonstration approached the corner of Nevsky and Sadova, machine-gun fire was heard. People ran to the sidewalks, but, since the doormen all along the Nevsky had closed the gates, there was nowhere to escape, and the shooting continued. The Nevsky was strewn with the bodies of the demonstrators. At a corner of the Nevsky, a store was located on the basement level. When the machine-gun fire began, we descended a short flight of stairs to the door of the shop, which was closed. Working women disassembled the window pane and, helping each other, got into the shop and ran out through a dark passage into a yard and from there through an alley back again to the Nevsky.

“The streets of Petrograd were running with the blood of workers and soldiers...we buried them in a communal grave. “When on the morning of July 5, 1917 we returned to our plant, ‘Novi Promet,’ it was as if we did not know our co-

workers. During the course of our two-day absence, the Mensheviks and SRs had spread the foul slander that the Bolsheviks were fully responsible for the shooting down of the workers. The atmosphere was tense. When we entered the shop, many working women jumped up and began to throw aluminum nuts with very sharp edges at us. I was taken by surprise and covered my face with my hands, and my attackers kept repeating:

“‘Take that, Bolshevik spy!’

“‘What are you doing? The Bolsheviks gave their lives for the working class and you listen to the Mensheviks and SRs, the murderers of the working class....’

“The working women, seeing my face running with blood, became frightened. Someone brought water, iodine, a towel. The girls from my brigade were in a flood of tears. They told me how the Menshevik Bakasheva and others had set them against the Bolsheviks.

“The wavering of working women became apparent not only in our plant but also in other Petrograd enterprises during the July Days, when counterrevolutionary scum together with the Mensheviks and SRs carried on their filthy persecution of the Bolsheviks. The Mensheviks and SRs had started down the path of open counterrevolution.”

–E. Tarasova, “Pod znamenem Bolshevikov,” in A. Artiukhina et al. (eds.), *Zhenshchiny v revoliutsii*

In the final weeks before October, the Bolshevik party made an all-out effort to consolidate the support of the working women and enlist them in the imminent struggle. Party committees held working women’s conferences at which they explained the problems of the party, dispelled the wild rumors which abounded, attacked counterrevolutionary positions and generally tried to raise class-consciousness among the women and draw them into revolutionary activity.

Coinciding with the October Revolution itself was the First All-City Conference of Petrograd Working Women, which was organized by *Rabotnitsa* and attended by 500 delegates elected by 80,000 working women. A major goal of the conference was to prepare non-party women for the coming uprising and to acquaint them with the program which the new Soviet government would pursue after victory. The women discussed various questions of government and worked out plans for the welfare of mothers.

The conference was temporarily interrupted by the outbreak of the armed uprising which had been under discussion. The delegates recessed in order to participate in the revolutionary struggle along with many other women who bore arms, dug entrenchments, stood guard and nursed the wounded. Afterward Lenin was to say of them:

“In Petrograd, here in Moscow, in cities and industrial centers, and out in the country, proletarian women have stood the test magnificently in the revolution. Without them we should not have won, or just barely won. That is my view. How brave they were, how brave they still are! Just imagine all the sufferings and privations that they bear. And they hold out because they want freedom, communism. Yes, indeed, our proletarian women are magnificent class warriors. They deserve admiration and love....”

–V.I. Lenin, quoted in Fanina W. Halle, *Women in Soviet Russia*



**Women soldiers of the Bolshevik Red Guards. By 1920 there were 66,000 women soldiers in the Red Army.**

## Part 2

Few people today, even among those who take a special interest in the history of women, have ever heard of the Russian League of Equal Rights for Women. Yet in the days following the February revolution it was this organization, a branch of Carrie Chapman Catt's International Suffrage Alliance, to which feminists in Russia and around the world looked for leadership in the struggle for women's liberation.

From its headquarters at 20 Znamenskaia Street in Petrograd the League waged an ardent struggle for women's rights – principally suffrage – through rallies, leaflets, newspaper articles and earnest petitions such as the following:

“Defending the interests of women and maintaining that the realization of peace among the people will be incomplete without the full equality of women and men, the Russian League of Equal Rights for Women appeals to all women of all professions and calls upon them to join the League in order to quickly realize in practice the great idea of complete equality of the sexes before the law.

“In Unity there is Strength.”

–*Den*, 9 March 1917

On 15 April 1917 the League witnessed the realization of its long-sought goal as the Provisional Government granted all women over the age of 20 the right to participate in duma elections. Over the next four months additional legislation enabled women to practice law, elect delegates to the forthcoming Constituent Assembly, run for election themselves, hold government posts and vote in all provincial and municipal elections. Social Revolutionary

leader Catherine Breshkovskaia (later to be dubbed by Trotsky the “Godmother of the Russian Counterrevolution”) wrote in exultation to the National American Woman Suffrage Association:

“I am happy to say that the ‘Women’s Journal’ can be sure we Russian women have already the rights (over all our country) belonging to all citizens, and the elections which are taking place now, over all our provinces, are performed together by men and women. Neither our government nor our people have a word to say against the woman suffrage.”

–Catherine Breshkovskaia, letter to the National American Woman Suffrage Association, 20 May 1917

It is notable, then, that the victorious Russian League has been relegated to historical near-oblivion, while the Bolshevik party is universally acknowledged – even by staunch anti-communists – as the instrument by means of which Russian women achieved an unparalleled degree of social equality. And this is as it should be, for in fact the League’s paper victory had virtually no practical significance for the masses of Russian women. Not only did the new equal rights statutes leave untouched the most urgent problems of daily life – such as widespread starvation – but such reforms as were guaranteed were implemented, as in the West, in a purely tokenistic fashion. American newspaper reporter Bessie Beatty, who attended a Provisional Government political convention in Petrograd during this period, noted that of the 1,600 delegates in attendance only 23 were women. Not that women were absent from the proceedings; far from it. Numerous women served tea, caviar and sandwiches, ushered men to their seats, took stenographic notes and counted ballots. “It was so natural,” said Beatty, “that it almost made me homesick.”



**Bolshevik women leaders: (from left) Konkordiia Samoilo (editorial board, *Rabotnitsa*); Inessa Armand (editorial board, *Rabotnitsa*; head of Zhenotdel); Larissa Reissner (political commissar, Soviet Navy high command); Nadezhda Krupskaya (organizer, Bolshevik Party in exile; education reformer and commissar, as well as Lenin's companion).**

### **Bolshevik Pledge: Full Social Equality for Women**

Lenin had pledged that “the first dictatorship of the proletariat will be the pioneer in full social equality for women. It will radically destroy more prejudices than volumes of women’s rights.” With the Soviet seizure of state power and in the very teeth of the bitter struggle against counterrevolution and imperialist intervention the Bolsheviks proved their determination to honor this pledge.

The very first pieces of legislation enacted by the new Soviet government were directed at the emancipation of women in a way which far exceeded the reformist demands of the suffragists. The aim of this legislation was the replacement of the nuclear family as a social/economic unit through the socialization of household labor and the equalization of educational and vocational opportunities. These two goals were key to the undermining of the capitalist social order and to the construction of the new society.

In December 1917 illegitimacy was abolished in law, making fathers, whether married or not, co-responsible for their children and freeing mothers from the burden of a double standard which had punished them for the consequences of shared “mistakes.” Subsequent legislation declared marriage to be a contract between free and equal individuals which could be dissolved at the request of either partner, established hundreds of institutions devoted to the care of mothers and children, legalized abortions, assured equal pay for equal work and opened up unheard of opportunities for women in industry, the professions, the party and government. And this legislation was backed by government action. Thus when Soviet working women, like working women in other countries, began to lose their jobs to soldiers returning from the front, the Petrograd Council of Trade Unions addressed the following appeal to all workers and factory committees:

“The question of how to combat unemployment has come sharply before the unions. In many factories and shops the question is being solved very simply ... fire the women and put men in their places. With the transfer of power to the Soviets, the working class is given a chance to reorganize our national

economy on a new basis. Does such action correspond with this new basis? ... The only effective measure against unemployment is the restoration of the productive powers of the country; reorganization on a socialist basis. During the time of crisis, with the cutting down of workers in factories and shops, we must approach the question of dismissal with the greatest care. We must decide each case individually. There can be no question of whether the worker is a man or a woman, but simply the degree of need.... Only such an attitude will make it possible for us to retain women in our organization, and prevent a split in the army of workers....”

—Petrograd Council of Trade Unions, April 1918, quoted in Jessica Smith, *Women in Soviet Russia* [1928]

This petition was supported by other unions and government organizations, and mass dismissals of women from Soviet industry were in fact checked. Three years later, during another period of widespread layoffs, the government issued a decree providing that in cases where male and female workers were equally qualified they were to be given equal consideration in retaining their jobs, with the exception that single women with children under one year of age were to be given preference. In the event that such women had to be laid off, their children had the right to continue to attend the factory nursery or kindergarten. It was further stipulated that neither pregnancy nor the fact that a woman was nursing a baby could serve as cause for dismissal, nor was it permitted to dismiss a woman worker during a leave of absence for childbirth.

Surveying the Soviet government’s work among women during its first two years Lenin was able to conclude that:

“A complete revolution in the legislation affecting women was brought about by the government of the workers in the first months of its existence. The Soviet government has not left a stone unturned of those laws which held women in complete subjection. I speak particularly of the laws which took advantage of the weaker position of woman, leaving her in an unequal and often even degrading position – that is, the laws on divorce and children born out of wedlock, and the right of women to sue the father for the support of the child.... And we may now say with pride and without any exaggeration that outside of Soviet Russia there is not a country in the world where women have been given full equal rights, where women are not in a humiliating





**Zhenotdel (Department of Working Women and Peasant Women) on International Women's Day, 8 March 1923.**

position which is felt especially in everyday family life. This was one of our first and most important tasks....

“Certainly laws alone are not enough, and we will not for a minute be satisfied just with decrees. But in the legal field we have done everything required to put women on an equal basis with men, and we have a right to be proud of that. The legal position of women in Soviet Russia is ideal from the point of view of the foremost countries. But we tell ourselves plainly that this is only the beginning.”

—V.I. Lenin, quoted in Jessica Smith, *Women in Soviet Russia*

### **Zhenotdel**

The transition was not an easy one for women (or for men), particularly in rural areas and in the Muslim East. Appreciating the difficulties which women had to overcome in breaking from reactionary traditions, the Central Committee of the Bolshevik party, although it was caught up in the turmoil of the civil war, gave additional impetus to its work among women by calling for an All-Russian Conference of Working Women and Peasant Women to take place in Moscow in November 1918. This conference was preceded by the establishment of a bureau of convocation which sent agitators throughout the country, including frontline regions, to inform women about the forthcoming conference and to facilitate the election of delegates. Given the desperate conditions which prevailed, it was estimated that approximately 300 delegates would attend, but at the opening of the first session on November 16, 1,147 women delegates were seated.

Conference discussions addressed a variety of questions, including the problems of working women in Soviet Russia,

the family, welfare, the role of women in the international revolution, organizational problems, the struggle against prostitution in Soviet Russia, the struggle against child labor and the housing question.

While affirming in principle that the struggle for communism and women's emancipation could succeed only through the united struggle of all sections of the working class and peasantry, and not through the building of an autonomous women's movement, the delegates also noted that women were often the least conscious elements in these sections and the most in need of special attention. In the light of this approach to special work among women, which had been developed by the German Social Democratic Party and carried forward by the Bolsheviks in the pre-revolutionary period, delegates to the conference affirmed the proposal by Bolshevik leaders Inessa Armand and Konkordiia Samoilova that the conference appeal to the party “to organize from among the most active working women of the party special groups for propaganda and agitation among women in order to put the idea of communism into practice.” The Bolsheviks' response was the creation of a Central Committee commission headed by Armand for work among women. It was succeeded the following year by the Department of Working Women and Peasant Women – *Zhenotdel*.

*Zhenotdel* was to become a major vehicle for the recruitment of women to the Bolshevik party, but its primary purpose was not recruitment but the instruction of non-party women in the utilization of their newly-won rights, the deepening of their political awareness and the winning of their cooperation



**“Women, Learn How to Read!” by printmaker and teacher Elizaveta Kruglikova. Under the tsarist empire, 92% of women were illiterate. Zhenotdel carried out massive literacy drive.**

for the construction of the proletarian state.<sup>5</sup>

While special work among women was carried out by many agencies, *Zhenotdel* was unique in that it offered women practical political experience. In annual elections women chose their delegates – one for every ten working women or for every hundred peasant women or housewives. These delegates attended classes in reading and writing, government, women’s rights and social welfare, and they took part in the organization of conferences, meetings, and interviews designed to arouse the interest of their constituents and draw them into political activity. They were entitled to representation on the Central Committee of the Bolshevik party, and those who were elected to represent *Zhenotdel* pursued a special program of political education which included reviewing the reports of district committees, co-ops, trade unions and factory directors. Some *Zhenotdel* delegates became full-time paid functionaries in government institutions or trade unions where they participated directly in the administration of the government.

*Zhenotdel* carried out extensive propaganda campaigns

<sup>5</sup> The *Zhenotdel* was founded in 1919. Two years later, the Second International Conference of Communist Women and the Third Congress of the Communist International passed resolutions drawing lessons from the work of this Communist Party Central Committee Department of Working Women and Peasant Women. These resolutions are reprinted in the Internationalist pamphlet *Bolsheviks and the Liberation of Women*. In 1930, the *Zhenotdel* was shut down by the Stalinist bureaucracy as part of a general rollback of many of women’s gains.

through its publications. By 1921, it was publishing a special page devoted to women in 74 weekly newspapers. In addition, it published its own weekly bulletin and the monthly journal *Kommunistka* (*The Communist Woman*), which had a circulation of 30,000. In addition, *Zhenotdel*’s literary commission supervised the publication of leaflets and pamphlets dealing with party work among women – over 400,000 pieces of literature during the first six months of 1921 alone.

Finding themselves confronted at every step by the enormous barrier of illiteracy among women, *Zhenotdel* delegates threw themselves into the work of organizing over 25,000 literacy schools in which they themselves were often the majority of the students. They also set up co-operative workshops for women, organized women who had been laid off from factories and established orphanages and colonies for homeless children.

Within a few years *Zhenotdel* had succeeded in creating out of the most backward sector of the working class and peasantry an organized, active, politically conscious stratum of women citizens devoted to the Soviet republic. Of these astonishing women delegates the Russian poet Vladimir Mayakovsky wrote:

“They come  
From the machines  
From the land and washtubs  
Under red kerchiefs  
Tucking in the strands,  
Hundreds of thousands  
Of women-delegates  
Chosen  
To build and govern.”

– Quoted in V. Lebedeva, “Zabota o materiakh i detiakh,” in A. Artiukhina et al. (eds.), *Zhenshchina v revoliutsii*

### Women Rally to Soviet State

While the Soviet regime had its detractors, even among working women in the major cities, all evidence indicates that the great majority of working women, for whom there could be no going back to the life they had known under the old regime, remained loyal to the government through famine, epidemic and Civil War. Wearing red head bands, women marched through the streets of Petrograd, during its darkest days, singing that although typhus and counterrevolution were everywhere, the world revolution was bound to save them. One woman who spoke for many wrote:

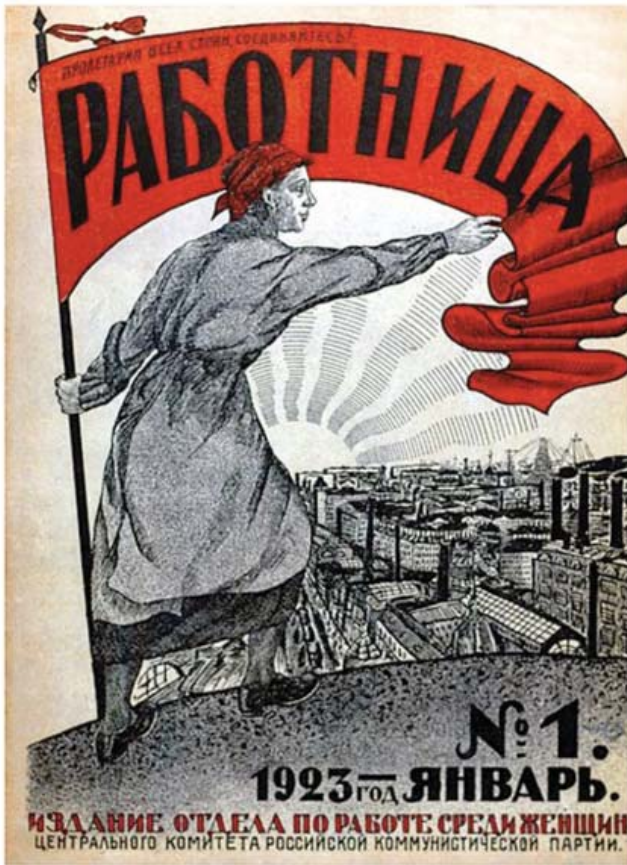
“I am the wife of a Petrograd worker. Earlier I was in no way useful to the working class. I could not work.

“I sat at home, suffocating in the cellar and preparing dinner from garbage which the bourgeoisie had not found fit to eat.

“When working-class rule began, I heard the call for us ourselves to rule and build our lives. Well, I thought, how can the generals and their daughters have yielded their places to us? I began to listen...

“They chose me for a Kalachinska District conference. I learned a great deal there. A literacy instructor was assigned to me...

“If life is difficult for us now, all of us will bear it and not one will give the bourgeoisie reason to celebrate that they can again keep all the people in chains. We may suffer for a while, but to our children we will leave an inheritance which neither moth will eat nor rust will corrode. And we shall support strong soviet rule and the Communist Party.”



**Rabotnitsa (Woman Worker) restarted in 1923.**

—V. Tsurik, *Bednota*

But the clearest indication of support for the Soviet government was the enthusiasm with which women took up arms against the counterrevolution. Soviet women were members of Red Guard units from the first days of the October Revolution, and they fought side by side with men on every front during the Civil War. Like women in bourgeois countries, they initially volunteered as nurses, with the difference – as Alexandra Kollontai points out – that they regarded the soldiers not merely as “our poor soldier boys,” but as comrades in struggle. Soon, however, they became scouts, engineers of armored trains, cavalry soldiers, communications specialists, machine-gunners and guerrillas. They also took the initiative in forming “stopping detachments,” which captured deserters and persuaded them, whenever possible, to return to their positions. Lenin praised these detachments, saying: “Smash the traitors ruthlessly and put them to shame. Eighty thousand women – this is no trifling military force. Be steadfast in the revolutionary struggle.”

When the fighting ended, an estimated 1,854 women soldiers had been killed or wounded and many more taken prisoner. Sixty-three women were awarded the Order of the Red Banner for military heroism.

### The Work Goes Forward

By 1921 it appeared as if a wholly new type of woman was about to make her appearance in Soviet Russia. According to Alexandra Kollontai’s personal ideal, this woman would be self-supporting and would live alone; she would take part in

social and political work and would engage freely in sexual love; her meals would be eaten in a communal restaurant; her children would be happy in a state nursery and her home would be cleaned, her laundry done and her clothes mended by state workers. Other communists cherished other visions of the fully emancipated socialist woman, but for all of them the future was full of promise – so much had been accomplished already.

It was too early to know that just ahead lay bitter defeats for Soviet women, for the Soviet working class as a whole and for the international proletarian revolution. The bureaucratic degeneration of the Soviet state, which arose in the first instance out of the backwardness, isolation and poverty of post-revolutionary Russia and out of the failure of the proletarian revolutions in the technologically advanced countries of Western Europe, constitutes another chapter. The privileged, conservative bureaucratic caste which emerged out of these conditions reversed at will many of the gains which women had achieved through the Revolution: abortion was illegalized; the women’s section of the party was liquidated; coeducation was abolished; divorce was made less accessible; and women were once again encouraged to assume their “natural” tasks of domestic labor and child rearing within the confines of the oppressive family.

But despite these defeats, the lessons of Bolshevik work among women have not been lost to succeeding generations of revolutionists, and the work goes forward. Just as Kollontai pointed out to Bessie Beatty during the first flush of the Soviet victory: “Even if we are conquered, we have done great things. We are breaking the way....” ■

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## From Tijuana to Matamoros

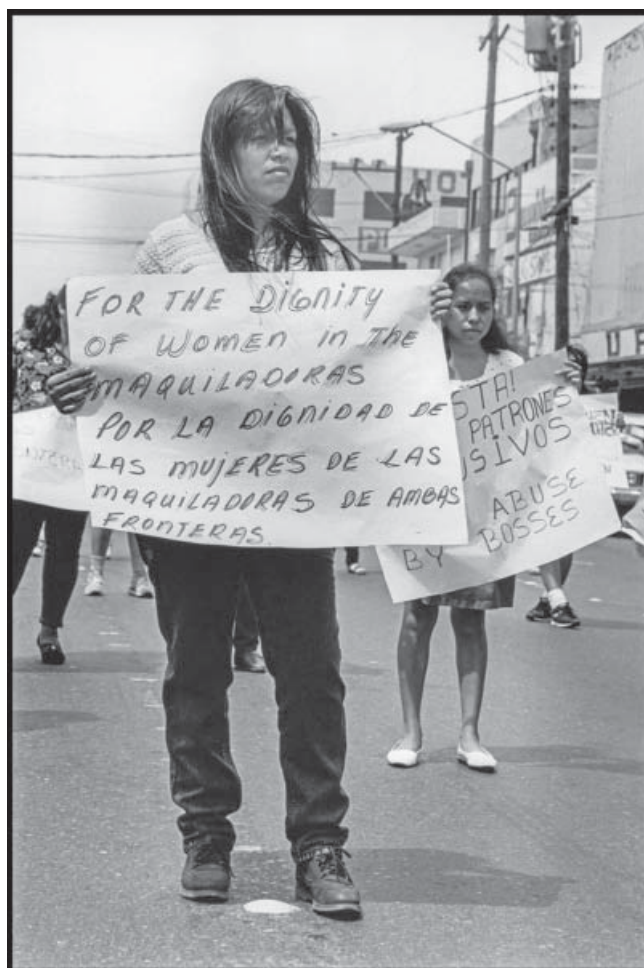
# Mexican Maquiladora Workers Fight for Their Rights

*The following article is reprinted from The Internationalist No. 1, January-February 1997.*

Rebellion has been brewing among the more than half a million industrial workers in the *maquiladora* (free trade zone) factories strung out along Mexico's northern border. The plants are mainly owned by U.S. companies (as well as the leading Japanese conglomerates). The workforce is young, mostly under 25 years old, and predominantly women. Following the December 1994 peso devaluation, which slashed Mexican workers' real wages in half, the rest of Mexico's industry has been crippled. But paying starvation wages and producing almost exclusively for the North American market, the *maquiladoras* are booming – and for the first time, there have been a number of relatively successful strikes. A battle to unionize this new industrial belt is looming, which poses the need for a revolutionary leadership that champions the cause of oppressed women workers.

On May Day 1995, more than a thousand workers marched in Tijuana. Signs denounced control of the “unions” by the official party, the PRI, which has used its rigid control of labor to impose brutal austerity policies dictated by Wall Street and Washington. Other placards demanded, “Traitorous and Cowardly Mexican Army Get Out of Chiapas!” where 40,000 Mexican troops are encircling the Zapatista Indian rebels. But most striking was the active participation in the protest by workers in the *maquiladora* factories. Without union protection, subject to employers' whims and the tight control of company security and police forces, simply to march was a courageous act of defiance by these mainly women workers. Moreover, *maquiladora* workers from Tijuana to Matamoros joined May Day protests while hundreds of thousands jammed into Mexico City's Zócalo, the capital's main square, after the government-controlled CTM “labor” federation called off its traditional parade, fearing it could turn into a full-scale revolt against the PRI and its heavy-handed “labor” bureaucracy.

In the Tijuana demonstration, women carried signs demanding dignity for women in the *maquiladoras*. They were among the more than a hundred workers at the Exportadora de Mano de Obra S.A. (Emosa) plant who were protesting sexual harassment at the plant, where they inspect and repair rubber sealing rings for the U.S. aerospace, auto and electronics industry. Sexual abuse is rampant in these plants, which employ predominantly female labor: of the 100,000 *maquiladora* workers in Tijuana, an estimated 80 percent are women. Free trade zone assembly and light manufacturing plants have



David Bacon/Impact Visuals

**Women workers of Tijuana maquiladora demonstrate on May Day 1995 against sexual harassment by bosses.**

traditionally employed women on the grounds that they are supposed to be more dexterous, docile and above all less likely to organize independent unions. That is changing, as the Emosa workers' actions show. But the employers are raking in huge profits based on superexploitation of low-wage labor. So when workers brought charges against Emosa, the company's U.S. owner, American United Global/National O-Ring, closed the plant, firing the entire work force.

The fight at Emosa grew out of a company picnic in September 1994, where the president of the California-based parent corporation, John Shahid, demanded that the women workers perform a bikini show, which he videotaped. Accord-



**Workers vote for independent union in 1997 election at Han Young auto parts manufacturing company.**

ing to the women, Shahid told them how to move as his camera focused on the waist down. When they later confronted him at a plant meeting, demanding a wage increase and that the videotape be turned over to them, he threw down \$15, saying that was their “raise,” and said what he wanted in return was “amor” (love). The workers filed a complaint with the Mexican labor board, and brought criminal charges in a Tijuana court. Company executives refused to appear, and shortly after shut the plant. Stymied there, the Emosa workers, with the aid of the San Diego-based Support Committee for Maquiladora Workers, sued the U.S. owners in Los Angeles court for sexual harassment, illegal firing, nonpayment of back wages and denial of severance pay. In October 1995, American United Global settled the suit out of court for a reported \$500,000.

Over the last several years, particularly in response to the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which went into effect in January 1994, a number of liberal and labor activist groups have begun or stepped up cross-border solidarity campaigns with Mexican workers. The Emosa settlement is being hailed in these circles as a major victory, pointing to the possibility of appealing to U.S. courts for redress against violations of Mexican labor laws by subsidiaries of American companies. Whatever the evaluation of the Emosa settlement (the terms are secret), it should be clear that U.S. courts are no friends of women workers. Almost simultaneously, a complaint brought by workers at Sony’s Magnéticos de México plants in Nuevo Laredo for flagrantly violating Mexican labor laws was dismissed by the National Administrative Office in San Antonio, an arbitration body set up under NAFTA to hear labor disputes. North and south of the border, the courts are the “legal” instruments of capital against labor and the oppressed. Their job is to enforce the bourgeois laws – or not enforce them, if that better serves the interests of the ruling class.

In fact, the major pressure on the O-ring manufacturer to settle in the Emosa case reportedly came from a solidarity committee of United Auto Workers Region 1-A, which wrote to the

company’s board of directors that contracts with the Big Three auto companies require suppliers to be “good corporate citizens,” and hinted that the UAW might push GM, Ford and Chrysler to switch suppliers. There were also several demonstrations by Emosa workers and supporters outside American United Global’s headquarters in Downey, California. This is an example of the “corporate campaigns” that have become popular lately among sections of the labor bureaucracy, mainly as a phony “alternative” to strike action. Yet giant companies are not going to be defeated by revelations that they flunked some “corporate citizenship” standard. Real solidarity with Mexican workers requires more than a just letter on union stationery. What’s needed is not appeals to corporate “conscience” or looking to the bosses’ courts, but hard class struggle on both sides of the border.

That struggle must be guided by proletarian, internationalist and revolutionary principles. Thus recently, campaigns against sweatshop labor in Central American maquilas have been linked to demands that U.S. companies not buy from plants in those countries, or that the plants be shut down. Such demands reflect the *protectionism* of the labor bureaucracy, who just want a better deal, a “social contract” with companies that are “good (U.S.) corporate citizens.” The opposition of the U.S. union bureaucracy to NAFTA is fundamentally *national-chauvinist*. That is why official labor support for Mexican workers is queasy and minimal at best, when it isn’t outright appeals to racist xenophobia, such as the campaign by Teamster union tops against Mexican truck drivers. Their complaints (open or veiled) about foreign workers “stealing American jobs” express their own support for *American capitalism*. Genuine support for Mexican, Central American, Filipino and Japanese workers, often working for the very same corporations, requires solidarity in militant union *action*, not exercises in pressure politics.

Moreover, while the Emosa case involved a U.S. company that fled from Mexico when challenged by its workers, appeals to U.S. courts can be a dangerous and double-edged tactic. As part of its pretensions of imperialist hegemony in a New World Order, Washington has enacted or simply decreed a number of measures claiming the international applicability of U.S. laws. The reactionary Helms-Burton law proclaims this doctrine of extraterritoriality to enforce the counterrevolutionary U.S. trade embargo against Cuba on Mexican, Canadian and European companies. In the mid-1980s, under Ronald Reagan, U.S. authorities kidnapped a Mexican doctor and flew him to California for trial on charges of involvement in the killing of a Drug Enforcement Agency operative in Guadalajara. Rather than looking to the U.S. bosses’ laws and courts, class-conscious workers must appeal to U.S. and Mexican workers for joint struggle against the common class enemy.

The sexual harassment and abuse of workers at Emosa

is only the tip of the iceberg as concerns the oppression of women under capitalism. "Beauty contests" are frequent in Tijuana-area *maquiladoras*, encouraged by the chamber of commerce as a diversion for women workers – along with company-sponsored sports teams for the men. And it is standard procedure for *maquiladora* operators all along the border to administer pregnancy tests to female job applicants as well as women employees, in order to escape from the provisions of Mexico's labor code, which provides for three months paid maternity leave and protection of pregnant women from dangerous tasks. This practice is extensively documented in a report by the Human Rights Watch Women's Rights Project, "No Guarantees: Sex Discrimination in Mexico's Maquiladora Sector" (August 1996). During the three-month probationary period, it is common for free trade zone companies to require women employees to show a company nurse their bloody sanitary napkins as proof of menstruation, and even submit to intrusive physical examination to prove that they are not pregnant (these practices are discussed in the article "Mexican Women Workers Arise: Class Struggle in the 'Global Sweatshop'," *Women and Revolution* No. 34, Spring 1988).

Even more abusive is the companies' deliberate mistreatment of pregnant women workers, subjecting them to dangerous chemical fumes and ordering them to undertake onerous tasks in order to force them to resign. A notorious case that was widely reported in the Mexican press was that of María Elena Corona Caldero, who worked at the Plásticos Bajacal factory in Tijuana. When she became pregnant in 1989 and asked for seated work she was refused; a few weeks later when she began bleeding during her shift, a supervisor refused to let her go to the hospital and she had a miscarriage while working at the conveyor line. María Elena's case was one of the motivating factors behind a drive to organize an independent union at Plásticos Bajacal. But although it was financially supported by several U.S. unions, the vote lost to a government-controlled "union" which joined with company goons in "monitoring" the ballots by watching how each worker cast their ballot.

The Human Rights Watch report states, "Women repeatedly expressed unwillingness to challenge discriminatory practices in the *maquiladoras*, given the lack of other comparable employment opportunities." The weight of the many-sided oppression of impoverished women, the conservatizing pressure of the family and the desperate struggle to provide for their children (many of the young women are single mothers), certainly place enormous obstacles in the way of women fully participating in social struggle. But the report's repeated claim – at least six times in the first dozen pages – that women won't fight against sexual harassment is belied by the experience of the Emosa and Plásticos Bajacal workers in Tijuana, by the women workers at Sony in Nuevo Laredo who were brutally beaten by police as they struck against CTM "union" scabherders in 1994, by women workers at Zenith in Reynosa who struck a decade earlier. The idea that *maquiladora* workers can't win was dramatically disproved by the strike and plant occupation by workers at the RCA Thomson electronics plants in Ciudad Juárez in January 1995. Fundamentally, the claim

that women won't fight is an excuse to justify the human rights organization's liberal appeal to companies and the U.S. and Mexican governments to desist from discriminatory practices.

The fight to unionize the predominantly female work force of the border industries cannot be limited to the "traditional" demands of simple trade unionism. The struggle against the abysmal wages (workers typically earn \$35 for a 48-hour, six-day workweek) means directly taking on the Mexican government and its Yankee imperialist patrons, for whom the superexploitation of *maquiladora* workers is a key part of their economic policies. In a two-part article on "Labor Organizing in the Maquiladoras" in *Workers Vanguard* (Nos. 620 and 621, 7 and 21 April 1995), based on a trip to the Nuevo Laredo-Reynosa-Matamoros area, we stressed that "the woman question is in fact *central* to the *maquiladoras*," and that "a class-struggle opposition cannot be limited to economic demands, but must respond to all forms of oppression, notably of women."

There must be conscious and aggressive defense of women against the pervasive sexual harassment and discrimination, demanding an end to all pregnancy tests. A strike begun over the firing or attempt to force the resignation of a pregnant woman worker could have an electrifying effect all along the border. It is necessary to fight for free, 24-hour daycare services. At the same time, the struggle for the liberation of women requires a fight for free abortion on demand, which will immediately confront the most reactionary forces in the form of the Catholic church hierarchy and the clerical-derived Partido Acción Nacional (PAN).

It is also necessary to take on environmental questions from a class standpoint: the newsletter of the Support Committee for Maquiladora Workers reports on a conference of 160 workers from 70 *maquiladoras* in Baja California where it was reported that in a three-month period earlier this year, four women at one of the worst plants had anencephalic births (babies born without brains) and there were eight to ten miscarriages a month, directly related to hazardous working conditions and exposure to toxins. Elected workers safety committees must be formed with the power to stop production when dangerous conditions are present.

A successful struggle to unionize these young and predominantly female workers who are strategically placed along the U.S.-Mexico border will not be carried out by business unionists who play by the rules of the bosses' laws. It will require the leadership of a party committed to a program of struggle against the exploiters in every domain. The fight against women's oppression is not a "secondary" issue but a strategic part of the fight of the working class for its emancipation. Stressing the significance of the integration of women into social labor, the early Communist International under the leadership of Lenin and Trotsky put forward theses on "Forms and Methods of Communist Work Among Women" calling to "take seriously the organization of the broad masses of working women for revolutionary struggle" as the only road to achieving true equality. Today as well, a revolutionary workers party must be forged to lead the fight for *women's liberation through socialist revolution*. ■

# Gay Rights and Socialist Revolution

*The following article is reprinted from Revolution No. 4, September 2007, published by the Internationalist Clubs at the City University of New York.*

As the United States continues its imperialist occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq, on the home front the rulers wage a war of terror against the working class and basic democratic rights. One of the “hot button” issues for reactionary crusades is the assault against same-sex marriage. We don’t pretend that marriage is bliss – if anything, it’s more often the opposite. It is an institution of capitalist society to shore up the nuclear family. But revolutionary Marxists oppose every type of discrimination, defend gays’ and lesbians’ right to get married like anyone else and oppose the hateful attempt by governmental bigots to deny same-sex couples benefits married couples get, such as shared health insurance, breaks on taxes and social security inheritance benefits.



**Gay rights activists march in New York City on first anniversary of Stonewall “riots” against brutal police attack.**

## War-Mongers and Gay-Bashers

It’s no accident that the biggest war-mongers in the media also jump to whip up anti-gay hysteria, as in the media frenzy over the so-called “Lesbian 7,” young black women from Newark tried for felony assault and gang assault after a confrontation with a man who accosted them in Greenwich Village. (Some had been friends of Sakia Gunn, a Newark teen who was accosted at a bus stop and then murdered when she identified herself as gay.) The press seized on the incident to whip up homophobia, as the *New York Post* (April 12) ranted about the “Attack of the Killer Lesbians” and the “seething sapphic septet” of “bloodthirsty young lesbians,” while the *Daily News* (April 19) called them a “lesbian wolf pack.”

Hot to fan the flames of bigotry, Fox News Channel’s O’Reilly Factor (June 21) ran a piece on a supposed “Lesbian Gang Epidemic,” warning of a “national underground network” of hundreds of such gangs (“150 such crews in the Washington, D.C. area alone”!) dedicated to “terrorizing” people, “recruiting” kids and “indoctrinating” them with homosexuality. Sounding like an old-time B-movie, it warned, “some of these gangs carry pink pistols, they call themselves the Pink Pistol Packers.”

The rabid rantings of O’Reilly soon went south as the cops’ own gang investigation units disowned the wild claims. O’Reilly mumbled on the air that he had “overstated the extent of gay gangs in the Washington area,” but then hastened to call the seven women from Newark a “pack of lesbians.” Once again, racist vocabulary and homophobia spew from spin doctors notorious for beating the war drums over invented “WMD” in Iraq.

Ludicrous as these professional liars seem, their smears are no joke but an incitement to repression and lynch-mob terror. The same terrorist “war on terror” that escalates racist police violence like the NYPD murder of Sean Bell encourages storm trooper incidents like the July 2006 SWAT team raid on a gay gym in Albuquerque, New Mexico, where cops “bullied, terrorized and humiliated” patrons, many of them elderly, forcing them to lie handcuffed on the floor as the police ran “background checks” (ACLU report, July 2006). Is it a stretch to link the war in Iraq and government- and media-incited bigotry to heightened violence against gays? Not if you read the “Anti-Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Violence” report (2007 edition) put out by the liberal National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs, which registered a sharp rise in such violence in 2003-05, noting the “clear cultural and political factors that contributed” to this, including:

“the all out assault on lesbian and gay relationships through anti-same-sex marriage initiatives across the country and at the federal level, the reaction of the religious and political right to the Supreme Court’s striking down of sodomy laws, and religious backlash to the high visibility of LGBT people in popular culture.”

## The Nuclear Family and Homosexual Oppression

Attacks on homosexuals do not just stem from a few bad journalists, right-wing politicians or plain and simple ignorance. They are rooted in the capitalist system! Their origins lie with the rise of class society, the development of capitalism and the consoli-

dation of the nuclear (bourgeois) family. As explained by Friedrich Engels in his classic book *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, the division of society into classes was interwoven historically with the subjugation of women, the central institution of which is the patriarchal family. For the capitalists who became the ruling class of modern times, the family was a tool ensuring that their private property was safeguarded and passed from one generation to the next through the male lineage. The home became women's "domestic sphere," with wives charged with supplying and rearing a male heir to inherit this property. Working-class women were subjected to double oppression, supplying cheap labor to factories as well as housework and child-rearing to bring up new generations of wage slaves.

Thus the enforcement of the family was (and remains) crucial to the capitalist system as a whole. The capitalist, in order to make sure the heir being produced was *his* and not the mailman's, enforced monogamy; and women, with the institution of marriage, became the sole "property" of men. Ensuring the reproductive value of women in producing heirs for the capitalists and workers for the factories required bans, prejudices and superstitions against sexual activity outside of marriage and procreation. The bourgeois family gave rise to what historians have called the institutionalization of heterosexuality, including categorizing homosexuality as "unnatural." Sodomy bans were made into laws punishing a "type" of person who committed such acts. Many writers over the past decades have discussed this process from the now-fashionable Michel Foucault to John Boswell's essay "Revolutions, Universals and Sexual Categories" in Martin Duberman et al., *Hidden From History* [1989].)

As those who practiced same-sex relations were being demonized and driven to the fringes of society, a movement championing their rights began to emerge. Emerging in late 19th-century Germany, where the radical labor movement was growing, it demanded the abolition of anti-homosexual laws like Germany's infamous Paragraph 175, which criminalized sex between men and was only abolished in 1994. Among its leaders were Karl Maria Kertbeny, who coined the term *homosexual*, and Magnus Hirschfeld, who later founded the first homosexual rights organization, the Scientific Humanitarian Committee. Socialists such as the gay British poet Edward Carpenter, German Social Democratic Party leader August Bebel (who had been a close friend of Karl Marx) and others were among the most vocal opponents of bourgeois campaigns against homosexuality. A *cause célèbre* was the notorious 1895 trial and imprisonment of the Irish playwright Oscar Wilde. While serving a prison sentence that broke his health, Wilde – who also considered himself a socialist – wrote his famous poem "The Ballad of Reading Gaol," portraying the violence and degradation imposed by the jails of "civilized" British capitalism.

### **Bolshevism vs. Stalinism**

It was the October 1917 Revolution in Russia that opened a new historical chapter, emboldening and lifting to their feet those persecuted under capitalism. Led by the Bolshevik Party of V.I. Lenin and Leon Trotsky, the new Soviet state immediately abolished the tsarist empire's laws against ho-

mosexuality. This went hand in hand with measures towards women's emancipation unequalled in any capitalist country, as the Bolsheviks sought to lay the material basis for overcoming the oppressive nuclear family.

While some anti-communist gay historians have claimed otherwise, the Bolsheviks' "decriminalization of homosexuality was not an incidental by-product of broader legal reforms, but a conscious act of state policy," as David F. Greenberg noted in his book, *The Construction of Homosexuality* [1988]. This is underlined by official Soviet declarations of "the absolute noninterference of the state and society into sexual matters" except where there is "force or duress," as stated by the head of the Moscow Institute of Social Hygiene. The latter also wrote in 1923 that "Homosexuality, sodomy and various other forms of sexual gratification set forth in European legislation as offences against public morality are treated by Soviet legislation exactly as is so called 'natural' intercourse."

In the same year, the Soviet Commissar of Health visited Hirschfeld's Institute of Sex Research in Berlin, where he spoke about the Bolshevik regime's decriminalization of homosexuality. In 1926 the Soviets invited Hirschfeld to Moscow and Leningrad. It is also significant that the revolutionary government's Commissar for Foreign Affairs, Grigorii Chicherin, was openly gay and had been closely associated with important homosexual cultural figures like Sergei Diaghilev and the poet Mikhail Kuzmin.

Key figures of the Harlem Renaissance who were drawn to the liberating message of the Russian Revolution, like Langston Hughes and Claude McKay, were also involved in Harlem's lively gay cultural scene, as discussed in works like A.B. Christa Schwarz's *Gay Voices of the Harlem Renaissance* (2003) and the films *Looking for Langston* (1988) and *Brother to Brother* (2004). Important campaigners for gay rights came out of a number of Communist parties, such as Harry Hay, founder of the first gay rights group in the U.S., the Mattachine Society, later followed by the courageous lesbian rights pioneers of the Daughters of Bilitis. Witch hunts against "commies" often combined with crusades against homosexuals (the "lavender scare"), whose supposed moral weakness was deemed a threat to "national security."

While the Bolshevik Revolution was a beacon for freedom struggles around the world, Russia's poverty and economic backwardness, compounded by years of war, encirclement and intervention by 14 capitalist powers, led to the revolution's degeneration. Joseph Stalin led the political take-over by a privileged, nationalist bureaucracy that sought to bury Lenin's program of international socialist revolution. Reanimating social conservatism on a wide range of fronts, the Stalinist bureaucracy proclaimed the family a "unit of socialism" and re-criminalized homosexuality as well as abortion. Stalinist parties around the world echoed bourgeois homophobia – a vile tradition that some continue to this day. This is the polar opposite of Bolshevism's commitment to mobilize the power of the working class against *every* form of oppression.

Four decades after Lenin and Trotsky led the Russian workers to power, the Cuban Revolution inflicted a humiliating defeat on Yankee imperialism in its own "backyard." Millions around the world were inspired by Cuba's advances in health,



education and many other fields. Yet Stalinist homophobia again reared its ugly head as a manifestation of the bureaucratic deformation of the Cuban workers state, as gays and lesbians faced purges, prejudice and campaigns of incarceration. Interestingly, in recent years a campaign against homophobia has been carried out by Mariela Castro, director of the government's National Center for Sex Education (CENESEX) and daughter of Raúl Castro. Among the center's proposals is that Cuba become the first Caribbean country to recognize gay and lesbian couples' civil and inheritance rights, and that its free medical system cover surgery for transsexuals.

### Stonewall and After

The civil rights movement, the Cuban Revolution and the Vietnam War paved the way for new social struggles in the 1960s. The year 1968 began with the Tet Offensive by the National Liberation Front (Vietcong), followed by ten million French workers occupying factories and raising the red flag, mass student protests in Mexico and upheavals on U.S. college campuses. The looming defeat of Washington's dirty colonial war on Indochina brought, among other things, the legalization of abortion (though not the elementary right to free abortion on demand), which anti-woman reactionaries have been trying to overturn ever since.

This was the context for the events that erupted in June 1969 after a police raid on the Stonewall Inn, a gay bar in Greenwich Village. Used to harassing, abusing and shaking down the patrons of gay and lesbian nightspots, the cops were taken aback when those at the Stonewall defended themselves. The yellow press pumped out bigotry with headlines like "Homo Nest Raided, Queen Bees Are Stinging Mad" (*Daily News*, 6 July 1969). Today, respectability-seeking history texts often tone down the fact that Stonewall was an all-out street battle lasting four days. Hundreds of people, many of them young black and Puerto Rican gays, repeatedly drove the cops to retreat, using rocks, cobblestones, bricks, bottles, even Molotov cocktails.

Echoing the black power slogan (first launched by activists fed up with Martin Luther King-style pacifism), that of "gay power" was coined by activists shaped by the New Left conception that each sector of the oppressed was responsible for fighting its own oppression. In contrast, Marxists seek to build a genuine revolutionary party that, as Lenin put it in *What Is To Be Done?* (1902), acts as a "tribune of the people ... able to react to every manifestation of tyranny and oppression, no matter where it appears," mobilizing the *power* of the working class, whose emancipation cannot be accomplished except by uprooting all social oppression.

New Left sectoralism opened new channels for the Democratic Party's time-honored "pork-barrel politics": piecing off leaders of different groups and "communities" to quell challenges to the status quo. The Democrats, party of the old slaveocracy, of Hiroshima and Vietnam, which hunted reds and gays cheek by jowl with Nixon and J. Edgar Hoover (whose vicious homophobia didn't stop him from cross-dressing on occasion) – this party of oppression was now remarketed as a gay-friendly "rainbow coalition." Upwardly mobile former activists sought to climb on the bandwagon, embracing a self-

defeating illusion while turning their backs on a struggle for genuine change and leaving working-class and minority gays and lesbians by the wayside. Some even sought to win over the party of Jerry Falwell by forming the Log Cabin Republicans.

As new anti-sex witch hunts descended during the Reagan years, and Bible-thumping crazies clogged the airwaves claiming AIDS was god's retribution against gays, mainstream gay and lesbian organizations shed remnants of radical vocabulary in a drive for respectability. Symptomatic was their ostracism of groups like the North American Man/Boy Love Association (NAMBLA), condemned for the thought-crime of criticizing the "age of consent" laws that arbitrarily criminalize consensual sex between people of different age groups. Scandalously, the reactionary hysteria that screams "pedophile!" at such critics is echoed by some on the left (the small Socialist Alternative group is an especially egregious example).

Today, the bloody colonial occupation of Iraq, the endless lies, frauds and attacks on basic rights perpetrated by Bush and his Republican cronies led to the Democrats regaining control of Congress, led by Nancy Pelosi of San Francisco, a bastion of gay and lesbian voters. Despite fatuous illusions peddled by pro-capitalist "progressives" and much of what passes for a left in the United States, the Democrats have kept the war going, because they serve the same master as Bush: the capitalist rulers for whom imperialism is not a "mistaken policy" but the essence of their outmoded social system.

As Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama and other Democrats vie to be the next Mass-Murderer-In-Chief of U.S. imperialism, don't forget what the last Democratic president did. Bill Clinton appealed to homosexuals by promising to overturn the ban on gays in the military, only to sign the vicious "don't ask, don't tell" policy. (In part this was a ploy to cash in on some gay groups' attempt to outdo the right in flag-waving. We Marxists oppose discrimination in the military, as everywhere else, while saying "Down with the bourgeois army – Not a person or a penny for the imperialist war machine!") Less known is Clinton's signing of the Defense of Marriage Act of 1996, which bans the federal government from recognizing same-sex marriage and says no state has to recognize such marriages even if officially sanctioned by another state. This is precisely the foundation for the latest crusades against gay marriage, with which Bush and Bible-pounding bigots have emboldened gay-bashers all over the country.

Against all the parties, politicians and apologists of this rotten system – Republicans and Democrats, their electoral satellites and pressure groups like the Greens and Ralph Nader (the multi-millionaire who denounces "illegal aliens") – we fight to win students and youth to help build a *revolutionary workers party*. As "Solidarity Forever," one of the most popular working-class anthems from the radical IWW ("Wobblies") said: "We will bring to birth a new world from the ashes of the old." Those ashes must and will include the oppression of gays and lesbians. Born of class society with its imprisoning nuclear family, stifling hypocritical morality and constant "war of each against all," that oppression is part of the barbaric system of modern slavery called *capitalism*. Join us in the fight for international socialist revolution! ■

# Partial Decriminalization of Abortion in Mexico City, A Limited Bourgeois Reform

## Mexico: For Free Abortion On Demand!

*The following article is translated from El Internacionalista No. 7, May 2007.*

MEXICO CITY, April 24 – This evening, a plenary session of the Legislative Assembly of the Federal District (ALDF, Mexico City’s municipal parliament) approved, by a wide margin, a reform of the current abortion law. The most significant change is a new phrasing of Article 144 of the Penal Code, which henceforth defines abortion as “the termination of a pregnancy after the twelfth week of gestation” (*Milenio*, 20 April). In other words, ending a pregnancy during the first three months will no longer be penalized, because it will not be legally defined as an abortion. Because of another legislative reform, abortions will

be provided free of charge to women who request them at the city government’s health care facilities (hospitals and clinics).

This measure is of a limited character: abortion in the second and third trimester remains a criminal offense – the reform only reduces the prison term for women who exercise their right to terminate an unwanted pregnancy. Moreover, young women under the age of 18 will be required to obtain their parents’ permission, an ominous and potentially deadly restriction. Nevertheless, the reform has provoked a frenzied reactionary hysteria from the clergy and its political representatives. Feminist groups, on the other hand, declared a victory. Throughout Latin America, the partial decriminalization of abortion in Mexico City is being viewed as crack in the wall of Catholic reaction that could open the way toward bringing down the prohibition of abortion in Brazil and other countries on the continent.

Against the religious obscurantists and political reactionaries, as well as against the timid bourgeois reformers, all of them oppressors of women, we internationalist communists fight for the unrestricted right to *free abortion on demand*, at the woman’s sole discretion, with high quality medical care, at any point during the pregnancy. We also demand the broad distribution, free of charge, of contraceptives, as well as access to safe medications for early termination of an incipient pregnancy. At the same time, we emphasize that the complete liberation of women from social oppression can only be achieved through the destruction of capitalism, eliminating the poverty that makes it impossible for millions of mothers to properly feed their children. This would enable women’s



Eduardo Verdugo/AP

**Women demonstrate in favor of decriminalizing abortion in first trimester of pregnancy. Beyond “freedom of choice,” the liberation of women requires socialist revolution.**

emancipation from the slavery of the family, with their full participation in work outside of the home, in conditions of equality and with the socialization of domestic chores. *For women’s liberation through socialist revolution!*

Against this limited reform, the National Action Party (PAN) of Felipe Calderón, the Mexican Catholic Church, and a raft of ultra-reactionary and quasi-fascist organizations, like Provida (a “pro-life” organization linked to the clergy), have launched a crusade under the slogan of “protecting the innocent.” Pope Benedict XVI climbed aboard, dispatching Colombian cardinal Alfonso López Trujillo to Mexico as a special anti-abortion emissary from the Vatican, and sending a letter to the Mexican Conference of Bishops. Cardinal Norberto Rivera, the primate of the Mexican bishops, threatened supporters of legal abortion with eternal hellfire in his sermons. Now the church hierarchy is threatening to excommunicate anyone who votes for decriminalization. The defense of “family values” led by clerical reaction has sharply revealed its true character: it is an attack on the most basic rights of women, and a buttress of the aberrant macho stereotypes that serve to “justify” women’s oppression in the confines of the family, a key institution of bourgeois society that serves to inculcate the conservative values that sustain it.

The legislative initiatives that converged in this reform were first presented by deputies of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) and the Social-Democratic and Peasant Alternative. The final draft came from the parliamentary fraction of the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD), the dominant force in the ALDF, while the hidebound reactionaries of the

PAN howled with consternation. Nevertheless, it is significant that throughout the six-year administration of Mexico City by Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO), the standard bearer of the PRD, a bourgeois populist-nationalist party, as head of government he did nothing to advance abortion rights. In addition to not wanting to endanger his presidential ambitions, and it turns out that AMLO is a great friend of the ultra-reactionary cardinal Rivera.

In the final analysis, the oppression of women is a direct product of the class divisions in society. Because of this, even though the right to abortion is an elementary democratic right for women, a merely democratic struggle limited to the institutions of capitalist “democracy” will not suffice to achieve it. In fact, all the bourgeois parties oppose full legalization of abortion. Communist legislative deputies would have voted critically in favor of the minimal reform passed by the Legislative Assembly, which partially decriminalized abortion, while at the same time proposing the complete elimination of the anti-abortion law. But the question goes beyond legislative action. In reality, the struggle for women’s rights requires a social revolution, which today can only be socialist.

The fight for women’s emancipation confronts the combined forces of state repression, clerical reaction and its blood-thirsty mobs, *machista* violence in the family and in practically all spheres of life, the burden of ignorance, obscurantism and religious prejudices, as well as the decrepit state of the health care system, which offers services of very deficient quality to the workers, and practically nothing to the unemployed. It is for this reason that the fight for free, safe abortion on demand is a fundamental component of the fight for international socialist revolution.

### **Capitalism Means Hunger and Death**

Until now in Mexico, abortion had been legally prohibited, with few exceptions. In the capital city, these were limited to cases of pregnancy as the result of rape, when the woman’s life was in danger, or when the fetus was gravely deformed. Under these conditions, a clandestine abortion carries serious risks: the woman risks her life due to hemorrhage or massive infection. Furthermore, she and those who perform the operation are considered criminals by the state. Police periodically raid the clandestine clinics, arresting women, doctors and nurses.

In spite of all this, the practice of abortion is quite common. This is a sign of the real desperation of women who face the terrible choice of running the risk of an abortion or bearing unwanted children they cannot support. In Mexico, where the government’s own statistics admit that half of the population is mired in poverty, and 20 percent are in destitution, the problem of feeding another child is far from being an abstract dilemma. As soon as the new Calderón administration took office, January’s tortilla crisis caused a 40 percent rise in prices, while Congress eliminated milk subsidies. So as the government is literally taking basic foods off the plates of the urban and rural poor, the question of whether or not to bear children is not limited to the “right to choose.” This makes the talk of “saving babies” particularly obscene in a country

where abortion is a crime, while 30 of every 1,000 infants die (when in Cuba the ratio is less than 6 per thousand), mostly due to gastrointestinal infections and illnesses that could be eradicated through vaccination.

The most reliable statistics indicate that there are more than one million abortions each year in Mexico. The overwhelming majority of women who decide to have an abortion must administer it themselves, or surreptitiously turn to facilities where poorly-qualified staff perform the procedure, and where they are often treated like garbage. According to statistics from the United Nations, 106,000 women are hospitalized every year in Mexico due to unsafe abortions. In the capital, complications of botched abortions are the third leading cause of maternal death. According to data from the Secretariat of Health and Welfare, 100 women die every year in this country from unsafe abortions (and the true levels must be much higher than the official government statistics). All this when, if performed properly, abortion is one of the simplest and safest medical procedures.

These statistics reflect, once again, the oppression characteristic of class society. Who are the women who die from the effects of unsanitary clandestine abortions? The wealthy, who can pay to check themselves into a foreign hospital? Obviously not. The ones who suffer the consequences of the criminalization of abortion are the poor women, and everyone knows it.

The fight for the decriminalization of abortion in Mexico’s capital has a long history. Back in 1983 a bill was drafted to legalize abortion in the first trimester, but it was defeated. In 1979, the short-lived parliamentary fraction of the Revolutionary Workers’ Party (the PRT, which falsely advertised itself as Trotskyist), along with various feminists from the Communist Party, sponsored a bill for “voluntary motherhood” that called for the complete legalization of abortion. Just like today, reactionary forces organized street protests, and even organized physical attacks against defenders of this reform.

In the current case, the limitations of this amendment to the law are not restricted to the continued classification of abortion as a criminal offense. Even when carrying out the abortion is legal, there’s no guarantee that a woman could obtain one in an unrestricted and effective manner. For example, it’s now legal throughout the country for a woman to have an abortion when the pregnancy is the result of a rape. (Significantly, the clerical reactionaries oppose even this.) However, even when a woman who has become pregnant due to rape gets a court order authorizing her abortion, hospital authorities and the government “Comprehensive Family Development” (DIF) agency often refuse to carry out the order.

Take the very well-known case of Paulina. Paulina Ramírez Jacinto was raped at the age of 13, but nevertheless was denied an abortion in Mexicali. The bishop and the governor of Northern Baja California state personally intervened to dissuade her, and when this did not succeed, to prevent her from terminating the pregnancy. A report from Human Rights Watch (March 2006) entitled “The Second Assault: Obstructing Access to Legal Abortion after Rape in Mexico” presents the cases of women who suffered similar ordeals in the states of Guanajuato, Yucatán and the capital



**Internationalist Committee at College of Sciences and Humanities-South in Mexico City, 2007. Banner reads, “Free Abortion on Demand for Whoever Requests It!”**

district during 2005. A social worker in Mérida who helped a twelve-year-old girl who got pregnant from a rape gave this testimony:

“The authorities say: ‘it’s not possible.’ I show them the article [of the state penal code] where it says that [abortion in the case of rape] is among the exceptions. ... In the DIF [where I was working] they wanted her to have the child by any means. ... [The authorities] would say that now many months had passed [so that the abortion would be impossible by that point] and I told them: ‘That’s because you have told me no for so many months’.”

Even in the United States, where abortion is legal, actual access to abortion is heavily restricted. Just last week, the Supreme Court banned a third-trimester abortion procedure (intact dilation and extraction), which could open the door to a reactionary piecemeal assault on the right to abortion. A recent case that demonstrates the obstacles facing women who want to terminate a pregnancy is that of the young immigrant woman, Amber Abreu, who is now facing criminal charges in the state of Massachusetts (under an archaic statute from the 1840’s!) for an attempted abortion. As our comrades of the Internationalist Group wrote in an article in her defense:

“The case of Amber Abreu highlights the fact that what’s at issue is not just the legal ‘right to choose,’ it’s about the actual access to abortion services. In many states laws have been passed to prevent teenage women from terminating a pregnancy without notifying their parents. Clinics have been besieged by right-wing ‘god squads’ seeking not only to harass women seeking an abortion, but also to shut the facilities down. In several Midwestern and Mountain states this has succeeded to the point that there are only one or two abortion clinics left. On top of this, the anti-abortion bigots resort to outright murder, posting the names and addresses of abortion doctors on the Internet, shooting them in their homes and bombing clinics. Right-wing terrorist John Salvi killed two workers at a Planned Parenthood abortion clinic in Brookline and wounded five others in 1994. The Interna-

tionalist Group calls for militant working-class defense of abortion clinics.”

Now in Mexico, the reactionaries are going to turn to such terrorist methods, as Jorge Serrano Limón of Provida has already indicated. In reality, the struggle has already begun: no matter what the law may say, we will have to face all kinds of legal and extralegal roadblocks that they intend to put in the way, as well as to defend the medical staff and women at the clinics and hospitals where abortions are performed. No doubt reactionary doctors will say that they are “conscientious objectors” to refuse to perform abortions, like they did to Paulina in Mexicali. No way! It will be necessary to mobilize the class-conscious workers, women, and all those who defend democratic rights to enforce this right and guarantee the unrestricted access to abortion. Indeed, the fight for free abortion on demand as part of a health care system of the highest quality is a fundamental concern for the *working class* as a whole.

### **For Women’s Liberation Through Socialist Revolution!**

The legal ban on abortion in Mexico offers a clear example of the level of oppression suffered by women in this country. Whether a woman gives birth or not must be for her alone to decide, not the Pope, nor the ruling-class politicians, reactionary judges or anyone else. “We give birth, we decide,” is a slogan chanted by many women who fight for this fundamental right. In this they are completely correct. Yet the fight for free abortion on demand is not a cause that only concerns women, but one affecting all working people. Women’s oppression will not be abolished by a series of legislative measures. To realize their emancipation, it is necessary to destroy the foundations of this oppression: private property and the institution of the family that relegates women to domestic chores and childrearing. It will take the socialization of all the functions of the family to liberate women from this burden.

It’s not only for Marxists that the degree of women’s emancipation from their particular oppression is the most precise index of society’s degree of emancipation from oppression in general. The division of society into classes and the consequent appearance of private property brought with it the need to guarantee the transmission of inherited property from the propriety-owning man to “his” sons. This meant that women were separated from social production, and relegated to work in the home and the difficult labor of child-rearing. Converted into the property of men, imprisoned in the confines of the family, woman has historically been oppressed because of her gender. If she also belongs to an economically oppressed social class, as a slave, serf, or worker, and/or a group subject to ethnic-racial discrimination, she suffers *double* and even *triple* oppression.

In recent decades, the steady reduction of workers’ wages due to a bosses’ offensive has resulted in the reintroduction

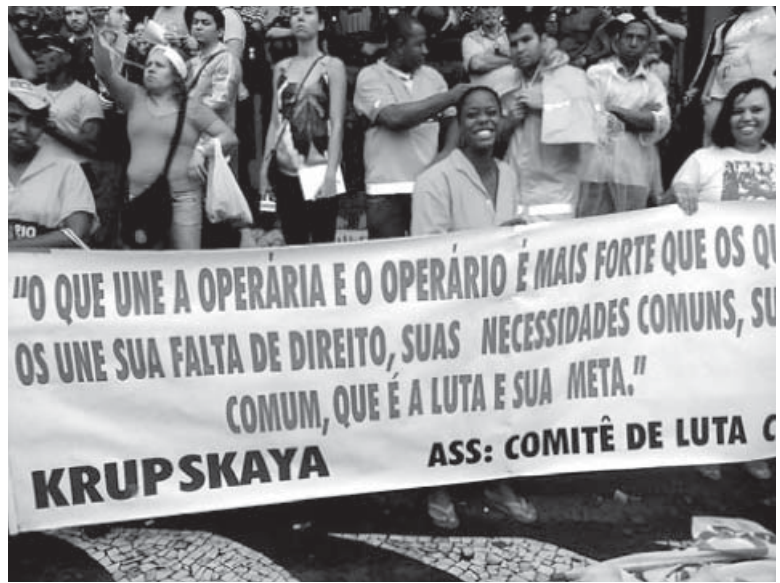
of an ever-greater number of women into social production because of their need for economic survival and the capitalists' drive to reduce the costs of production. It's no accident that the great majority of Mexico's *maquiladoras* (free trade zone factories) hire women almost exclusively, whom they keep oppressed and terrorized by a multitude of means (the murders in Ciudad Juárez, for example, should be seen in this context). The integration of women into social production under capitalism, which is also an indispensable condition for their social emancipation, implies that *machista* oppression in the family is added to the exploitation that women suffer as workers. After working outside of the home for starvation wages, the woman must return home, and do all the housework.

Working women are not only oppressed by preventing them from ending an unwanted pregnancy, but also by being fired from their jobs for having children that they did want. As we wrote in our article "Mexican Maquiladora Workers Fight for Their Rights" (*The Internationalist* No. 1, January-February 1997), "It is standard procedure for *maquiladora* operators all along the [U.S./Mexico] border to administer pregnancy tests to female job applicants as well as women employees, in order to evade the provisions of Mexico's labor code, which provides for three months paid maternity leave and protection for pregnant women from dangerous tasks." Thus we Marxists who fight for the right to end an unwanted pregnancy also defend the right of women who want to have children.

It's important to note that despite the fact that the bourgeoisie only employs women in order to better exploit them, in times of working-class insurgency, when the oppressed masses are rebelling, the entire capitalist class takes sides against the conquests of women, because their own privileges are threatened. Under the Nazi regime, for example, the product of the German bourgeoisie's need to destroy the powerful German workers' organizations, the campaign to push women workers out of the factories and drag them back into the home reached its climax. The Nazi slogan for women was "*Kinder, Kirche, Küche*" (children, church, and kitchen). This could be repeated today without the slightest objection by one Carlos Abascal, a member of the sinister fascist organization, El Yunque. A repugnant macho Mexican saying, "Keep your woman, like your rifle, always loaded and behind the door," echoes that of the Nazis. That the woman must remain "loaded," that is, pregnant, gives an accurate accounting of the role that this society assigns to her: as a mere reproductive apparatus chained in the prison of the nuclear family.<sup>1</sup>

No matter how moderate the reform now passed by the ALDF may be, the reactionary clergy did not hesitate to attack.

<sup>1</sup> This is the equivalent of the U.S. phrase about keeping women "barefoot and pregnant." In the early 1960s, a legislator in Arkansas was quoted saying that if a woman "starts poking around in something she doesn't know anything about," then "we get her pregnant and keep her barefoot."



**Banner quoting Krupskaya at International Women's Day 2014 in Rio de Janeiro. Striking sanitation workers and our comrades of the Liga Quarta-Internacionalista do Brasil are carrying the banner, which says: "That which unites working women with working men is stronger than that which divides them. They are united by their common lack of rights, their common needs, their common condition, which is struggle and their common goal. Krupskaya. Signed: Class Struggle Caucus."**

Bishop Felipe Arizmendi has threatened to excommunicate the "exterminator assassins"; Cardinal Rivera appealed to halt the "evil onslaught." The current deputy general secretary of the PAN, Abascal (who was interior secretary and minister of labor in the previous government of Vicente Fox), shamelessly declares that women should stop working outside the home and return to being "the heart of the household." On the Televisa

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network's news program *Primero Noticias*, Abascal showed a series of grotesque images of babies cut to pieces, falsely saying that this is what would be caused on a massive scale by the passage of the partial decriminalization bill.

Along with the processions that these reactionary forces have organized in Guadalajara, Querétaro, and the capital, now we must add the declaration from president Felipe Calderón and his wife "in favor of life," a joint statement by Protestant and Catholic churches against abortion, and the many activities and threats from reactionary clerical organizations like *Provida* and the Knights of Columbus. In a country where soldiers frequently rape and impregnate indigenous women, where military men raped and assassinated Ernestina Asunción, an elderly Nahuatl Indian woman from Zongolica in the state of Veracruz, when even the president of the Republic and the ombudsman responsible for "human rights" pardoned the rapists, a country where scores of Mexican women die every year from the complications of clandestine abortions, it is outrageous to hear these murderous government officials smear those who struggle for the right to safe abortions as "assassins."

The reactionary attack "in defense of the family" and of the bourgeois ideology of *machismo* is also accompanied by attacks on the rights of homosexuals, and puts the basic democratic principle of separation of church and state in question. At the beginning of this year, the Catholic clergy ranted and raved against the passage by the ALDF of a "civil union" law that granted homosexuals certain elementary rights like the right of inheritance and the right to health benefits due to either member of the couple. This new law, however, does not recognize the right of gays and lesbians to adopt children, among other things. As Marxists, we insist: *Full democratic rights for gays and lesbians! State and church out of the bedroom!*

The capitalist nuclear family is a fundamental element of the reproduction of the social order. As such, it is essential for the production of the next generation of the exploited and likewise of the exploiters, and consequently for the transmission of the values of bourgeois society. To allow women to decide whether or not to get pregnant makes the reactionaries tremble precisely because it puts into question the ideology fundamental to their domination, consequently endangering

the sacred rights of private property.

This is why even nationalist ex-leftists who have made their peace with the bourgeoisie often turn into ferocious opponents of the right to abortion. The most notorious example of recent times is Sandinista leader Daniel Ortega, who was elected a second time as president of Nicaragua (with a former *contra* as his vice-president) while trumpeting his new-found Christian faith, and backed a law to criminalize abortion without exceptions. It's notable that the three countries in Latin America where the termination of a pregnancy is totally illegal, even in cases of rape and the endangerment of the mother's life – Nicaragua, El Salvador and Chile – are the very same countries where counterrevolutionaries backed by Yankee imperialism have triumphed.

Women's liberation requires abolition of private property in the means of production through a socialist revolution, which in turn will establish the material conditions for genuine emancipation. We fight for the mobilization of the proletariat, not only for full legalization of abortion, but also for the establishment of 24-hour daycare centers under union control. In Mexico, a workers and peasants government would make a systematic effort to liberate women from their enslavement by collectivizing the chores that this entails: it would establish not only daycare centers and schools but also collective cafeterias and laundries. On the foundation of a collectivized economy, we can lay the framework for overcoming the misery that has been the fate of the masses of toilers and indigenous peoples in Latin America since time immemorial.

The connection between the fight for elementary democratic rights and the need for socialist revolution is an integral part of our Trotskyist perspective and program for permanent revolution, which in turn implies the international extension of the revolution to the imperialist centers, to smash the counterrevolution and mobilize their enormous economic resources for the benefit of all the exploited. We communists of the Internationalist Group and the League for the Fourth International dedicate ourselves to making this perspective a reality. We invite you to join us in this struggle. *Free and safe abortion on demand! For women's liberation through socialist revolution!* ■

## Class Struggle International Workers Founded

On 12 August 2016, *Trabajadores Internacionales Clasistas* (Class Struggle International Workers) was founded in New York City. The TIC set as its central task winning the most conscious immigrant workers to the program of internationalist class struggle, not only fighting for labor and immigrants' rights but also encompassing the major issues confronting workers and oppressed sectors today. It is similar to other "transitional organizations" including Class Struggle Education Workers in New York and Class Struggle Workers – Portland, which work together with the Internationalist Group. The TIC program includes a section concerning the struggle in defense of women workers:

### Women's Liberation: Duty of All Workers

March 8 is International Women's Day, commemorating the deaths of over 100 immigrant women workers in the Triangle

Shirtwaist factory fire in New York in 1911, which spurred the unionization of the garment industry. Women workers shoulder a double workday, on the job and both before and afterwards in the home, where they are burdened with the responsibility for domestic labor in the family. They are constantly hounded by sexual harassment and unequal treatment. They are even denied control over their own bodies. *Trabajadores Internacionales Clasistas* fights for equal pay for equal work. Around the world, we fight for free abortion on demand, at the sole decision of the woman. We demand free, 24-hour child care. Along with machismo, homophobic prejudices are a weapon of the exploiting class: every class-conscious worker is duty-bound to defend the democratic rights of gays, lesbians, transgender people and all the oppressed. ■

# The Fight to Save Beatriz's Life Down with El Salvador's Abortion Ban!



Internationalist photo

Protest in New York City, initiated by the Internationalist Group, against El Salvador's abortion ban, highlighted by the case of Beatriz, 5 June 2013.

## For Free Abortion On Demand!

*The following article is translated from a June 2013 Spanish-language El Internacionalista leaflet.*

Since the middle of April, and particularly in the last two weeks when her situation grew ever more critical, there has been a mounting cry to allow a young woman from El Salvador, Beatriz, to receive an abortion that would save her life. 22 years old, with a one year-and-a-half-old son, Beatriz (a pseudonym to protect her privacy) suffers from lupus and renal insufficiency (kidney disease), and thus her second pregnancy put her life at risk. The fetus was anencephalic (lacking a brain) and hadn't the slightest chance of living outside the womb. In April, her doctors sought a court injunction to allow them to perform a "therapeutic abortion," that is, to end the pregnancy in order to save her life.

After a hard legal battle, on May 28 the Constitutional Commission of the Supreme Court of the Central American country sadistically denied her petition to allow an abortion. One day later, a decision in her favor was published by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights in San José, Costa Rica. Subsequently, Beatriz's long ordeal has come to an end: on Monday, June 3 doctors performed a Caesarean section which saved her life. The fetus did not survive. Since then, Beatriz's illness has continued, but the possibilities for her recovery have improved considerably.

If by this fortunate turn of events the worst has been avoided, Beatriz's case shed light on the grave problem of the ban on abortion, *in all circumstances*, that is in force today in El Salvador, as well as in other Latin American countries: Chile, Costa Rica, Honduras, Nicaragua and Peru. Abortion is only permitted in Cuba, Guyana, Puerto Rico, Uruguay and Mexico City. In the rest of the continent, abortion remains penalized in most cases, and is only permitted when it is determined that the fetus is gravely deformed or that the life of the mother is at risk. In the United States abortion is, for the time being, legal, but increasingly difficult to obtain.

Against the religious obscurantists and political reactionaries, as well as the timid bourgeois reformers – all of whom are enemies of women's rights – internationalist communists fight for the unrestricted right to *free abortion on demand*, at the sole decision of the woman. The legal prohibition of abortion is a sure indicator of the scale of the oppression suffered by women. It is no coincidence that the first country to legalize abortion was Soviet Russia, in 1920, as a result of the October Revolution.

Whether a woman gives birth should be her personal decision, and no one else's. The ultra-reactionary fathers of the Catholic church and bourgeois politicians of all stripes have no right to interfere. Although the right to abortion is a democratic right, it will not be made a reality for all women without a hard class struggle that is linked to the need to carry out a socialist

revolution that extends internationally.

The case of Beatriz brings up important political lessons in this respect. The president of El Salvador, Mauricio Funes, became Prime Minister under the banner of the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN), the former guerrilla organization in the bloody civil war that rent the Central American country in the 1970s and '80s which later became a bourgeois party. Funes himself was not an FMLN member, but a popular television host chosen in order to beat the ultra-reactionary ARENA, the party of the death squads, at the polls. But despite their leftist pretensions, neither Funes nor the FMLN defended Beatriz.

The Salvadoran government appeared “divided.” On one hand, the Public Health minister, María Isabel Rodríguez, and the Attorney for Human Rights timidly supported Beatriz’s petition to the Supreme Court. This way they could pose as defenders of women’s rights and leave the decision to a reactionary institution that would rule against Beatriz. On the other hand, the Institute of Legal Medicine denied Beatriz the possibility of an abortion, aiding the Supreme Court in delaying its verdict until Beatriz approached the third trimester of her pregnancy so as to put her life in greater danger. Above all, they did not want to disturb the government’s reactionary allies.

Mauricio Funes himself launched the cynical slogan “Beatriz is not alone” (*La Prensa Gráfica* [San Salvador], 13 May) without lifting a finger to help her. As Morena Herrera, president of the Agrupación Civil para la Despenalización del Aborto (Citizens Committee for the Decriminalization of Abortion) and a member of the Salvadoran Colectiva Feminista pointed out to *El Internacionalista*, “it was especially shocking that a supposedly ‘leftist’ government was in agreement with the most reactionary forces in the country and that it took no measures to save the life of Beatriz.” Even Funes’ declaration of solidarity was forced out of him when a picket of persistent protesters tried to approach the head of state, heavily guarded by dozens of soldiers, during the ceremonial opening of a new bridge.

In Nicaragua as well, the law that had allowed therapeutic abortion since 1893 was repealed in 2006 to prohibit abortion in all circumstances. The sponsor of this legislation was the conservative president at the time, Enrique Bolaños. But even more revolting was the role of the Sandinista Front for National Liberation (FSLN), another ex-guerrilla organization that took power in 1979 with the collapse of the bloody Somoza dictatorship, and which has now been born again (as in the case of its leader Daniel Ortega, who found religion after losing at the polls in 1989) as a bourgeois party. The FSLN congressional fraction voted for this measure against the fundamental rights of women, and now Ortega’s government administers the law.

Even a perceptive article in the *Christian Science Monitor* (30 May) in the U.S. noted that “Two of the three Central



**Protest outside the Supreme Court in San Salvador requesting a judicial order to permit an abortion in the case of Beatriz, 5 May 2013. The high court turned down the petition.**

American governments led by political parties that evolved from left-wing guerrilla movements”— the FMLN and FSLN — “are now hosts to the strictest abortion laws in the region.” The article comments that “when it comes to the reproductive rights of women, Latin America’s so-called revolutionary left is no different than the reactionary right — and sometimes worse.” Nevertheless, the reality is that both leftist groups were petty-bourgeois (and now bourgeois) nationalists and were never revolutionary communists like Farabundo Martí in the 1920s and '30s.

This fact underlines that the fight for free abortion on demand, as part of a universal, high-quality health care system, is not an issue for women alone. It requires the action of workers of both sexes and of all the oppressed against capitalism. In the U.S., for example, abortion was legalized in the early 1970s in part as a result of the emergence of a women’s movement, but also and above all due to the social unrest boiling up across the country following the uprisings against racism in the black ghettos and Latino barrios, a wave of combative strikes in the industrial centers and the struggle against the Vietnam War, which U.S. imperialism was losing.

The oppression of women will not be abolished by mere legislative reforms. For that it is necessary to put an end to its material basis: private property and the institution of the family that makes women into domestic slaves charged with the care of children. To liberate women from this heavy burden it will take a socialist revolution that socializes these family tasks. Thus we communists raise a working-class program for the liberation of poor and working women, with demands including:

- Free, 24-hour daycare centers;
- Equal pay for equal work;
- Separation of church and state;
- Unrestricted right to divorce;
- Full rights for homosexuals, and against interference of the state in consensual sexual relations;
- Abolition of all obstacles, legal or de facto, preventing



access to skilled jobs;

- Socialization of household work;
- Free, high-quality socialized medicine.

Feminists, on the other hand, concentrate on breaking the “glass ceiling” which makes it difficult for petty-bourgeois and bourgeois women to obtain the highest positions of leadership. This has brought us figures like Hillary Clinton, who as U.S. Secretary of State, along with President Barack Obama, has managed to impose the veil on Libyan women, and has sought to do the same in Syria by arming “moderate” Islamic fundamentalists. Meanwhile, access to abortion is increasingly subject to restrictions (many of them approved by Democratic Party legislators).

Bourgeois feminists are so focused on appealing to the capitalist rulers and their arbiters of official morality that the president of NARAL (which used to be called the National Abortion Rights Action League before it decided to drop the word “abortion” in favor of “choice”) launched an on-line petition asking *Pope Francis* to come to the aid of Beatriz! This is absurd and downright grotesque. The former Archbishop Bergoglio not only opposed the timid attempt in 2006 of the Argentine government to permit abortion in a few cases, in the 1970s, as head of the Jesuit order in Argentina he was complicit with the junta’s stealing of children of leftist political prisoners it murdered!

In El Salvador, the profound disdain for women’s rights on the part of the bourgeois rulers was made clear in the decision of the Supreme Court, which made itself perfectly clear: “This court holds that the rights of the mother cannot take precedence over those of the *naciturus*” (fetus). This is a *death sentence*. Thus it ruled that “there is an absolute impediment to authorizing an abortion in that it would contradict the constitutional protection to the human person ‘from the moment of conception’.”

What noble “pro-life” sentiments of these robed reactionaries who would condemn a woman to die in the name of the survival (which in this case was impossible) of the *naciturus*! They are true heirs of Salvadoran dictator Maximiliano Hernández Martínez, a theosophist who once declared that “it is a greater crime to kill an ant than a man,” and then proceeded to order the slaughter of 30,000 peasants in the 1932 communist uprising. In the United States, the anti-abortion movement includes a layer of terrorists who have murdered or attempted to murder more than two dozen abortion doctors and bombed or burned 183 clinics and offices in the name of their “pro-life” agenda (statistics from the National Abortion Federation).

The reactionary campaigns “in defense of life” have intensified in recent years. The case of Mexico is illustrative. In the Federal District (Mexico City) a limited reform was approved in 2007 which permits the termination of pregnancy during the first trimester (12 weeks) of pregnancy, but abortion itself is still considered a crime punishable by years of imprisonment. On top of this, in the states where the National Action Party (PAN, the heirs of the clerical-reactionary *cristero* revolt of the 1920s and the fascist *sinarquista* “golden shirt” squads of the 1930s) governs, legislatures in more than half the states of the country approved reactionary counter-reforms on the

pretext of “protecting life from the moment of conception.”

By 2009, for example, some 130 women had been tried and jailed for having had an abortion, declared guilty of “aggravated homicide.” One of the states where abortion was outlawed under any circumstances is Baja California. Nine years before the state legislature voted the new misogynist law, the state government prevented Paulina, a 13-year-old child who had been raped, from being able to put an end to her pregnancy even though she had a legal right to do so. The bishop and the governor himself intervened to browbeat her.

Moreover, at the same time as religious and civil authorities persecute women for seeking to terminate unwanted and even life-threatening pregnancies, companies employing large numbers of women workers in Mexico routinely fire pregnant employees. As we have pointed out before:

“[I]t is standard procedure for *maquiladora* operators all along the border to administer pregnancy tests to female job applicants as well as women employees, in order to escape from the provisions of Mexico’s labor code, which provides for three months paid maternity leave and protection of pregnant women from dangerous tasks.”

– *The Internationalist* No. 1 (January-February 1997)

We communists defend against the capitalists and their state both the right of women to abortion and to give birth to the children they desire.

The right to abortion is a democratic issue, but also a question of class. In Latin America, the total ban on abortion has resulted in a situation where it is carried out in precarious medical conditions, making what would otherwise be a rather simple medical procedure into a risky operation. This affects above all poor and working women, like Beatriz, who can’t pay for a weekend trip to Miami to have an abortion. In the particular case of El Salvador, women who have abortions, as well as the medical teams which administer them, can be jailed for up to 30 years.

Between 2000 and 2011, at least 129 women were accused and tried for abortion and for murder connected to abortion, of whom 22 are in jail today ([www.20minutos.es](http://www.20minutos.es)).

In a telephone conversation with *El Internacionalista*, Beatriz’s lawyer, Dennis Muñoz of the Citizens Group for Decriminalizing Abortion, noted that the decision of the Inter-American Human Rights Court is binding on the Salvadoran government. But given the multiple means for impeding or postponing the carrying out of the urgent medical treatment, Muñoz insisted, “we must not let up” and continue international protest.

Today the lives of dozens of Salvadoran women are endangered by a pregnancy whose termination the reactionary laws equate with first-degree homicide.

For that reason it is urgent to fight for the *complete decriminalization of abortion in every country of the hemisphere and the world*. The fight for free abortion on demand, carried out in the safest medical conditions in a system of quality medical care, available to all, links a series of elementary democratic tasks with the necessary struggle for socialist revolution. The case of Beatriz exemplifies the urgent need to advance on this road. ■

# Democrats and Republicans Against Women's Rights Portland: Class Struggle Picket Slams Right-Wing Anti-Abortion Rally



CSWP

Union militants confront anti-abortion bigots, Portland, Oregon, 17 January 2016.

## By Class Struggle Workers – Portland

*The following article is reprinted from Bridge City Militant No. 2, Winter 2016, published by Class Struggle Workers – Portland. The CSWP, an opposition tendency in the Portland, Oregon and Vancouver, Washington labor movement, is politically supported by the Internationalist Group.*

On Sunday, January 17, a group of 50 union activists picketed a “youth rally” held by Oregon Right to Life, an anti-abortion group that held a day of action nationally to “mourn” the anniversary of Roe v. Wade and attack women’s right to abortion. With a banner calling on labor to defend abortion rights, Class Struggle Workers – Portland led a determined picket with members of the Painters, Stagehands, Carpenters, Teachers, Teamsters, IWW, and Laborers unions participating, as well as members of Black Rose Anarchist Federation, Portland Solidarity Network and many others. The crowd picketed the entrances to the event, causing delays and confusion for attendees.

Event organizers and attendees were shaken by the unexpected militant opposition, as pro-abortion chants drowned

out their Jesus rock and soured their misogynist pizza party. They threatened to call the police, then tried shoving matches, and when that failed, resorted to juvenile taunts as they tried in vain to hide from the noisy protesters that surrounded the swank Pearl District catering facility.

Protesters chanted “Pro-life, your name’s a lie, you don’t care if women die” and “Not the church, not the state, women must decide their fate” as anti-abortion fanatics arriving from a rally held earlier in Pioneer Courthouse Square dodged the picket lines covering both entrances to the building.

Demonstrators chanted, “Racist, sexist, anti-gay, Christian fascists go away!” Organizers of the anti-abortion rally included Oregon Right to Life executive director Gayle Atteberry, prominent in the far right of the local Republican Party, and ORL president Harmony Dawes, well-known for her virulent anti-Semitism and support of her Holocaust denier uncle Ted Pike’s National Prayer Network. Dawes (formerly Grant) has several anti-Jewish articles published on fascist David Duke’s website.

As the presentation inside got underway, pickets moved



**It will take nothing short of workers revolution to free women from domestic slavery.**

to cover large windows through which participants could hear their chants and see their signs. Speakers at our counter-rally highlighted the danger women face from anti-abortion bigots, and pointed out the need for a workers revolution to overturn capitalism and liberate women.

An IWW member addressed the crowd: “For them, you are a baby factory, an incubator for the worker of tomorrow, who can be exploited by a boss, another body to keep replicating the system of profit, a system that keeps your boss living large and you from getting the services you need... We need a revolutionary organization.”

A member of Class Struggle Workers – Portland addressed the crowd, saying, “What does that mean for women when abortion is illegal? When there are no clinics? When you can’t get access? Women die every year from trying to self-terminate pregnancies because they can’t obtain a safe, legal abortion. We need a society that can collectivize all aspects of housework, of child-rearing, in order to truly liberate women. But in order to do that we need a working-class revolution, an international revolution.”

An Internationalist Group spokesman explained, “We’re calling on labor to defend the right to abortion, to defend the clinics, which are under attack by terrorist elements supported by some of the people in there.”

Union militants intend for the January 17 picket to be a beginning for organizing more solid and numerous labor-centered defense of abortion clinics. Speakers at the rally recalled the recent terrorist attacks on a Planned Parenthood clinic in Colorado Springs and the firebombing of a Pullman, Washington Planned Parenthood last September. CSWP picket signs called for “Free Abortion on Demand,” while speakers warned that the Democratic Party was no friend of working women. This party of bloody imperialist war supports restrictions on abortion access that make a mockery of the “right” to abortion for poor and working-class women. We need a class-struggle workers party to lead the fight for the emancipation of women, an essential part of the struggle for the emancipation of the working class. ■

## Why CSWP Says “Labor: Defend the Clinics!”

Point six of the Class Struggle Workers – Portland program states: “Fight sexism, defend the rights of women. For free, high-quality 24-hour child care. For full reproductive rights, including free abortion on demand as part of a socialized universal health care system. For labor defense of abortion clinics against reactionary terrorists....” And for us, program is not just some nice words, but a set of principles for action.

We are an opposition tendency in the trade unions, a tendency seeking to change the policy of the unions and to replace the current union leadership with one committed to the policy of class struggle. CSWP is not the only left opposition in the labor movement. But there is no other group in the Portland-area unions that is trying to get the unions to take a stand on the abortion question.

Most union lefts don’t draw the line in the unions on the right to abortion because it’s “divisive,” so in practice these not-so-radicals limit themselves to issues of “bread and butter” and “democracy.” Sure, so long as nothing serious is at stake, they will carry on about all sorts of “social justice.” But in pursuit of opportunist alliances and temporary popularity, they won’t fight the capitalist system and all the oppression it creates – oppression of women, blacks, immigrants, gays and lesbians, etc. In our epoch of decaying capitalism, however, if you can’t fight the capitalist system politically you can’t win any serious labor struggle.

At the January 17 picket, we chanted “Pro-life, your name’s a lie, you don’t care if women die.” It is often noted that the anti-abortion movement’s professed concern for the “life” of the fetus is simply a hypocritical ploy in their agenda to put the woman in her “place.” And while the religious bigots truly believe that they are marching under the banner of heaven, the oppression of women is not just a relic of biblical times. The drive to put women in their place, as incubators and house-slaves, comes from the capitalist system.

It is immensely beneficial to the bosses to keep half of the working class in that special place, tasked with doing most or all of the unpaid work that keeps the labor supply coming back to work from day to day and from generation to generation. So long as a woman, by reason of a pregnancy that she is not allowed to abort, can be condemned against her will to 20 or so years of this second shift, then you can forget about “equal rights.” And the bosses have even got some of the workers believing that this is the way things ought to be, that this arrangement is some kind of “human nature.”

It doesn’t have to be this way: oppression is not “human nature” but the product of a specific social order, the rule of capital. The fight against capitalism – the class struggle – is not just about wages and benefits. The class struggle includes the fight for the liberation of women: for the right of women to control their own bodies, for the socialization of “women’s work,” free child care, cooking, cleaning and laundry services. Likewise, the struggle for black liberation, including of doubly oppressed black women, is part of the class struggle.

With working-class women standing at the forefront of the class struggle, leading together with their male comrades, our class will become an unstoppable force. ■

# Italian Trotskyists on International Women's Day 2017

## Revolutionary Struggle for Women's Liberation

### Not (Capitalist) Welfare State Feminism



Andrew Medlin/AP

Twenty thousand march in Rome starting at the Colosseum on International Women's Day, 8 March 2017.

*This article is translated from L'internazionalista No. 2 (May 2017), the newspaper of the Nucleo Internazionalista d'Italia, section of the League for the Fourth International.*

International Women's Day, March 8, was from its inception in 1909 a proletarian day of struggle, initiated by socialists and born of the bitter strike and unionization struggles waged by women garment workers in New York City. A century ago this year, an uprising that began on International Women's Day brought down the Russian tsar and led to the October 1917 Bolshevik Revolution and the founding of the first workers state in history. Red October led not only to a vast expansion of the rights of women but to a planned economy that began to lay the basis for overcoming the material basis of women's oppression. It remains the beacon showing the way forward to achieve the emancipation of all the oppressed: **For women's liberation through socialist revolution!**

The "global women's strike" called by feminist groups this past March 8 had a very different character. This varied from country to country. In the United States, protests were marked above all by opposition to the Republican president and notorious sexist Donald Trump, as the Democratic Party hides behind

the screen of women's protests. Elsewhere in the world, there were marches and protests in more than 40 countries inspired by the Ni Una Menos (Not One Less) movement in Argentina, which organized mass protests in 2015 and 2016 following grisly gang rapes and murders of young women. This movement has been hailed by many on the left as the beginning of a new wave of radical feminism.

In Italy on March 8, the Casa delle Donne (House of Women) centers promoted demonstrations of over 20,000 marchers in Rome, 10,000 in Milano and thousands more in other major cities. In Rome, a number of leftist "rank-and-file" unions struck (USB, Cobas, SLAI-Cobas, etc.), as did the teachers union affiliated to the CGIL labor federation, and some mass transit shut down. Like the huge demonstration of over 100,000 protesters in the capital last November 26, the main focus was on individual "masculine violence against women," and the appeal was to the capitalist state. Non Una di Meno, affiliated with the Argentine Ni Una Menos, called on the United Nations and the European Court of Human Rights to protect women, and organized meetings with bourgeois women politicians.

Naturally, bourgeois forces sought to make the most of this.

The president of the Chamber of Deputies, Laura Boldrini, had the Italian flags at Montecitorio (the seat of parliament) lowered to half-mast; the ex-Forza Italia<sup>1</sup> president of the Republic, Sergio Mattarella, uttered pious words against violence against women; and the Democratic Party mayor of Milano declared that “pink quotients [of women] are no longer enough.” The police in Bologna even got in on the “anti-violence” act, organizing an initiative called “This is not love.” Nondasola (12 March), a web site associated with Non Una di Meno, wrote: “It is a serious responsibility of the state to put into play everything that is necessary to prevent, watch over and protect women from violence.”

Rather than putting forward a program for revolutionary struggle *against* the capitalist state – that machinery of the ruling class for the violent imposition of its rule on workers, women and all the oppressed – these feminists seek to *work with* the state. The platform of Non Una di Meno, “Eight Points for 8 March,” calls for a “self-determination income,” that is, a guaranteed income to enable women to escape from violent relationships, and “welfare for all, based on women’s needs, which frees them from the obligation to work more and more.”

When in the “Eight Points” they call for public schools to be “a crucial nexus to prevent and combat male violence against women,” and when they call to eradicate “misogynist, sexist, racist stereotypes” in the media, they spread the illusion that this could be realized under capitalism as a matter of education. How would that be done? Here is what they say: “We demand of the government immediate action to set up a Media Watchdog capable of intervening and preventing sexism in the media” (Non Una di Meno, “It’s Not (Just) the RAI,” 24 March). So they are calling on the government to exercise feminist censorship of the media! All of these calls look to the bourgeois state as a friend or ally, a partner of women rather than the main enemy.

In short, what the organizers seek is a kind of capitalist welfare-state feminism. While raising some correct and necessary demands, such as for free abortion on demand and an end to the “conscientious objector” clause in Law 194 (which allows doctors and hospitals to subvert the right to abortion), the platform places this in a purely bourgeois-democratic framework. Theirs is a utopian reformist and social-democratic program that would subordinate the struggle for women’s rights to the capitalist state, the biggest enemy of women. And it ignores basic economic demands which go beyond the limits of capitalism, including collectivization of housework, childcare and food service, which are crucial to liberating working women from all-sided social oppression.

Unsurprisingly, the welfare state feminists of Non Una di Meno are viscerally anti-communist, demanding that unions and parties not bring their symbols and banners on the marches (i.e., no red flags or hammers and sickles). But this hasn’t stopped opportunist left groups from hailing them. The Partito di Alternativa Comunista (PdAC, Communist Alternative Party, part of the international current of followers of the late Nahuel Moreno, the LIT) emphatically “welcomed” Non Una di Meno, although it called the leadership “feminist” and “reformist,” and considered the banner ban a “step backward.” But the Morenoites are themselves feminists and reformists, and class collaboration is

<sup>1</sup> “Go Italy,” the party of rightist former prime minister, media mogul and owner of the A.C. Milan football (soccer) team Silvio Berlusconi.

their stock-in-trade.

The Partito Comunista dei Lavoratori (PCL – Workers Communist Party, until now linked to Jorge Altamira’s Argentine Partido Obrero) adopts a slightly more left posture in the feminist framework. On the eve of last year’s demonstration in Rome against male violence, the PCL put out a declaration (21 November 2016) calling “For the construction of a radical, anti-capitalist and anti-clerical feminism.” Although their women comrades reportedly were undemocratically treated at a February 2-3 national meeting of Non Una di Meno, the PCL’s response was to issue a parallel “Eight Class Points for March 8,” trying to put a working-class veneer on feminism by adding calls for abolishing the Jobs Act (which has led to the spread of short-term employment contracts), restoring Article 18 (against mass layoffs) and the like.

In the media, the word “feminist” is often loosely used to refer to anyone who supports women’s rights – or who falsely claims to do so. But feminism is a political program, which by its very nature is *bourgeois*, as are all forms of “identity politics.” It is counterposed to the *revolutionary working-class* politics of Marxism. Posing gender as the fundamental dividing line in society – in some places underlining this by excluding males from March 8 protests, or ordering them to march at the back – it diverts the struggle from the source of women’s oppression, *capitalism*.

And this is true of all “feminisms.” Tacking a few “pro-worker” reform demands and the adjective “anti-capitalist” (or “proletarian” or “socialist”) onto a feminist program, even throwing in a reference to an eventual “radical transformation of society,” at most makes it a formula for reformist class collaboration. By focusing on demands to make capitalism more palatable, especially for certain layers of bourgeois and petty-bourgeois women, *feminism is counterposed to the genuine liberation of women, and of poor and working women in particular*.

The focus on what is being called “femicide” is not because women are murdered more often than men (the opposite is the case: the murder rate for men is more than twice as high as for women in Italy, five times as high in the U.S. and six times as high in Argentina). Nor has there been a sudden increase in murders of women (in Italy and the U.S. they have fallen in the last decade). On the other hand, one place where the murder rate – including notably of women – has gone up is in Mexico, where it more than doubled from 2005 to 2012. The reason is the deadly “war on drugs,” in which women have been wantonly mowed down by army, police and drug traffickers alike. Even so, men are *ten times* as likely as women to be murdered in Mexico.

The campaign about “femicide” is a feminist political choice. It focuses on one important aspect of women’s oppression where the direct oppressors *are* individual men, namely domestic violence. While far fewer women are murdered than men, women are more likely to be the victims of violent attacks, particularly in the home. But even at that level, the feminists have no real program to fight it. Calling the police against an abusive companion in Mexico could be suicidal, as police might well side with the perpetrator and have notoriously been implicated in sexual abuse, rapes and murders of women. For black people in the U.S., it often leads to police murder of the man, and sometimes of the female victim.

For similar reasons, women in anti-violence centers in Italy

don't want the police showing up there. The bourgeois courts that manage "family rights" can even take the children away from both mother and father to place them in foster care (as happened with a poor couple of Casale Monferrato, solely for being "too old"). The same "justice" system condemns the poor to life imprisonment and absolves the mega-thieves in coat and tie.

The locus and source of domestic violence is *the institution of the family*, the fundamental social unit of bourgeois society. But most feminists don't want to call for replacing the family, and these days are even leery of challenging "family values." For one thing, that means directly taking on the Catholic church, which is a prime perpetrator of women's oppression, for centuries counseling women to submit to abusive relationships. Yet the first Ni Una Menos demonstration in Argentina was not only endorsed by bourgeois politicians *but also by the Church*, the same clerical hierarchy (including the current Pope Francis) which covered for the military junta's theft of children of leftists it murdered. But most importantly the issue of domestic violence against women poses the need for a socialist revolution to provide the material basis for overcoming the economic dependence inherent in the family under capitalism.

Marxists fight for replacement of the family by socializing household tasks, child-rearing and food service. Feminists do not call for this. If they talk of a "patriarchal family" it is because they hold that "another family is possible," so to speak, an equitable, non-patriarchal family, just as the anti-globalization protesters declared "another world is possible" *under capitalism*. These are fatal illusions. Even such palliatives as the "self-determination income" (a/k/a "citizenship income" or guaranteed income such as is being talked about in the European parliament) is no answer. Like reformist schemes of "wages for housework," if implemented this would not only reinforce women's traditional roles and subjugation to household labor, but likely further remove women from social labor, *blocking* emancipation from domestic confinement.

### Capitalist Economic Crisis Takes Toll on Women

The world capitalist economic crisis has eroded the living conditions of working people in Italy and elsewhere, and increased the number of unemployed, poor and elderly people without economic resources, and the scarcity of health care. The bourgeoisie's decades-long policies of "blood and tears," of brutal "austerity" for the poor and working class and obscene enrichment for the bosses, has worsened since the onset of the depression in 2007-08. There have been cuts to pensions and welfare and increasing restrictions on the right to abortion. The progressive dismantling of the health-care system and social services means that most of the burden for the care of the infirm, elderly and children falls on the shoulders of women.



**Thousands of low-paid, on-call cafeteria and cleaning workers, mostly women, struck across Italy on 31 March 2017. To defeat outsourcing and win a real national contract requires united action by all workers in hospitals and universities, backed by industrial unions.**

When there are setbacks for the working class, women are hit the hardest. Childcare facilities have been reduced and are increasingly unaffordable. Unemployment is massive, especially for youth, but it is even worse for women, who are often the last hired and first fired. Wages have been lowered overall, and are even lower for women; pensions are increasingly hard to obtain, but this is even more difficult for women, especially given their greater family burdens; the Jobs Act together with other measures have made job insecurity almost universal, but it is worse for women. Women make up a disproportionate share of part-time workers, and are over half of those receiving "vouchers" (low-paying job "contracts" limited to a few hours).

Thus while female workers earn on average 17% less than their male counterparts for the same jobs, overall women make 42% less than men, because they make up a disproportionate share of involuntarily part-time workers who would like a full-time job. A significant number of them are single mothers, and many lost full-time jobs when they became pregnant: just in 2008-2009, some 800,000 mothers reported being fired after becoming pregnant. At the time of hiring, many are asked to sign resignations, to be activated in case of pregnancy. Or they are not hired at all. Meanwhile, divorce and litigation over alimony, child support or custody cause great tensions in families, especially the poorest. Moreover, domestic abuse increases sharply in times of economic distress. And then women pay the greatest price as victims of domestic violence.

How to resolve this is no mystery. In the 1930s Great Depression, Leon Trotsky put forward the demand for a *sliding scale of wages and hours*, to reduce the workweek with no loss in pay, to provide work for all. But this will not come through "enlightened" legislation in the bourgeois parliaments or amicable negotiation with employers. Even the modest reduction of the workweek in France from 39 to 35 hours (the Loi Aubry enacted in 2000) is now being undone as the profit-bloated bosses cry poverty. That

law hardly made a dent in mass unemployment, but slashing the workweek to 25 hours with no pay cut would be quite different. Naturally, the bosses oppose it: they need what Marx called a “reserve army of the unemployed,” to keep wages down.

Trotskyists also fight for *free, 24-hour childcare and laundries*; for *low-price, high-quality dining facilities* serving the poor and working people; for *massive programs of public works under workers control*; for *the right to public housing*, with adequate bedrooms for children; for *free, high-quality medical care* (socialized medicine) and *free mass transit*. Such demands are key to genuine liberation of working women. They point to a centrally planned, collectivized, socialist economy in which production is determined by social need, not profitability in the capitalist market. That is why such demands can only be won by hard class struggle leading to socialist revolution. That was the point of Trotsky’s 1938 Transitional Program, which we fight for today.

### **For Free Abortion on Demand – Eliminate the “Conscientious Objector” Clause**

The question of abortion is a key issue for women, and a lightning rod for the forces of reaction who would keep them in thrall.

The grim reality for working-class and oppressed women in Italy has fueled widespread anger and indignation over how the “conscientious objector” clause reportedly caused the death of 32-year-old Valentina Miluzzo at the Cannizzaro hospital in Catania, Sicily. Pregnant with twins, Valentina was at the hospital last October 15 with a high fever, pain and low blood pressure and was suffering a spontaneous abortion. In two interviews Valentina’s husband said, “That doctor told me that he was an objector and couldn’t intervene as long as there was life in those fetuses, he told me this while my wife screamed in pain. He said this to me and other people...” She died some hours later.

Over 70% of gynecologists and almost half of anesthetists and non-medical personnel are “conscientious objectors.” These figures are much higher in the south of Italy, while less than two-thirds of hospitals with gynecology departments nationwide provide any abortion service at all. The capacity of these medical “conscientious objectors” to overcome their “moral scruples” to practice abortions in private clinics for large sums of money is well known. In the 1970s this capacity earned them the name of “*cucchiai d’oro*” (golden spoons).

Hospital directors and others in positions of power in the health system are often chosen on a political basis under the patronage system. A key criterion is willingness to wage anti-abortion crusades. A highly visible example of this is Roberto Formigoni, president of the Lombardia region from 1995 to 2013 and also a leader of *Comunione e Liberazione* (Communion and Liberation, a major clerical-reactionary lobby). Formigoni’s CL followers at the Mangiagalli hospital in Milano persecuted doctors who performed abortions. This led to a long trial with criminal charges being brought against six doctors. The message was very clear: doctors and medical staff who refuse to declare themselves to be “conscientious objectors” can seriously risk their career, maybe their job, and could even end up in prison.

The present Law 194 which regulates abortion was approved in May 1978 in a tumultuous period when the working class was demonstrating some real social power and large parts of society

were in open revolt. The “conscientious objector” clause, along with other restrictions sharply limiting the right to abortion, were the result of the class-collaborationist betrayal of the Stalinists of the Communist Party (PCI). At the time, the PCI was supporting the government of Christian Democrat Giulio Andreotti. It also backed the “anti-terrorist” Reale Law that threw hundreds of leftist militants into prison, and called on PCI members to act as government spies. All of this was done in the name of its “Historic Compromise” with capitalism, which meant conciliation with the Christian Democrats, the Vatican and NATO. Women and many others are still paying the price of this betrayal.

Three years later, in 1981, the PCI opposed the referendum proposed by the bourgeois Radical Party that would have significantly extended access to abortion. Authentic Trotskyists called to vote “yes” but various feminists and the Lega Comunista Rivoluzionaria (present-day Sinistra Anti-Capitalista [Anti-Capitalist Left], Italian followers of the late Ernest Mandel), tailing after the PCI, opposed the referendum. In this country of the Vatican, the elementary principle of separation of church and state, raised by the bourgeois-democratic revolutions, is rejected by the constitution. The PCI of long-time Stalinist leader Palmiro Togliatti insisted that the infamous Lateran Treaty agreed to by Mussolini and Pope Pius XI in 1929 be incorporated into the constitution, thereby guaranteeing widespread privileges for the state religion, which still very much exist today.

The reality is that getting an abortion in Italy today is very difficult or impossible for working-class and poorer women and most minors. Those who can afford it can travel to Britain, but many others have died as a result of clandestine abortions that put their very lives at risk. We demand: ***Church out of the hospitals, schools and bedrooms! For complete separation of church and state! Down with the Lateran Treaty and the Concordat with the Vatican! Abolish the “conscientious objector” clause! For free abortion on demand!***

### **The Material Basis of Women’s Oppression ... and Liberation**

The utopian socialist Charles Fourier commented in the early 19th century that the level of progress of a society can be measured by the degree of freedom that women have in it. The struggle for women’s liberation is an integral and inseparable part of the struggle for socialist revolution. The defense of even basic democratic rights like abortion, childcare and maternity leave necessarily means a confrontation with the capitalist state and the entrenched power of the Vatican and requires a class-struggle mobilization. Only the overthrow of capitalism by workers revolution will guarantee these rights and lay the material basis for the full emancipation of women.

As Friedrich Engels wrote in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1883), the material roots of women’s oppression are inextricably linked to the early division of human society into classes. Women’s oppression began with the beginning of class society and private property, particularly with agriculture and the domestication of animals, when there was an accumulation of wealth for the first time. The new patriarchal families were economic units established in order to assure

*continued on page 82*

# The Italian Left and Abortion in Poland: A Case of Self-Amnestying Amnesia

*The following article is translated from L'internazionalista No. 2, May 2017, published by our comrades of the Nucleo Internazionalista d'Italia.*

The entire Italian left hailed the large-scale strike and protest by Polish women last October 3 against a bill that would have outlawed abortion in virtually all cases. The massive demonstrations brought hundreds of thousands into the streets in Warsaw and Lodz and effectively shut down a number of establishments. The clerical-reactionary Law and Justice Party (PiS) government backed off and the Sejm (Poland's parliament) overwhelmingly voted down the draconian legislation. But that still leaves in place the existing law, one of the most restrictive in Europe, which bans abortion except in the case of rape or incest, danger to the woman's life or severe fetal malformation.

The October 3 mobilization was an important, though limited, victory against attempts to further roll back women's rights. It was hardly radical: called by the petty-bourgeois "progressive" party Razem (Together), the protest only took off when it got the backing of the Christian Democrats of the Civic Platform of European Union president Donald Tusk, which ruled Poland from 2007 to 2015, and of the new liberal (conservative) bourgeois Modern Party.

But in hailing it, leftists around the world uniformly leave out an important fact: *up to 1990, Polish women had the right to abortion almost without restrictions* (a clause in the 1956 law permitting abortion if the woman faced "difficult living conditions" was increasingly liberally interpreted). The law was changed as part of the counterrevolution led by Solidarność (Solidarity), the anti-Communist "trade union" that was a vehicle for anti-Soviet Polish nationalism and Catholic reaction. The omission of this crucial fact is not accidental. It reflects the collective amnesia of the opportunist pseudo-socialists who supported Solidarność to the hilt.

Virtually the entire Italian left is responsible for having aided the abolition of Polish women's right to abortion. Their pious declarations today of support for women's rights are belied by that historic crime. Their silence about how abortion came to be banned in Poland is a self-amnesty.

How did this come about? After World War II, the supposedly "democratic" imperialists launched a Cold War against the Soviet Union, which had borne the brunt of the fighting and suffered the largest number of casualties (over 20 million), and whose Red Army smashed Hitler's Nazi regime. Representing the political continuity of the Bolsheviks under Lenin and Trotsky, the Fourth International defended the bureaucratically degenerated and deformed workers states of the Soviet bloc against imperialism and internal counterrevolution, while calling for proletarian political revolution to oust the Stalinist misleaders, as the League for the Fourth International likewise does today with the remaining deformed workers states, from China and North Korea to Vietnam and Cuba.

Some opportunists fled from the Trotskyist movement in the early stages of the Cold War, refusing to defend the Soviet Union and China during the Korean War that began in 1950. After the defeat of U.S. imperialism in Vietnam in 1975, following a brief period of "détente" the imperialist masters in Washington launched a new anti-Soviet offensive that culminated in the counterrevolution that from 1989 to 1992 swept through the Soviet bloc, ultimately leading to the overthrow of the USSR itself. The first front was in Afghanistan, where Soviet intervention in 1979 sought to prop up the government in Kabul that had been weakened by reactionary revolts against its modest reforms. Again the opportunists deserted.

In the West, social democrats and "Eurocommunists" and a host of pseudo-Trotskyists joined the imperialists in denouncing "Soviet aggression," although it was obvious at the time – and has since been definitively proven – that the CIA had poured money and arms into the country to instigate the revolt well before the Soviets intervened. Over the next decade Washington mounted its biggest clandestine operation in history, financing, arming and training Islamic fundamentalist *mujahedin*, including one Osama Bin Laden, to wage holy war against the "Communist infidels." While the Soviet-backed Afghan government extended education to girls, the U.S.-backed "holy warriors" shot teachers.

The authentic Trotskyists, then represented by the international Spartacist tendency, proclaimed "Hail Red Army in Afghanistan!" Soviet intervention was a rare progressive step by Moscow that could open the way to extending the gains of the October Revolution to the Afghan peoples as had occurred with Soviet Central Asia. But the Kremlin didn't want this intervention, which it saw forced on it by the CIA's intrigues, and eventually Mikhail Gorbachev pulled Soviet troops out in 1989. At that point we offered to send an international brigade to fight on the side of the Kabul regime against the U.S.-backed *mujahedin*. An Italian comrade was dispatched to Afghanistan to report on the struggle, highlighting the resistance of Afghan women.<sup>1</sup> But the offer was turned down.

A second hot spot of this Cold War II came in Poland, with the rise of Solidarność in 1980. By 1981 it had clearly come under imperialist control. Almost without exception, the left in the West flocked to the Solidarność banner. In Western Europe, social-democratic Cold Warriors and "Eurocommunists" (including Italian Communist Party leader Enrico Berlinguer) joined demonstrations with monarchists and fascists calling for "Solidarity with Solidarity." Against this, authentic Trotskyists pointed out that Lech Walesa's Solidarność was union-buster Ronald Reagan's favorite "union" and that it was financed by millions of CIA dollars funneled through the Vatican Bank and

<sup>1</sup> See "Front Line Afghanistan," *Workers Vanguard* No. 482, 21 July 1989, and also "Eyewitness Kabul: Afghan Women Fight for Their Lives," *Workers Vanguard* No. 477, 12 May 1989.



West German social democracy.

The Trotskyists, including the founders of the LFI and of the Nucleo Internazionalista d'Italia, showed that Solidarność was not really a workers union but an anti-Soviet Polish nationalist outfit, in which much of the membership consisted of landowning rich peasants (kulaks). We warned that Walesa sported a pin of the Black Virgin of Czestochowa, a key symbol of clerical nationalism in Poland, and was constantly spouting the words of the Polish pope Wojtyla, and that priest-ridden Solidarność was a threat to the right of abortion (see "Solidarność: A Man's World," *Women and Revolution* No. 24, Spring 1982). We called to put a stop to the counterrevolution being plotted by Walesa & Co., closely advised and financed by leading imperialist operatives.

So the results are in. Who was right? Which policy defended women and the interests of the working class?

In Afghanistan, by 1992 the imperialist-backed Islamists had won, the shaky Kabul regime, abandoned by the Soviets, fell, its leader hanged, women were forced back into the *burqa*, the head-to-toe veil with a screen to see out of that is like a moving prison cell, and education for girls was virtually abolished. In 2001, the U.S./NATO imperialists occupied the country, including with the participation of Italian troops. A decade and a half later, the occupiers are still there, in the guise of "advisors" and "contractors." In Poland, counterrevolution brought a sharp fall in living standards of working people; factories closed, including the Gdansk shipyards where Solidarność was born; and the right to abortion was largely abolished in 1990.<sup>2</sup>

In short: opportunists capitulate, imperialists and religious fundamentalists win, workers and women lose.

The responsibility for this is direct. The Gruppo Bolscevico-Leninista (GBL), which included founding members of the Partito Comunista dei Lavoratori (PCL), put out a leaflet in December 1981 headlined "Solidarity with Solidarność." The leaflet equated the Polish Stalinist leader Jaruzelski with the bloody dictator Pinochet in Chile. The GBL also condemned the intervention of the Soviet army in Afghanistan, even if it later came out against its withdrawal. The international current to which the Partito di Alternativa Comunista (PdAC) is affiliated, the LIT (International Workers League – followers of the late Argentine pseudo-Trotskyist Nahuel Moreno), went even further and hailed the Islamist *mujahedin* fighting the Soviets.

These two tendencies also stood with the forces of counterrevolution at the decisive moment when the fate of the Soviet Union was decided in 1991. And they're still at it. Both the PCL (until now followers of another Argentine pseudo-Trotskyist, Jorge Altamira) and PdAC originally supported the Islamist rebels in Libya, although the former got cold feet after NATO started bombing from Italian air bases. The PdAC had no such qualms, demanded the imperialists give heavy weapons to the Islamist gangs in Syria, and is defending the cutthroat *jihadis* that just got routed in Aleppo, Syria. In earlier incarnations, both propped up popular-front governments in Italy (including as they prepared for war on Serbia and passed anti-immigrant laws).

Meanwhile, both the Morenoite PdAC and the Altamiraite PCL refuse to defend the Chinese, North Korean and Vietnam-

ese deformed workers states against imperialism and internal counterrevolution. The Stalinist bureaucracies have permitted ominous capitalist inroads, but the actual restoration of bourgeois rule has not yet occurred. By echoing imperialist propaganda claiming these states are capitalist, the fake-Trotskyists are refusing to defend them, and thus help prepare the way for counterrevolution. The social gains of these revolutions were paid for with millions of lives, and as in all of East Europe, overturning them would be a body blow to women's rights.

As Trotsky wrote in his "Letter to the Workers of the USSR" (May 1940) on the eve of World War II: "It is the duty of revolutionists to defend tooth and nail every position gained by the working class, whether it involves democratic rights, wage scales, or so colossal a conquest of mankind as the nationalization of the means of production and planned economy. Those who are incapable of defending conquests already gained can never fight for new ones." For women, for workers, from Poland to Italy, in the 1980s and today, genuine Trotskyists stood and stand at their posts. ■

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<sup>2</sup> See "Smash Attacks on Abortion Rights!" *Women and Revolution* No. 38, Winter 1990-91.

## Italian Trotskyists...

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a certain line of descent to pass on wealth through inheritance. There was a division of labor in the family: men were the owners and women would do the childrearing and domestic chores and be the means of reproduction – hardly a free loving relationship.

Over the centuries, as the mode of production changed from slavery to serfdom to mercantile capitalism, the nature of the family changed. As a money economy spread, the formation of families became an economic transaction, with dowries and bride prices. Under industrial capitalism, the family ceased to be a unit of production and began to break down, especially among the proletarians. But it continues to be upheld as a standard today by reactionary forces seeking to foist stultifying bourgeois morality on the “lower orders.” Thus, even as women entered the workforce, engaging in social labor which represented an enormous step forward, they still bear the burden of domestic labor, the infamous “double shift” which drives many to distraction.

True emancipation of women is impossible in a society based on the oppressive institution of the family. The precondition for the liberation of women is replacing of the family as an economic unit with the socialization of domestic work. As Bolshevik leader Alexandra Kollontai wrote in “Communism and the Family” (1920):

“Instead of the working woman having to struggle with the cooking and spend her last free hours in the kitchen preparing dinner and supper, communist society will organize public restaurants and communal kitchens.... Communism liberates woman from her domestic slavery and makes her life richer and happier....

“The family is withering away not because it is being forcibly destroyed by the state, but because the family is ceasing to be a necessity.... In place of the old relationship between men and women, a new one is developing: a union of affection and comradeship, a union of two equal members of communist society, both of them free, both of them independent and both of them workers. No more domestic bondage for women. No more inequality within the family. No need for women to fear being left without support and with children to bring up.”

Today there is a widespread awareness that the oppression of women is not simply due to the individual attitudes of sexist men but is a social question that is deeply ingrained in society. Even so, a sectoralist view predominates in the Italian left that women must fight for women’s rights and minorities and gays and others for theirs. As a result of being marginalized in leftist organizations, many women feel it necessary to organize separately in order to fight against their oppression. This may be understandable, but it is inimical to genuine liberation for women, which requires the common struggle of all oppressed and working people.

In Italy, immigrant women are triply exploited and oppressed: as workers, as immigrants and as women. With the notable and honorable exception of the SI Cobas union, which has been fighting to organize bru-

tally exploited logistics and agricultural workers, nobody else on the left talks much about this. The Nucleo Internazionalista is the Italian section of the League for the Fourth International, which has concentrated much of its work in immigrant and minority milieus. Last August, a transitional organization of immigrant workers linked to the Internationalist Group, *Trabajadores Internacionales Clasistas* (Class Struggle International Workers), was formed in New York which included a section of its program titled “Women’s Liberation: Duty of All Workers”:

“March 8 is International Women’s Day, commemorating the deaths of over 100 immigrant women workers in the Triangle Shirtwaist factory fire in New York in 1911, which was the spark for the unionization of the garment industry. Women workers shoulder a double workday, on the job and both before and afterwards at home, where they are burdened with the responsibility for domestic labor in the family. They are constantly hounded by sexual harassment and unequal treatment. They are even denied control over their own bodies. *Trabajadores Internacionales Clasistas* fights for equal pay for equal work. Around the world, we fight for free abortion on demand, at the sole decision of the woman. We demand free, 24-hour child care. Along with machismo, homophobic prejudices are a weapon of the exploiting class: every class-conscious worker is duty-bound to defend the democratic rights of gays, lesbians, transgender people and all the oppressed.”

The fight for women’s liberation is an integral part of the class struggle. To lead this class struggle, a Leninist vanguard party of the proletariat must be built which can act as a “tribune of the people.” As Lenin wrote in *What Is To Be Done?* it must put itself at the head of and be the defender of all the oppressed and exploited. In a genuinely Leninist party the entire organization is mobilized to fight against women’s oppression. Only by fighting for the liberation of women, for genuine equal rights for gays and lesbians, for full citizenship rights for all immigrants with or without “papers,” can such a genuinely communist party lead the fight for workers power. ■

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