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Clara Zetkin in the lion's den - Workers' unity and feminism at the 1921 Comintern congress

Sunday 19 January 2014, by [RIDDELL John](#) (Date first published: 12 January 2014).

In 1921, when the Communist International (Comintern) held its Third World Congress, Clara Zetkin was the most widely respected Communist outside Russia. Yet she was the victim of vigorous efforts on the eve of the congress to vilify her and drive her out of the Comintern leadership, if not from the movement. Nonetheless, she ranks, together with Lenin and Trotsky, among the dominant intellectual figures at the congress.

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Let us survey Zetkin's role in the great ideological struggle at the Third Congress and then link it to her involvement in the movement for women's emancipation.

Zetkin had won a wide reputation as the main leader of the international socialist women's movement before 1914. She then became one of the most effective advocates of socialist internationalism during the war. She had helped to form the German Communist party and was among its most prominent leaders.

In early 1921, however, Zetkin's party had taken a sharp turn to ultraleftism. This was expressed above all in a failed attempt at general strike - the "March Action" - which the party conducted alone, without significant support outside its ranks. The most outspoken opponent of this adventure, Paul Levi, was expelled from the party in April, with the agreement of the Comintern leadership. Zetkin strongly opposed the party's ultraleft course and defended Levi. For this she was censured and would have been expelled, party leader Paul Frölich later told Lenin, except for objections from Moscow. [\[1\]](#)

A wall of rejection

Zetkin was isolated in her party, surrounded by what her biographer Louise Dornemann calls "a frigid wall of rejection, mistrust, and hostility," branded as an "opportunist" and "renegade." Zetkin

“felt herself dreadfully alone, as never before in her life.” [2]

Zetkin’s opponents organized to prevent her from influencing the World Congress, which was to convene in Moscow in June. Béla Kun, leader of the Comintern’s ultraleft wing, whom the Comintern had sent to Germany to help reorient the party there, wrote Lenin on May 6, 1921, warning him against Zetkin. “Levi and Zetkin are utter hysterics, and what they are saying in the German party right now consists of nothing but lying gossip,” he stated. Hysteria was then considered a chiefly female mental disorder, marked by faking symptoms of illness to achieve personal advantage. Kun continued: “As for the statements of the aged comrade Zetkin ... Despite all my sentimental feelings toward the old fighter ... the old woman is suffering from senile dementia. She provides a living proof that Lafargue and his wife acted entirely correctly.” Kun was referring to Marx’s daughter, the socialist leader Laura Lafargue and her husband, Paul. On reaching Zetkin’s age, Laura Lafargue had taken her life, convinced she had nothing further to offer the movement. [3]

Three weeks later, the German delegation to the World Congress sent Lenin a collective warning:

“There is absolutely no objective foundation for the consideration that is being given here to the person of Clara Zetkin in deciding the tactical and organisational issues linked to the March Action.”

“Any concession to the person of Comrade Clara Zetkin would severely damage the capacity for action and discipline of the Communist movement in Germany.” The Executive and the Russian delegation must “not show any sentimental consideration for the person of Clara Zetkin.” [4]

Sneak attack

The German party leaders delivered another attack on Zetkin at the Comintern women’s conference held just before the world congress, mobilizing Alexandra Kollontai and some other women leaders, with the aim of ousting Zetkin from her post as head of the Communist Women’s Movement. We have an account from Lenin, as related by Zetkin:

“Yesterday, at the women’s conference, you [Zetkin] were subjected to nothing less than a well-organised attack on you as the embodiment of the worst type of opportunism. And this was led by our good [Ernst] Reuter, who thus participated, for the first time as far as I know, in Communist work among women. That was simply stupid, quite stupid. Imagine: he thought he could rescue the theory of the offensive by launching a sneak attack on you at the women’s conference.”

Lenin then recounted how the “sneak attack” was prepared, Zetkin reported, making sarcastic remarks about “...great men busying themselves with backdoor and petty female politics.” [5]

“Petty female politics”: The belittlement of women through such turns of phrase was then deeply embedded in language. Thus Zetkin, in an article honouring Lenin, did not hesitate to attribute these words to him. In a similar vein, when Kollontai spoke out against Bolshevik policies in Russia, Leon Trotsky sarcastically called her an “Amazon”; Karl Radek termed her a “Valkyrie.” Elsewhere, Radek told the delegates, “[W]e are not hysterical women but men.” One of Zetkin’s supporters, the Polish Communist Adolf Warszawski, protesting the persistent attacks on her, caused an uproar by saying, “[Y]oung men sometimes behave like old women, and the only man in the German delegation is Comrade Zetkin.” [6]

Zetkin was not swayed by such talk. Later in the congress, she told her male comrades, “Thank heavens, we are not your ape-like imitators, not failed, inferior copies of you. We inject our distinctive intellectual and moral values, in both revolutionary struggle and revolutionary

construction.” [7]

Zetkin’s discussion with Lenin helped win the leading Russian Communists to support her critique of the disastrous “March Action” launched by Béla Kun and her party.

Leaders of the German delegation reacted strongly. Reuter, later the Cold War mayor of West Berlin, called for Zetkin to be expelled unless she recanted. Fritz Heckert blamed her for mobilizing the congress against the German party. Reuter’s biographer tells us that the the German delegation was embittered by Russian comrades’ rejection, adding:

“They placed the blame for this above all on the influence of Clara Zetkin over Lenin. She had reported to Lenin in detail about every aspect of the [March Action].” [8]

Vindication

But the congress rejected Reuter’s and Heckert’s arguments. In the end, Heckert was prevailed upon to deliver a glowing tribute to Zetkin, along with a bouquet of roses, in a an extraordinary celebration by the congress of her sixty-fourth birthday.

Zetkin did indeed present the congress with an indictment of the party leadership’s actions in a series of brilliant speeches, delivered in the teeth of aggressive heckling. She opposed confrontational assaults by a small vanguard and insisted on the need for Communists to win the broad masses of workers. That, in the end, became the dominant theme of the congress as a whole. Its decisions were a compromise, avoiding open condemnation of the German party leaders’ conduct. But the congress adopted the strategic outlook counterposed by Zetkin and Paul Levi to the errors of the March Action and championed at the Moscow gathering by Lenin and Trotsky, taking decisions that opened the road to adoption of the united front policy six months later. [9]

Winning ‘middle layers’

But Zetkin’s views on winning the masses to revolution went further than the congress decisions. Indeed, a close look at her statements suggest that she may well have been influenced by her experiences in the Communist Women’s Movement.

Take her proposed resolution on the March Action to her party’s Central Committee meeting on April 7, 1921. It stated:

“The Communist Party needs to maintain very close contact with the broad masses of proletarians and ... integrate into the struggle the most advanced forces from the middle layers between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. Decaying capitalism deprives these layers of security in the essentials and purpose of life. As a result, they come into increasing conflict with the bourgeois state.” [10]

This notion, distinctive in Zetkin’s strategic thinking, is rarely seen in other Communist statements of the time. She insists on the need to win middle layers outside the proletariat and pinpoints their grievances as lying not just in a lack of economic security but in a loss of ‘the purpose of life’. Could this concept be related to Zetkin’s experiences in work among women?

In 1921 Zetkin was head of the Comintern’s newly formed secretariat for work among women, which had been asked to organize an international structure of committees on the national, regional, and

local level. This structure was called, informally, the Communist Women's Movement; its journal bore the proud title, Communist Women's International. [11]

The early Communist International's work among women was directed by an outstanding array of women leaders, the Comintern's most resilient international team, most of whom later opposed the rise of Stalinism. These women have now been almost forgotten – "absented," as some say – except for Clara Zetkin, who is remembered mainly for her work in an earlier period. Zetkin's role in the Comintern is well documented in its Fourth Congress, which is now published, [12] as well as the Third Congress, which will go to the printer later this year.

Zetkin's ideas on the importance of women's role were far from universally accepted in the Communist movement. Even in the Comintern, Zetkin wrote in 1921, "leaders all too often underrate the importance" of the Communist women's movement, because "they see it as only 'women's business.'" [13]

Is there a special 'women's question'?

In addressing the Comintern, she tries to get around the prejudices of a sceptical milieu. Thus her Third Congress resolution on women states:

"It is a basic postulate of revolutionary Marxism that there is no 'special women's question'. For working women to join together with capitalist feminism weakens the struggle of the proletariat." [14]

Zetkin, like other Marxists of her time, used the word "feminism" only for the bourgeois wing of the movement. In this talk, I will use it with its current meaning: feminism is the struggle for women's liberation and against sexism. And if the word is understood in that sense, the Communist Women's Movement was indeed a large and effective international component of feminism, until it was sidelined by the rise of Stalinism.

Is there really, as Zetkin's resolution suggests, "no special women's question"? In the resolution just quoted, five sentences further down, she writes: "Women are doubly oppressed, by capitalism and by their dependency in family life." In a congress speech, she spoke of the dilemma facing bourgeois women who enter the job market. They must compete for the jobs with men. And, "as long as capitalism rules, the stronger sex will threaten to deprive the weaker of livelihood and the means of life." [15] That is unmistakably a reference to women's special oppression.

Indeed, Zetkin wrote about three different forms of capitalist servitude – exploitation, alienation, and oppression – an approach far from universal among Marxists even today. Consistent with this view, she held that Communists should appeal to all women of all classes. Zetkin "wanted to win not only women [industrial] workers, but women who were office employees, peasants, civil servants, intellectuals," writes biographer Gilbert Badia. "She favoured appealing to Social Democratic women, setting aside invective in order to win a hearing."¹⁴ Zetkin spoke in this vein to the Fourth Comintern congress in 1922:

"Thus female employees, especially intellectuals such as teachers and office workers of various types, are growing rebellious.... [M]ore and more housewives, including bourgeois housewives, are awakening to a recognition that present conditions – the continued existence of capitalism – are incompatible with their most basic interests in life. Comrades, brothers and sisters, we have to utilise the ferment." [16]

In this spirit, when Zetkin assessed non-proletarian women's rights gatherings, she highlighted points of agreement that could be utilized for common action.

Working class: an inclusive approach

Zetkin's inclusive approach is reflected in her descriptions of the working class. Here is a short passage – a found poem – in an article from Communist Women's International, which she edited:

"Those who reap the crops and bake the bread are hungry.

Those who weave and sew cannot clothe their bodies.

Those who create the nourishing foundation of all culture waste away, deprived of knowledge and beauty." [17]

To my ear, what she says is influenced by a feminist vantage point. In the same spirit, Zetkin and others of her team often use a distinctive term to describe working people: die Schaffenden – a word whose German meaning combines "produce" and "create." [18]

Zetkin applied this approach to the task of building broad unity against fascism, for which she was the reporter at a 1923 Comintern conference. Addressing a united-front anti-fascist conference that year, Zetkin explained that "broad layers of petty bourgeois and intellectuals have lost the conditions of life of the pre-war period. They are not proletarianized but pauperized." Their hopes in capitalist democracy have been betrayed; it no longer produces reforms. But the proletariat offers them a road forward, because "only revolutionary class struggle wins reforms." [19]

Marxism and feminism

There is a common theme in these statements: Zetkin is charting a path along which the revolutionary proletariat can win social hegemony, leading a broad coalition of workers, farmers, women, and all victims of capitalist alienation, exploitation, and oppression. In German Communist movement at that time, she is the figure who argues for this approach most clearly and strongly – in a more rounded way than Paul Levi, for example.

It seems likely that her vision on this point was related to her combined engagement with Marxism and what we today call feminism. For Zetkin, support of women's emancipation is inherent in Marxism. But her texts suggest that her engagement with feminism informs and expands her Marxism, leading to an inclusive approach, a deep understanding of oppression and alienation and of alliances with the oppressed.

Despite Zetkin's rejection of "feminism" as a bourgeois notion, an analysis of her work suggests no support for the notion of Marxism as the stern father and feminism the wayward daughter. Some feminist thought is wrong-headed and retrograde, to be sure, but that is true of Marxism as well. However much one may prioritize Marxism as the principle framework for revolutionary thought, one must approach feminism in learning mode.

Marxism will be tested by its ability to link up with and learn from feminism. Moreover, this relationship is not unique. The goal of Marxism must be to join with and learn from every school of non-Marxist revolutionary thought and action. This, it seems to me, is the deeper lesson of Zetkin's thought during the Comintern's early years.

P.S.

* <http://johnriddell.wordpress.com/2014/01/12/clara-zetkin-in-the-lions-den/>

* This working paper was presented to the Historical Materialism conference in London, November 8, 2013. All the Third-Congress related quotations in this article will be included in the first English-language edition of its proceedings, *To the Masses*, edited by John Riddell, to be published in 2014 by Brill for Historical Materialism Book Series. The 1,300-page edition will include 35 appendices publishing related source material, mostly previously unavailable unpublished in English.

Footnotes

[1] Ruth Stoljarowa and Peter Schmalfluss, eds. 1990, *Briefe Deutscher an Lenin 1917-1923*, pp. 236-7.

[2] Louise Dornemann, *Clara Zetkin: Leben und Wirken*, Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1973, p. 423.

[3] Babichenko, L.G., Ia.S. Drabkin, and K.K. Shirinia 1998, *Komintern i ideia mirovoi revoliutsii*, Moscow: Nauka, pp. 266-9.

[4] Stoljarova and Schmalfluss 1990, pp. 264-6.

[5] Zetkin 1985, *Erinnerungen an Lenin*, Berlin: Dietz Verlag, pp. 32-53.

[6] Comintern 1921, *Protokoll des III. Kongresses der Kommunistischen Internationale*, Hamburg: Verlag der Kommunistischen Internationale, pp. 785, 520, and 220.

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 922.

[8] Comintern 1921, pp. 306, 542; Brandt, Willi and Richard Lowenthal 1957, *Ernst Reuter, ein Leben für die Freiheit*, Munich: Kindler, p. 169.

[9] See on ESSF (article 22639), "[Clara Zetkin's struggle for the united front](#)".

[10] *Sowjet: Kommunistische Zeitschrift*, 3, no. 1, pp. 4-9.

[11] See on ESSF (article 22640), "[The Communist Women's Movement \(1921-26\)](#)".

[12] John Riddell, ed. 2012, *Toward the United Front*, Chicago: Haymarket.

[13] *Kommunistische Fraueninternationale (KFI)*, 1, no. 2-3 (1921), p. 55.

[14] Alan Adler, ed. 1980, *Theses, Resolutions, and Manifestos of the First Four Congresses of the Third International*, London: Ink Links, p. 152.

[15] Comintern 1922, III Vsemirnyy congress Kommunistischeskogo Internationala, Petersburg, 1922, p. 912.

[16] Gilbert Badia 1993, Clara Zetkin, féministe sans frontières, Paris : Éditions ouvrières, p. 256.

[17] Riddell 2012, p. 847.

[18] KFI, vol. 2 (1922), no. 5-6, p. 519.

17. Zetkin stated the meaning of die Schaffenden to be: "All those whose labour, be it with hand or brain, increase the material and cultural heritage of humankind, without exploiting the labour of others." (From a speech to the German Reichstag (parliament), March 7, 1923, published that year by the KPD and quoted in Tânia Puschnerat 2003, Clara Zetkin: Bürgerlichkeit und Marxismus, Essen: Klartext Verlag, p. 346.) It should be noted that the concept of the Schaffenden was also used, for a different purpose, by some reformist opponents of Communism.

[19] Clara Zetkin, "Kampf gegen den internationalen Faschismus," in Internationale Presse-Korrespondenz, no. 52 (1923), p. 418.