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Clara Zetkin : oppression, class, and socialism - A comment on John Riddell's article

dimanche 19 janvier 2014, par [GERMAN Lindsey](#) (Date de rédaction antérieure : 18 janvier 2014).

Among the responses to my article, "[Clara Zetkin in the lion's den - Workers' unity and feminism at the 1921 Comintern congress](#)," [1] the following comment by Lindsey German is of particular interest. Lindsey is a London-based activist and writer for socialism and women's liberation. She is a frequent contributor to Counterfire.org and is the author of "Women's liberation : a class perspective." My reply will follow. [2]

John Riddell

Your article is, as ever, informative and fascinating about the treatment of Clara Zetkin at the Third Congress of the Comintern, and about her determination to fight against the ultra left folly of the March Action. Zetkin was a principled Marxist all her life, courageous enough to be one of a handful from German Social Democracy who opposed imperialist war in 1914, and a committed campaigner against women's oppression.

I agree too that her work over decades in organising women would clearly have informed her general politics. She understood that there had to be special ways of organising women, whether they were part of the SPD and later KPD, or whether they were more distant from organised socialist politics, but who nonetheless faced issues of oppression of exploitation which they could organise round.

However, I felt that the concluding part of your piece ignored Zetkin's important contribution to debate on socialism and feminism. You quote her as saying 'for working women to join together with capitalist feminism weakens the struggle of the proletariat', but say she only used this word to describe the bourgeois wing of the movement. Her term *Frauenrechtlerinnen* wasn't just applied to bourgeois feminists, however ; she engaged in polemics with a wide range of what today would be called feminists, and was extremely critical of any strategy which ignored the question of class and which claimed there was a common interest of women across all classes.

That is why she wrote 'What the Women Owe to Karl Marx' in *Die Gleichheit* in 1903 to mark the 20th anniversary of his death, when she described historical materialism as bursting 'like so many

scintillating soap bubbles' the idea of sisterhood between women of all classes. Or, a few years later :

"Therefore, our Socialist women oppose strongly the bourgeois women righters' credo that the women of all classes must gather into an unpolitical, neutral movement striving exclusively for women's rights.

"In theory and practice they maintain the conviction that the class antagonisms are much more powerful, effective and decisive than the social antagonisms between the sexes, and that thus the working-class women will never win their full emancipation in a struggle of all women without difference of class against the social monopolies of the male sex, but only in the class-war of all the exploited, without difference of sex, against all who exploit, without difference of sex.

"That does not mean at all that they undervalue the importance of the political emancipation of the female sex. On the contrary, they employ much more energy than the German women-righters to conquer the suffrage. But the vote is, according to their views, not the last word and term of their aspirations, but only a weapon—a means in struggle for a revolutionary aim—the Socialistic order."
-Clara Zetkin, *Justice*, 9 October 1909, p. 7.

The term feminist has very different connotations today, and many feminists are opposed to many aspects of capitalism and some to capitalism per se. It would be wrong both theoretically and practically for socialists to create barriers to working with feminists, or to pretend that they somehow have the interests of the bourgeoisie at heart, or to say that we can't learn from them. There is no doubt that 1960s feminism put major issues on the political agenda which have still not been resolved and with which socialists and feminists still grapple.

But there are many different feminisms. Can we deny that bourgeois feminism still exists, and that its spokeswomen have been, as Hester Eisenstein says, seduced by capitalism and imperialism, and that it is bitterly opposed to socialism and genuine women's liberation ? What about the women who talk about glass ceilings but ignore their sisters (and brothers) who are seeing the floor give way beneath them ? There are plenty of women in finance, media, the legal system and politics whose commitment to feminism is about more people like them in high places.

Isn't the relationship between class and oppression central, even if we don't always agree on definitions or solutions ? I agree that when Zetkin says that there is 'no special women's question' she isn't denying oppression but she surely is saying that the fate of women's liberation is inextricably linked with that of socialism.

Lindsey German

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<http://johnriddell.wordpress.com/2014/01/18/clara-zetkin-oppression-class-and-socialism-by-lindsey-german/>

Notes

[1] See on ESSF article 30875, "[Clara Zetkin in the lion's den – Workers' unity and feminism at the 1921 Comintern congress](#)".

[2] Click here for other responses :

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