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1910-1920s : Reading Clara Zetkin in context - On Women's struggles and Lindsey German's comment

vendredi 7 février 2014, par [RIDDELL John](#) (Date de rédaction antérieure : 6 février 2014).

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Thanks to Lindsey German for her constructive comment, Clara Zetkin : oppression, class, and socialism. She has provided useful documentation of Zetkin's views on socialism and feminism from the years before World War [1].

Reading these quotations, it seems to me that some of Zetkin's opinions can be better understood as a description of conditions at the time of writing rather than as an instruction valid for all times.

Summarizing Zetkin's view, German says, "[S]he surely is saying that the fate of women's liberation is inextricably linked with that of socialism." That is certainly a good distillation of Zetkin's core beliefs and also the position of all Marxists.

Elsewhere, German says that Zetkin "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." Certainly she is right that the question of class must not be ignored. As for her denial of a "common interest of women across all classes," however, that is a more complex question.

Women's universal oppression

German affirms the existence of women's oppression. She will therefore also agree, I believe, that this oppression bears down on all women, and in this respect they have a "common interest." Of course, this oppression weighs most heavily on working-class, poor, and racialized women, while for highly privileged women it is commonly outweighed by capitalist class privilege. But sexism is endemic in the ruling class as well as elsewhere in capitalist society, and highly privileged women are not exempt from its effects.

Zetkin believed that communists could find common ground with some privileged women in opposing women's oppression. In my article, Clara Zetkin in the Lion's Den (to which Lindsey was replying), I quoted two of her statements on this theme from 1921. "Women are doubly oppressed, by capitalism and by their dependency in family life," she wrote. In a congress speech, she spoke of the dilemma facing privileged 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.”

Reaching out to middle layers

Zetkin’s writings of 1921 show a consistent emphasis toward reaching out to “middle layers” between the capitalist and working classes. If this concept is not so prominent in her pre-1914 writings, that may be because objective conditions were different then.

Before 1914, the majority of German working-class forces were united in a political party and allied trade unions that were committed to the goal of revolutionary socialism. Rightist forces in these movements pulled in a different direction, but Zetkin and her comrades still hoped this conservative tendency could be overcome. Efforts for women’s liberation, in that period, were sharply polarized between forces within the workers’ movement and those in the counterposed “bourgeois” world. Conditions for socialist revolution seemed ripe, and most women in the working-class movement sought liberation along that path.

After 1914, however, the main Social Democratic and trade union leaderships entered in alliance with the capitalists to block socialism. In Russia, women won a historic victory through socialist revolution, very much in the manner that Zetkin had advocated. Elsewhere, however, the working-class upsurge was defeated and capitalism regained its footing. Women won gains there too, although not on the same scale as in Russia. These included (in many countries) the right to vote, won largely through their own efforts.

Women and the united front

Revolutionary (Communist) forces were now supported by only a minority of workers. The majority were on a middle ground : even if privileged and highly skilled, they were still part of the working-class, but their political parties and unions were tied to capitalism. In 1921, Communists in Germany began to reach out to workers in these pro-capitalist movements, seeking to win them to a common struggle around immediate demands - what soon became known as the “united front policy.” Zetkin did the same in the arena of work among women, while also helping to drive forward the united-front process as a whole.

The statements by Zetkin in 1921 that I quoted reflect this effort to win forces in the middle layers between the communist vanguard and the capitalist class.

By the time that I became a Marxist, in the late 1950s, the situation was transformed once again. In the Stalin era, the official Communist movement had abandoned the goals of socialist revolution and women’s liberation alike. In the 1960s, here in Canada in many other countries, a militant and powerful women’s liberation movement took shape, but it could not count on the support of any powerful working-class or socialist forces.

In these conditions, very different from the pre-1914 period, the women’s movement had no alternative but to stand on its own. Its separateness signified, above all, independence in action from the ruling class and its servants. The movement won significant gains and dealt heavy blows to sexism.

Some Marxists at that time insisted that only a proletarian women’s movement was worthy of support. But this, in fact, was merely an excuse for abstention from the struggle.

Today, the shape of the women's liberation movement has changed profoundly once again.

Throughout this entire varied evolution, some principles asserted by Zetkin hold true in all conditions. This is true of her commitment to the interlocked goals of women's liberation and socialism, evident in everything she wrote. But when she writes about the dichotomy between working-class and bourgeois women's struggles and of the futility of a separate struggle for women's rights, this should be understood in the context of the time in which she wrote.

John Riddell, February 6, 2014

P.-S.

* <http://johnriddell.wordpress.com/2014/02/06/reading-zetkin-in-context/>

Notes

[1] See on ESSF (article 30876), [Clara Zetkin : oppression, class, and socialism - A comment on John Riddell's article.](#)