

Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières > English > Europe, Great Britain > Eastern Europe & Russian Federation > USSR, Soviet Bloc, Russian Empire (history) > History (Russian Empire, USSR) > Russian Revolution > Clara Zetkin > **Only in Conjunction With the Proletarian Woman Will Socialism Be Victorious**

Only in Conjunction With the Proletarian Woman Will Socialism Be Victorious

lundi 10 mars 2014, par [ZETKIN Clara](#) (Date de rédaction antérieure : 16 octobre 1896).

Speech at the Party Congress of the Social Democratic Party of Germany, Gotha, October 16th, 1896. Berlin.

The investigations of Bachofen, Morgan 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 women's 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 women's 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-capitalistic 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 women's 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 stood in opposition to their most basic interests. It was from this moment on that there existed the modern women's question. Here are a few statistics to demonstrate how the modern mode of production works to make the women's 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 women's question than any highfalutin declamations.

The women's question, however, is only present within those classes of society who are themselves the products of the capitalist mode of production. Thus it is that we find no women's question in peasant circles that possess a natural (although severely curtailed and punctured) economy. But we certainly find a women's question within those classes of society who are the very children of the modern mode of production. There is a women's question for the women of the proletariat, the bourgeoisie, the intelligentsia and the Upper Ten Thousand. 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. (Bravo !) 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 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 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 (How accurate !) 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. 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 petit-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 petit-bourgeoisie are hurtling further and further towards their destruction. Within the bourgeois intelligentsia, another circumstance leads to the worsening of the living conditions : capitalism needs the intelligent and scientifically trained work force. 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 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 untrammelled 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. 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, 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 women's 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 !) 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 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 shortsighted. 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 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 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 ? (Amusement.)

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. (*Very accurate !*) The book pointed out for the first time the connection between the women's 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 ! (*Very true !*) 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 until 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 the cottage industry 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. All the more necessary is it for female workers to obtain a legally fixed workday. Whereas in England everybody agrees that the elimination of the 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. The complete freedom to form coalitions, which has been legally guaranteed to the female workers by the Empire's legislation, has been rendered illusory by the laws of individual federal states. I do not even want to discuss the manner in which the right to form unions is handled in Saxony (as far as one can even speak of a right there). But in the two largest federal states, in Bavaria and Prussia, the union laws are handled in such a way that women's participation in trade union organizations is becoming more and more of an impossibility. Most recently in Prussia, the district of the "liberal," eternal candidate for minister, Herr von Bennigsen has achieved everything humanly possible in the interpretation of the Law of Unionization and Assemblage. In Bavaria all women are excluded from public meetings. In the Chamber there, Herr von Freilitzsch declared very openly that in the handling of the law of unionization not only the text but also the intention of the legislators should be taken into account. Herr von Freilitzsch is in the most fortunate position to know exactly what were the intentions of the legislators, all of whom have since died, before Bavaria became more lucky than anybody could have imagined in their wildest dreams, by appointing Herr von Freilitzsch as her minister of police. That

does not surprise me at all, because whoever receives an office from God also receives concomitantly intelligence, and in our Age of Spiritualism, Herr von Freilitzsch has thus obtained his official intelligence and by way of the fourth dimension has discovered the intentions of the long deceased legislators. (Amusement.)

This situation, however, does not make it possible for the proletarian women to organize themselves together with men. Until now they 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 the cottage industry, for shorter working hours and, above all, against what the ruling classes like to call the right to organize.

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 do 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. This proposal is not new ; it was adopted in principle at the Party Congress of Frankfurt, and in a few regions it has been enacted most successfully. Time will tell whether this proposal, when introduced on a larger scale, is suited to draw proletarian women to a greater extent into the proletarian movement.

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. Indeed, it must certainly not be the task of Socialist propaganda among Socialist women to alienate the proletarian woman from her duties as mother and wife. On the contrary, she must be encouraged to carry out these tasks better than ever in the interests of the liberation of the proletariat. The better the conditions within her family, the better her effectiveness at home, the more she will be capable of fighting. The more she can serve as the educator and molder of her children, the better she will be able to enlighten them so that they may continue to fight on like we did, with the same enthusiasm and willingness to sacrifice for the liberation of the proletariat. When a proletarian then exclaims : "My wife !" he will add mentally, "Comrade of my ideals, companion of my battles, mother of my children for future battles." Many a mother and many a wife who fills her husband and children with class consciousness accomplishes just as much as the female comrades that we see at our meetings. (Vivid agreement).

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. For such a campaign, I suggest the distribution of pamphlets and I do not mean the traditional pamphlet on which the entire Socialist program and the entire scientific knowledge of our century are condensed on one quarto page. No, we must use small pamphlets which discuss a single practical question from one angle of vision, especially from the point of view of the class struggle, which is the main task. And we must not assume a nonchalant attitude toward the technical production of pamphlets. We must not use, as is our tradition, the worst paper and the worst type of printing. Such a miserable pamphlet will be crumpled up and thrown away by the proletarian woman who does not have the same respect for the printed word that the male proletarian possesses. We must imitate the American and English teetotallers who put out pretty little booklets of four to six pages. Because even a female proletarian is enough of a woman to say to herself : "This little thing is just charming. I will have to pick it up and keep it !" (Much amusement and many cheers.) The sentences which really count must be printed in great big letters. Then the proletarian woman will not be frightened away from reading and her mental attention will be stimulated.

Because of my personal experiences, I cannot advocate the plan of founding a special newspaper for women. My personal experiences are not based upon my position as the editor of *Gleichheit* (which is not designed for the mass of women, but rather their progressive avant-guard), but as a distributor of literature among female workers. Stimulated by the actions of Frau Gnauck-Kuhne, I distributed newspapers for weeks at a certain factory. I became convinced that the women there did not acquire from these papers what is enlightening, but solely what is entertaining and amusing. Therefore, the big sacrifices which are necessary in order to publish a cheap newspaper would not be worth it.

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. Except for the powerful brochure of Frau Popp, we do not have a single one that comes up to the requirements we need. Our daily press, too, must do more than it has done heretofore. Some daily newspapers have made the attempt to enlighten women by the addition of special supplements for women. The *Magdeburger Volksstimme* set an example in this endeavor and Comrade Goldstein at Zwickau has skillfully and successfully emulated it. But until now the daily press has regarded the proletarian woman as a subscriber, flattering her ignorance, her bad and unformed taste, rather than trying to enlighten her.

I repeat that I am only throwing out suggestions for your consideration. 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.

Only a Socialist society will solve the conflict that is nowadays produced by the professional activity of women. Once the family as an economic unit will vanish and its place will be taken by the family as a moral unit, the woman will become an equally entitled, equally creative, equally goal-oriented, forward-stepping companion of her husband ; her individuality will flourish while at the same time, she will fulfill her task as wife and mother to the highest degree possible.

P.-S.

* <http://www.marxists.org/archive/zetkin/1896/10/women.htm>

* Published : Clara Zetkin : Selected Writings, ed. by Philip Foner, trans. by Kai Schoenhals, International Publishers, 1984.

* Transcribed : for marxists.org in August, 2002.