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Reading Zetkin: What strategy for women's liberation?

Monday 10 March 2014, by [RIDDELL John](#) (Date first published: 9 March 2014).

In a recent comment to this blog, Tad Tietze defines Clara Zetkin's approach to women's oppression as marked by "consistent method, flexible application." [1] To portray this approach, he offers us an important speech by Zetkin to a convention of German socialists in 1896 [2]. In my view, Zetkin's address is a classic of Marxism, worth careful study, but does not offer us a satisfactory strategy for the women's liberation struggle today.

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Tad's comment was written as a response to views I expressed in "Reading Zetkin in Context," [3] an article that, he says, left him "unconvinced." However, aside from comments on feminism in the 1960s, Tad does not explain the substance of his disagreement. So I will limit myself to the issues raised in Tad's text and the Zetkin article that he recommends.

Tad tells us that the focus of Clara Zetkin, an outstanding German Marxist and collaborator of Rosa Luxemburg and V.I. Lenin, was "always how to go beyond mere political emancipation to social emancipation" and to examine "how the totality of capitalist social relations affects legal, political and social aspects of oppression."

Lindsey German also expressed this thought in her earlier contribution to this exchange [4]. Zetkin's thought, Lindsey says, is that "the fate of women's liberation is inextricably linked to that of socialism."

Without any doubt, that is a basic tenet of Marxism, which Tad, Lindsey, and I all expressed in our contributions.

Three strategic issues

Linking women's liberation to socialism, however, does not explain what women should do to achieve freedom. Here are three questions it leaves unanswered:

1. Will women's liberation be an automatic by-product of socialist transformation, or will it require a specific and conscious struggle to break the chains that bind women?
2. Will women play a special role as protagonists of their liberation, or can they leave this to be achieved by the broad movement of the entire working class?

3. If a struggle for women's liberation is needed, must it be waged now, or only when the revolution comes, or perhaps only after the revolution wins out?

Clearly, it is quite possible to defend the general concept that women's liberation is linked to socialism without advocating that women struggle for their liberation today. "Women's demands must await the revolution" - "Women should struggle only on issues affecting the entire working class" - "Women should be patient; socialism will soon resolve their problems": all these views are plausible interpretations of the link between women's liberation and socialism.

Indeed, when Stalinism carried out a counterrevolution against women's liberation in the 1930s, this was buttressed with affirmations that women's emancipation will be met through socialism.

But Clara Zetkin, in her 1896 speech to a convention of the Social-Democratic Party of Germany (SPD), did not merely link women's emancipation with socialism. She presented an analysis of women's position in terms of class relations of her time and a strategy to guide them to liberation.

Zetkin's speech is her best-known strategic appraisal of the road to women's liberation - justly "celebrated," as Tad says. It offers rich insights into the way class antagonisms and capitalist exploitation shape the overall course of women's emancipation as well as class and gender relations of her time. For example, Zetkin identifies forms of oppression suffered by women of the ruling class and intelligentsia with sympathy and perception.

Moreover, her speech is the only such text in Philip Foner's book of Zetkin's writings, still the sole collection of her writings available in English (Clara Zetkin: Selected Writings, New York: International Publishers, 1984). It is not surprising that many Marxists have sought to draw practical lessons from this speech.

Zetkin's strategic focus: the SPD of 1896

The heart of Zetkin's speech is the presentation of a strategic line of march based on support for her party, the Social-Democratic Party of Germany (SPD). After analyzing the contrasting responses to oppression by women of different social classes, she calls on women to join in building the socialist movement as the vehicle for their liberation. Her position is well summarized in this brief paragraph:

"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." (Speech to SPD party congress in Gotha, 1896 [5])

By the "minimal program of our party," Zetkin was presumably referring to the 14 immediate demands contained in the "Erfurt program" of the SPD. Only one of these points relates specifically to women. It reads: "Abolition of all laws that place women at a disadvantage compared with men in matters of public or private law."

Zetkin's strategy was plausible in the framework of German reality at that time. The SPD and its associated trade union, cultural, and social movements, revolutionary in orientation, were rapidly consolidating solid majority support in the working class. The movement saw its rapid growth as evidence that revolution was near, and revolution did in fact arrive only 22 years later. There were

indeed grounds to envisage women's liberation following from the victory of this mighty movement. Given this framework, Zetkin did not envisage women's liberation developing as a distinct social movement.

Consider again the three strategic questions I posed previously. The answers implied by Zetkin's speech would seem to be:

1. The socialist woman "agree with" the demands for civil rights raised by the "bourgeois women's movement" and seek to have their "rights as wife and mother ... permanently secured." But Zetkin does not call for a specific and conscious struggle to break the chains that bind women.
2. Women's role is to fight "hand in hand with the man or her class against capitalist society."
3. In the period leading up to socialist revolution, "we have no special tasks for the agitation among women." Demands relating to women's liberation ("the petty, momentary interests of the female world") will be of secondary importance.

It is possible that Zetkin's speech is not a full presentation of her thinking in 1896. Her address sought to gain the support of convention delegates, many of whom were skeptical regarding women's role in the socialist movement. She may have limited her comments to what she thought delegates were capable of absorbing. I will welcome clarification of this question by someone with a close knowledge of her early writings.

What is clear is that her later activity did go beyond what she proposed in the 1896 speech.

Here are two examples, additional to those I offered in "Reading Zetkin in Context," that seem to me to go beyond the scope of what she said in 1896.

First, Zetkin helped in 1910 to launch International Women's Day with a proposal defining it as a special celebration "to take up the entire women's question according to socialist principles." Its "foremost purpose must be to aid the attainment of women's suffrage," she wrote. (See Foner 1964, p. 108). Zetkin co-founded and led the Socialist Women's Movement, whose 1915 conference produced the first manifesto of internationalist opposition to World War 1. And two years later, it was an International Women's Day demonstration that kicked off the Russian revolution.

Second, the Communist Women's Movement in the 1920s, under Zetkin's leadership, developed an extensive program of struggle for women's rights within capitalist society that went far beyond advocacy of equality in law. I will take as an example just one paragraph from the segment of this program dealing with women's struggle in advanced capitalist countries:

"Demand economic and social measures to fight prostitution; hygienic measures against the spread of venereal diseases; an end to the housing of prostitutes in barracks, to their supervision by vice squads, and to social contempt for them. Do away with the sexual double standard for men and women." (See my collection, still in print, *Workers of the World and Oppressed Peoples, Unite*, Pathfinder, 1991, p. 992. [6])

Many central themes of women's struggle against sexism today are still absent, such as resistance to sexist harassment, sexual violence, and women's reproductive rights. Nonetheless, this is a clarion call for struggle against women's sexual oppression that is quite absent from the 1896 document. Moreover, the Communist Women's Movement did in fact later take up abortion and other reproductive rights.

Zetkin's 1896 speech does not envisage any positive role for feminism, which I understand to be a

current of thought and action directed specifically against sexism and toward women's liberation. In this regard, her assessment did not foresee how women's struggles were to develop in the twentieth century and up to our times.

Today, the context is entirely different. The concept of subsuming women's freedom struggle in the struggle of a great inclusive revolutionary socialist movement clashes against the fact that parties of this type do not now exist. A small socialist group or party of the type found in Tad's country and mine are not capable on their own of influencing the class struggle or serving as the agency for women's liberation struggle. The building of a revolutionary movement has become a much more complex and many-stranded process, in which feminism plays an essential role.

Tad describes Zetkin's legacy as "consistent method, flexible applications." I believe that "consistent method" refers here to the principles of historical materialism. I do not believe it encompasses strategy, which shifts in accord with objective conditions and class relations.

It comes as no surprise that the strategy advanced by Zetkin in 1896 is not applicable in the conditions we face 120 years later. That fact in no way detracts from her historic contribution to women's liberation and the socialist movement or from the rich legacy of her writings.

John Riddell

P.S.

* March 9, 2014:

<http://johnriddell.wordpress.com/2014/03/09/reading-zetkin-what-strategy-for-womens-liberation/>

Footnotes

[1] See on ESSF (article 31296), [Zetkin and oppression: consistent method, flexible application - Another comment on John Riddell's article.](#)

[2] Available on ESSF (article 31295), [Only in Conjunction With the Proletarian Woman Will Socialism Be Victorious.](#)

[3] See on ESSF (article 31024), [1910-1920s : Reading Clara Zetkin in context - On Women's struggles and Lindsey German's comment.](#)

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

[5] ESSF (article 31295), [Only in Conjunction With the Proletarian Woman Will Socialism Be Victorious.](#)

[6] <https://johnriddell.wordpress.com/2011/01/01/the-communist-international-in-lenins-time/>