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Clara Zetkin and the struggle against fascism

Thursday 13 June 2019, by [RIDDELL John](#), [TABER Mike](#) (Date first published: 5 December 2017).

The following article is the introduction to a newly published collection *Fighting Fascism: How to Struggle and How to Win* by the German Marxist Clara Zetkin (Haymarket Books, 2017), 131 pp. The text is reprinted with permission from *International Socialist Review*.

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Clara Zetkin

Seldom has there been a word more bandied about, yet less understood, than fascism. For many, the fascist label is simply an insult, directed against particularly repellent and reactionary individuals or movements. It's also customarily used as a political description of right-wing military dictatorships.

The term took on new significance during the 2016 US presidential election, in which the ultimate victor Donald Trump was routinely compared to Benito Mussolini and other fascist leaders. "Fascist comparisons are not new in American politics," stated an article in the May 28, 2016, New York Times. "But with Mr. Trump, such comparisons have gone beyond the fringe and entered mainstream conversation both in the United States and abroad."

Although these particular comparisons are overdrawn and imprecise, all allegations of fascism must be examined seriously. Working people and the oppressed have every reason to fear the endemic racism, abolition of labor and civil rights, brutal repression, and mass murder that characterize fascism.

Zetkin Fascism While resemblances on some level can undoubtedly be found among most rightist

movements and regimes, fascism itself is a very specific phenomenon, with unique features. Understanding the characteristics and dynamics of fascism is not just an academic exercise. Doing so is essential for being able to combat it.

This short book, containing a report and resolution by Clara Zetkin at a 1923 leadership meeting of the Communist International, presents a far-reaching analysis of what was then something entirely new on the world scene.

Many readers will be struck by the clarity and foresight of Zetkin's assessment, delivered at a time when fascism's emergence was still a mystery to most observers. Reviewing it almost a century later, one can appreciate her accomplishment in outlining, at this early date, a consistent Marxist position on the nature of fascism and how to fight it.

Fascism's emergence

The origins of fascism can be found in post-World War I Italy. Organized by Benito Mussolini during a period of social crisis in 1919, the Fasci Italiani di Combattimento arose as a reaction to the rising movement of the proletariat, that is, the social class of those who depend on sale of their labor power for their means of subsistence.

During this time Italian workers, inspired by the victory of the Russian Revolution and battered by Italian capitalism's postwar crisis, were marching forward in militant struggle. Throughout all layers of Italian society, expectation was high that the Italian Socialist Party—then a member of the Communist International—was on the verge of coming to power.

The proletarian upsurge reached a high point in September 1920. During that month over half a million workers, led by the metalworkers, seized factories throughout Italy. Workers began to organize production under the leadership of factory councils, and in many places they formed Red Guards to defend the seized factories. The strikes spread to the railways and other workplaces, and many poor peasants and agricultural workers carried out land seizures. Effective appeals were made to soldiers, as fellow workers in uniform, to refuse to obey any orders to attack the factories. In face of this seemingly unstoppable wave, the capitalist class and its government were paralyzed with indecision and fear. A revolutionary situation was unfolding, with the conquest of political power on the agenda.

But the Italian Socialist Party and the main trade union federation under its influence refused to see this month-long revolutionary movement as anything more than a simple union struggle. With such a mindset, the union leadership eventually directed the workers to leave the factories in exchange for a package of enticing but empty promises by the capitalists—who by that time were willing to sign anything provided they could get their factories back. Italian working people, who had hoped and expected that the end of capitalist rule was near, abandoned the factories in dejection.

The failure of the factory occupation movement led to widespread demoralization within the working class. The Fasci stepped up recruitment and carried out an escalating wave of attacks against the labor movement, receiving growing financial support from leading capitalists and protection from police and other sectors of the Italian state. In 1921 and 1922 several thousand workers and peasants were murdered in fascist "punitive expeditions." Hundreds of labor halls and union headquarters were destroyed.

Rapidly assuming the character of a mass movement, the fascists were able to take control of the government at the end of October 1922, with Mussolini becoming prime minister. Once in power,

fascism proceeded to crush the unions entirely, along with all other independent workers' organizations.

Encouraged by the Italian fascist victory, similar movements arose in other European countries, the strongest being in Germany. Fascist-type formations were also seen in Poland, Czechoslovakia, Austria, and elsewhere.

Recognizing a new phenomenon

As with most new social phenomena, it was not immediately apparent what was involved. Initially, many tended to lump fascism together with other instances of counterrevolutionary violence and terror.

In the years after the First World War, such terror was indeed widespread. In Hungary, a defeated revolution that briefly held power in 1919 was followed by 5,000 executions and 75,000 jailings. In Finland, where a civil war had taken place, the toll was 10,000 shot and 100,000 sent to concentration camps. Comparable instances of what became known as "white terror" were seen in other countries.

While the Italian fascists' use of counterrevolutionary violence was certainly analogous, the phenomenon of fascism involved something more. Uncovering its true nature was a task that fell to the Communist International.

Founded in 1919 under the impact of the Russian Revolution, the Communist International (Comintern) was something entirely new: a movement dedicated to discussing how the working class could overthrow capitalist rule, and organizing to do so. Under Lenin, the Comintern's congresses and meetings were schools of revolutionary politics.

The Comintern had its first organized discussion of fascism at its Fourth Congress in November 1922. It was not particularly fruitful, however. A report by Italian Communist Amadeo Bordiga, while describing important aspects of Mussolini's movement in Italy, was less successful in uncovering fascism's nature, stressing instead the similarities between fascism and bourgeois democracy and predicting that Italian fascism would not last long. Neither Bordiga's report nor the discussion that followed paid much attention to the struggle against fascism.¹

Realizing they hadn't yet gotten to the bottom of things, in June 1923 the Comintern's leaders took up the question once again. The venue was the Third Enlarged Plenum of the Communist International's Executive Committee. The key person in this effort was Clara Zetkin, who gave the report to that meeting and authored the resolution it adopted.

Clara Zetkin

Sixty-six years old in 1923, Clara Zetkin was one of the Comintern's most prominent veteran fighters. She was a unique figure in the international revolutionary movement.

In 1878, at the age of twenty-one, Zetkin joined the socialist movement in Germany. That was the year in which the Anti-Socialist Laws were enacted in Germany, making public advocacy of socialism a crime and membership in the Social Democratic Party (SPD) illegal. But Zetkin refused to be intimidated. Forced into exile for several years, she increased her activity in the revolutionary movement and became a leading activist in the party. In 1891 she began to edit *Die Gleichheit*, the

SPD's newspaper directed at women.

In 1907 Zetkin was the central founding leader of the international socialist women's movement. One of the most important initiatives of that movement was the establishment of March 8 as International Women's Day, a decision made at its 1910 conference.

A collaborator of Rosa Luxemburg, Zetkin belonged to the left wing of the SPD. In 1914, when that party betrayed its socialist principles by openly supporting Germany's war effort in World War I, Zetkin broke with the party's declaration of a "civil peace" with German capitalism for the war's duration, and went into active opposition. Becoming part of the revolutionary underground organized in the Spartacus League, she was arrested several times for antiwar activities. In 1918 the Spartacus League helped found the Communist Party (CP), of which Zetkin became a leader.

Following the murder of Luxemburg, Karl Liebknecht, and others in early 1919, Zetkin came to play a central role within the Communist Party leadership, as she did within the Communist International as a whole.

While Zetkin is best known for her decades-long role as the central figure in the socialist and communist women's movement, she was much more. She was a well-rounded political leader capable of deep political analysis and drawing practical conclusions from it, as was demonstrated by her 1923 report on fascism.

Fascism's characteristics

In that report, Zetkin pointed to some of the key features of fascism:

■ Fascism's emergence is inextricably tied to the economic crisis of capitalism and the decline of its institutions. This crisis is characterized by escalating attacks on the working class, and by middle layers of society being increasingly squeezed and driven down into the proletariat.

"Fascism is rooted, indeed, in the dissolution of the capitalist economy and the bourgeois state.... The war shattered the capitalist economy down to its foundations. This is evident not only in the appalling impoverishment of the proletariat, but also in the proletarianization of very broad petty-bourgeois and middle-bourgeois masses."

■ The rise of fascism is based on the proletariat's failure to resolve capitalism's social crisis by taking power and beginning to reorganize society. This failure of working-class leadership breeds demoralization among workers and among the forces within society that had looked to the proletariat and socialism as a way out of the crisis.

These social forces, Zetkin indicated, had hoped that "socialism could bring about global change. These expectations were painfully shattered.... [T]hey lost their belief not only in the reformist leaders but also in socialism itself."

■ Fascism possesses a mass character, with a special appeal to petty-bourgeois layers threatened by the decline of the capitalist order.

The capitalist decline results in "the proletarianization of very broad petty-bourgeois and middle-bourgeois masses, the calamitous conditions among small peasants, and the bleak distress of the 'intelligentsia' What weighs on them above all is the lack of security for their basic existence."

■ To win support from these layers, fascism makes use of anticapitalist demagoguery.

"Masses in their thousands streamed to fascism. It became an asylum for all the politically homeless, the socially uprooted, the destitute and disillusioned.... The petty-bourgeois and intermediate social forces at first vacillate indecisively between the powerful historical camps of the proletariat and bourgeoisie. They are induced to sympathize with the proletariat by their life's suffering and, in part, by their soul's noble longings and high ideals, so long as it is revolutionary in its conduct and seems to have prospects for victory. Under the pressure of the masses and their needs, and influenced by this situation, even the fascist leaders are forced to at least flirt with the revolutionary proletariat, even though they may not have any sympathy with it."

■ Fascist ideology elevates nation and state above all class contradictions and class interests.

"[W]hat [the masses] no longer hoped for from the revolutionary proletarian class and from socialism, they now hoped would be achieved by the most able, strong, determined, and bold elements of every social class. All these forces must come together in a community. And this community, for the fascists, is the nation.... The instrument to achieve fascist ideals is, for them, the state. A strong and authoritarian state that will be their very own creation and their obedient tool. This state will tower high above all differences of party and class."

■ The ideology of national chauvinism is used by fascist leaders as a cover to incite militarism and imperialist war.

"The armed forces [of fascist Italy] were to serve only to defend the fatherland. That was the promise. But the burgeoning size of the army and the enormous scope of armaments are oriented to major imperialist adventures.... Hundreds of millions of lire have been approved for heavy industry to build the most modern machines and murderous instruments of death."

■ A major characteristic of fascism is the use of organized violence by anti-working-class shock troops, aiming to crush all independent proletarian activity.

In Italy, Mussolini's forces engaged in "direct, bloody terror," Zetkin pointed out. Starting in agricultural areas, the fascists "struck out against the rural proletarians, whose organizations were devastated and burned out and whose leaders were murdered." Later "the fascist terror extend[ed] to the proletarians of the large cities."

■ The ideology of racism and racist scapegoating is central to fascism's message. While this aspect was not yet entirely clear in 1923, Zetkin nevertheless pointed out how in Germany "the fascist program is exhausted by the phrase, 'Beat up the Jews.'"

■ At a certain point, important sections of the capitalist class begin to support and finance the fascist movement, seeing it as a way to counter the threat of proletarian revolution.

"The bourgeoisie can no longer rely on its state's regular means of force to secure its class rule. For that it needs an extralegal and nonstate instrument of force. That has been offered by the motley assemblage that makes up the fascist mob." The capitalists "openly sponsored fascist terrorism, supporting it with money and in other ways."

■ Once in power, fascism tends to become bureaucratized, and moves away from its earlier demagogic appeals, leading to a resurgence of class contradictions and class struggle.

"There is a blatant contradiction between what fascism promised and what it delivered to the masses. All the talk about how the fascist state will place the interests of the nation above everything, once exposed to the wind of reality, burst like a soap bubble. The 'nation' revealed itself to be the bourgeoisie; the ideal fascist state revealed itself to be the vulgar, unscrupulous bourgeois

class state.... Class contradictions are mightier than all the ideologies that deny their existence."

Alternate analyses

Zetkin's analysis of fascism was radically different from other ones then being put forward within the workers' and socialist movements.

Among these, Zetkin's report took up the view of the reformist Social Democrats. "For them fascism is nothing but terror and violence," she reported.

"The reformists view fascism as an expression of the unshakable and all-conquering power and strength of bourgeois class rule. The proletariat is not up to the task of taking up the struggle against it—that would be presumptuous and doomed to failure. So there is nothing left for the proletariat but to step aside quietly and modestly, and not provoke the tigers and lions of bourgeois class rule through a struggle for its liberation and its own rule."

Zetkin's analysis also contrasts sharply with the analysis of fascism put forward subsequently by the Stalin-led Communist parties in the years and decades ahead. There were two main Stalinist approaches, both of which are counterposed to Zetkin's perspective:

1. Social fascism. Adopted during the Comintern's ultraleft 'Third Period' of the late 1920s and early 1930s, the thrust of this view was to equate Social Democracy and fascism, thereby justifying the German Communist Party's refusal to seek a united front with the powerful Social Democratic Party in the fight against the Nazis.

Had such a united front been organized, it would have had the support of the overwhelming majority of working people in Germany and would almost certainly have been powerful enough to counter the Nazis. The adamant refusal to do so by both the CP and SPD leaderships can rightly be said to have opened the door to Hitler's assumption of power.

2. Popular frontism. This view was first fully presented in a report by Georgi Dimitrov to the Seventh Congress of the by-then fully Stalinized Comintern in 1935. Fascism, Dimitrov stated, was "the open terrorist dictatorship of the most reactionary, most chauvinistic and most imperialist elements of finance capital." It "acts in the interests of the extreme imperialists," which he characterized as "the most reactionary circles of the bourgeoisie."²

Based on this analysis, the central task was to form blocs—"popular fronts"—with supposedly less reactionary, less chauvinistic, and less imperialist elements of the bourgeoisie—its "antifascist wing"—and to subordinate independent working-class struggle and political action to this objective. In practice such an approach meant that Stalinist parties stood in opposition to independent proletarian revolutionary action in general, seeing this as an obstacle to the projected popular front. Such a perspective also became justification for giving back-handed support to "antifascist" capitalist politicians such as Franklin D. Roosevelt in the United States, on the pretext that his Republican opponent represented "the chief menace of fascism."³

Leon Trotsky took the lead in rejecting these Stalinist positions, defending the key points raised by Zetkin in 1923. Written in polemical form, Trotsky's writings during the 1930s on the rise of fascism in Germany and the lessons of the Nazi victory present some of the clearest expositions of the Marxist analysis of fascism and what is required to defeat it.⁴

How to fight fascism

Liberal procapitalist forces frequently suggest that if fascist figures are just ignored, they will go away. That was not the view of Zetkin, however. For her, there was a life-and-death need for the working class and its allies to mobilize their full power in opposition to fascism.

In discussing the working-class fight against fascism, Zetkin emphasized several points:

■ Workers' self-defense is crucial in order to confront the fascist terror campaign. Above all, this includes organized workers' defense guards to combat fascist attacks.

"At present the proletariat has urgent need for self-defense against fascism, and this self-protection against fascist terror must not be neglected for a single moment. At stake is the proletarians' personal safety and very existence, as well as the survival of their organizations. Self-defense of proletarians is the need of the hour. We must not combat fascism in the way of the reformists in Italy, who beseeched them to 'leave me alone, and then I'll leave you alone.' On the contrary! Meet violence with violence. But not violence in the form of individual terror—that will surely fail. But rather violence as the power of the revolutionary organized proletarian class struggle."

■ United-front action to combat fascism is essential, involving all working-class organizations and currents, regardless of political differences.

"[P]roletarian struggle and self-defense against fascism requires the proletarian united front. Fascism does not ask if the worker in the factory has a soul painted in the white and blue colors of Bavaria; the black, red, and gold colors of the bourgeois republic; or the red banner with the hammer and sickle. It does not ask whether the worker wants to restore the Wittelsbach dynasty [of Bavaria], is an enthusiastic fan of [SPD leader and German President Friedrich] Ebert, or would prefer to see our friend [CP leader Heinrich] Brandler as president of the German Soviet Republic. All that matters to fascism is that they encounter a class-conscious proletarian, and then they club him to the ground. That is why workers must come together for struggle without distinctions of party or trade-union affiliation."

■ In addition to combating fascism physically when necessary to defend itself, the working class needs to combat fascism's mass appeal politically, making special efforts among middle-class layers.

"[T]he [Italian Communist] party surely also made a policy error in viewing fascism solely as a military phenomenon and overlooking its ideological and political side. Let us not forget that before beating down the proletariat through acts of terror, fascism in Italy had already won an ideological and political victory over the workers' movement that lay at the root of its triumph. It would be very dangerous to fail to consider the importance of overcoming fascism ideologically and politically."

■ Combating fascism in this way means, above all, demonstrating the proletarian leadership's absolute determination to fight to take power out of the hands of the bourgeoisie in order to resolve capitalism's social crisis, and putting forward a program aimed at cementing the alliances necessary to do so.

Zetkin believed that the perspective of a revolutionary fight for governmental power, based on an alliance of the exploited and oppressed social classes, was essential for victory over fascism. For this reason, in her report she stressed that a governmental demand expressing this perspective—that of a workers' and peasants' government—"is virtually a requirement for the struggle to defeat fascism."

The threat of fascism today

Striving to understand fascism today is not merely a historical question.

As the twenty-first century unfolds, capitalism has entered a period of social crisis, marked by escalating attacks on the rights and living conditions of working people and all the oppressed, along with sharpening social polarization. The November 2016 election of billionaire capitalist Donald Trump as US president, following a campaign marked by brazen rightist demagoguery and openly racist appeals, was both a reflection and a sharpening of this crisis.

As Zetkin foresaw almost a century ago, it is precisely situations like this that can give rise to fascist movements at a certain stage.

Such movements recognize the social crisis, but they aim to shift the blame for it away from the capitalist system, looking instead for scapegoats: immigrants, Blacks, Jews, self-confident and independent women, LGBT people, Roma people, and others. Outlandish conspiracy theories are conjured up, designed to deflect attention away from the social and economic system responsible for the crisis.

To garner support, fascist movements play on resentment. They appeal to racist, chauvinist, and antiwoman sentiments that deeply pervade so-called popular culture under capitalism.

The fascists' reactionary appeal to divide working people will need to be fought by putting forward instead the need for a common struggle by the oppressed and exploited regardless of nationality, ethnic background, or gender to throw off the rule of capitalists and landlords and begin building a more just and humane society.

But this battle will not take place solely within the realm of ideas.

As the social crisis deepens and a response among working people begins to develop, growing numbers of capitalists and their servants will resort to legal and extralegal measures to defend their class rule.

As these attacks escalate, they will need to be answered by working people fighting to defend their unions; by those fighting against racism, police brutality, and cop killings; by supporters of women's rights fighting to defend the right to abortion; by supporters of civil liberties fighting against attacks on democratic rights; by those standing up to capitalist environmental destruction; by those fighting anti-immigrant violence and deportations—in short, by all who struggle in the interests of the oppressed and exploited.

It is these activists and fighters who will be the ones most interested in studying the nature of fascism and the history of the struggle against it.

Many will find the Marxist perspective first outlined by Zetkin, and amplified subsequently by Leon Trotsky, Antonio Gramsci, and others, to be an essential weapon in the fight against the fascist threat.

In this context, growing numbers of working people and youth will be attracted to join in the fight for a socialist future.

That was the firm belief of Clara Zetkin.

In discussing fascism's appeal to youth, she pointed out that "the best of them are seeking an escape

from deep anguish of the soul. They are longing for new and unshakable ideals and a world outlook that enables them to understand nature, society, and their own life; a world outlook that is not a sterile formula but operates creatively and constructively. Let us not forget that violent fascist gangs are not composed entirely of ruffians of war, mercenaries by choice, and venal lumpens who take pleasure in acts of terror. We also find among them the most energetic forces of these social layers, those most capable of development. We must go to them with conviction and understanding for their condition and their fiery longing, work among them, and show them a solution that does not lead backward but rather forward to communism. The overriding grandeur of communism as a world outlook will win their sympathies for us.”

Fascism is ultimately a product of capitalist rule, Zetkin maintained. The threat of fascism will end once and for all only when the working class takes power out of the hands of the billionaire capitalist families and begins to build a new world.

Firmly convinced of this fact, Zetkin’s unwavering confidence in the revolutionary potential of the working class can be seen at the conclusion of her 1923 report:

“Every single proletarian must feel like more than a mere wage slave, a plaything of the winds and storms of capitalism and of the powers that be. Proletarians must feel and understand themselves to be components of the revolutionary class, which will reforge the old state of the propertied into the new state of the soviet system. Only when we arouse revolutionary class consciousness in every worker and light the flame of class determination can we succeed in preparing and carrying out militarily the necessary overthrow of fascism. However brutal the offensive of world capital against the world proletariat may be for a time, however strongly it may rage, the proletariat will fight its way through to victory in the end.”

Zetkin’s courageous call for antifascist action, issued less than a year before her death, stands as a fitting tribute to her lifetime of revolutionary struggle and to her legacy as a beacon for future generations.

Mike Taber and John Riddell,

Notes

1. Bordiga’s report can be found in Riddell, ed., *Toward the United Front: Proceedings of the Fourth Congress of the Communist International, 1922*(Historical Materialism Book Series, Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2012), 402-23.
2. Dimitrov’s report can be found in *VII Congress of the Communist International: Abridged Stenographic Report of Proceedings*(Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1939), 126-29. It can also be accessed at Marxists Internet Archive.
3. *The Communist*, 6, June 1936, 489.
4. Trotsky’s basic writings on the rise of Nazism in Germany can be found in *The Struggle Against Fascism in Germany*(New York: Pathfinder Press, 1971). Much of this material is also accessible online at Marxists Internet Archive.
5. *The four published volumes containing Comintern congress proceedings and edited by John Riddell are:*

Founding the Communist International: Proceedings and Documents of the First Congress, March 1919(New York: Pathfinder Press, 1987).

Workers of the World and Oppressed Peoples, Unite! Proceedings of the Second Congress, 1920 (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1991).

To the Masses: Proceedings of the Third Congress of the Communist International, 1921 (Historical Materialism Book Series, Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016).

Toward the United Front.

The three supplementary volumes are:

Lenin's Struggle for a Revolutionary International 1907-1916 (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1984).

The German Revolution and the Debate on Soviet Power (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1986).

To See the Dawn: Baku, 1920—First Congress of the Peoples of the East (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1993).

P.S.

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<https://johnriddell.wordpress.com/2017/12/05/clara-zetkin-and-the-struggle-against-fascism/>