

France - Feminism: women fighting for their rights have always met resistance from male power ...

Thursday 12 August 2021, by [LARRACHE Antoine](#), [TRAT Josette](#), [U Agnès](#) (Date first published: April 2021).

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Antoine Larrache and Agnès U: Can you explain how the women’s movement has been accused of dividing the working class and how it partly overcame this situation?

Josette Trat: If we look in the long term, since the French Revolution, we see that women have always been involved in public life in periods of great social unrest or outright revolutionary situations and that most of the time, when they demand rights for women in particular such as the right to education, work, the right to vote and so on, they arouse the anger of many men who seek to put them back in “their place”, that is to say the most often at home. Olympe de Gouges was guillotined not only because she was a royalist but also because she had forgotten “the virtues which are appropriate to her sex” by making public her Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Citizen, in 1791. She had dared to ask for the right to vote! But women are also criticized when they create their own discussion circles or journals.

This was the case again, in the first half of the 19th century, in the days of the “utopian” socialists, to use the terminology of Marx and Engels. We find traces of these polemics in articles by Saint-Simonian activists presented in the journal *Révoltes Logiques* in the 1970s. One of them, Jeanne, thus writes: “[men] believe they see in us a tendency to usurpation when we dare to manifest our will. In general men, even in the [Saint-Simonian] family, relate to women as well as governments relate to peoples. They fear us and do not yet love us”. There are many others that could be cited.

As late as 1848, women were also highly active in very diverse fields such as the creation, for example, of cooperatives. On the question of the right to vote, they sent petition after petition to the provisional government. A wasted effort. Nonetheless, Jeanne Deroin, a former Saint-Simonienne, stood as a candidate in the parliamentary elections of June 1849. Which was strictly illegal at the time. George Sand refused to support her, arguing that women must first obtain civil rights and educate themselves before claiming the right to vote. Deroin asked for the support of a number of popular clubs, but Proudhon (an influential socialist theorist with whom Marx argued a lot) did all he could to put a spoke in her wheels. He was equally hostile to women’s work and said that “the

woman who tries to exercise her intelligence becomes ugly, mad, and stupid”.

This current was also represented in the First International (IWA) which adopted a resolution, at its inception, in which the work of women was denounced as a major cause of “corruption of the human species”. Conversely, Eugène Varlin, also a member of the French delegation and future Communard, always supported the right to work of women.

During the Commune, André Léo, a “feminist” journalist already known under the Second Empire, protested, in a long and very virulent article dated 8 May 1871, against the side-lining of women: they could not vote or be elected in the municipal elections for the Paris City Council. Yet it was they who, on 18 March, were on the front line in Montmartre to prevent the soldiers from recovering the guns. André Léo personally blamed General Dombrowski who opposed the integration of women into the ranks of the National Guard. This did not prevent a number of them from joining their battalions, despite everything, and then during *la Semaine sanglante*, defending Paris, on the barricades against the Versailles. This is evidenced by Victorine B in her book “Souvenirs d’une morte vivante” or Louise Michel herself in her memoirs.

A century later, in 1970, when second wave feminists began to meet in single-sex general meetings, and a little later in “women’s groups”, the men took it very seriously. In fact, some activists even tried to force their way into meetings. From one historical period to another, when feminists seek to organize themselves, they often say the same thing, it is even quite surprising: we want to meet among ourselves, it is not out of principle of hostility towards men but because we want to be able to express ourselves more freely without being under the gaze or judgment of men. To be free to have more strength, talk about our oppression, develop projects and so on.

Women’s right to work required many debates within the labour movement in order to be effectively recognized in France, after the First World War. Capitalism has always sought to lower wages by putting different sectors of the workforce into competition. This is why the employers recruited women and children on a massive scale in the spinning mills, first in England and then in France, and so on. This would be the case in many sectors throughout the 19th century until today because women are often less organized and therefore generally paid less than men. In the face of this, the workers had two possible positions: either they fought for equal pay and the right of women to organize, or they opposed it. We have already seen the position of Proudhon who influenced a large part of the artisans and workers in France. One of the sectors most hostile to women’s work and unionization was the CGT federation of book workers. However, in 1910, the Bordeaux congress decided to admit women into its ranks under the same conditions as men. Two years later, Emma Couriau, who had been a typographer for seventeen years and worked at the same rate as men, asked to join an union in Lyon. The local typographers’ section refused to unionize and decided in addition to exclude her husband, who had been unionized for nineteen years in the book federation, on the pretext that he had tolerated his wife’s work, a pure scandal according to the Lyon section. This “affair” led to passionate exchanges within the CGT in 1913 and among feminists. Marie Guillot, a feminist teacher and a CGT union member wrote numerous articles in the CGT press and proposed the establishment of “a trade union women’s action committee”. Amidst all this, the CGT planned to organize a debate on women’s work at its next congress, but this could not take place with the outbreak of the First World War.

What happened subsequently, especially with Stalinism?

In France, the PCF went through several different phases in its history. The Communist Party, which was created in 1921 in the wake of the Russian Revolution, would, unlike other sectors of the labour movement, actively support the struggle for women’s suffrage, by presenting candidates while knowing that they would not be elected. It attracted a certain number of

very radical feminists like Madeleine Pelletier, one of the first female doctors, as well as revolutionary trade unionists. But most of them left the PCF when it was subjected to the “Bolshevization” imposed by Moscow which resulted in processes of purging and bureaucratization parallel to those in the USSR itself.

Until the end of the 1920s, the PCF, despite its increasing sectarianism and marginalization, retained in its ranks very class struggle oriented activists of both sexes. The PCF defended the right to abortion until 1927 in a very repressive context. [2] But from the 1930s, in particular at the time of the Popular Front, the PCF radically changed its discourse, because it made an alliance with the Radicals (a bourgeois republican party allied with the reformist left) and, moreover, was concerned with winning part of the Christian electorate. We therefore find articles in the PCF press of very reactionary inspiration, clearly patriotic and natalist.

This discourse, or even worse, would also be found in the 1950s. In 1956, Françoise Giroud, who was a journalist for *l'Express*, launched into a battle of opinion in favour of the decriminalization of contraception. It was supported by coalition of left-wing deputies who tabled a bill favouring this. The PCF, meanwhile, was radically opposed, saying that proletarians should not ape the debauched behaviour of the bourgeoisie who practice birth control out of selfishness and “vice”, that the proletarians must claim the means to have a large family and so on. It was the idea that the bourgeoisie was “decadent” and wanted to prevent the numerical strengthening of the working class.

For several months, there were public positions taken by the highest officials of the PCF, in particular Maurice Thorez (secretary general of the PCF) and his wife Jeannette Vermeersch against “birth control”, assimilated to neo-Malthusianism. This official line constituted a trauma within the Communist Party, in particular among doctors who knew very well the reality facing proletarian women who had no means to control their fertility and were forced to abort under appalling conditions. Many doctors were disgusted by this position taken by the PCF, incomprehensible to them. This was also the case of a young journalist and PCF activist, Jacques Derogy, who wrote a series of articles in 1955 in a newspaper of Resistance origin entitled *Libération*, after an investigation carried out in Great Britain, in which he praised the benefits of “birth control” practiced there and described and denounced the situation of women from working-class backgrounds in France. He was kicked out of the PCF. He couldn't believe it because he thought he was doing pioneering work in exposing this situation. This position of the PCF was linked, according to some, to the desire of the PCF to create a diversion at the time, from the “revelations” contained in the famous Khrushchev report concerning Stalin's personal responsibility for the scale of repression developed in the USSR for decades.

And how did this affect the PCF at the electoral level?

During and after May 1968, one of the major axes of the political agitation of the PCF was the fight against “leftism” which, in its terms, by frightening *la France profonde*, could only delay the access of the Left to government responsibilities. They had denounced the “petit bourgeois” student movement and its “provocations” and the far left organizations which largely emerged from it in their sights. However, the feminist movement was assimilated to the student movement inasmuch as the feminist movement adopted modes of action that did not conform to parliamentary traditions. For example, one of its first initiatives was to go to the Arc de Triomphe, without authorization, in August 1970, to lay a wreath for the wife of the Unknown Soldier, even more unknown than the latter! In 1971, 343 women declared having had an abortion in the *Nouvel Observateur*.

The second obstacle to the encounter between this party and the feminist movement was theoretical. The PC and CGT tradition considers that it is capitalism that oppresses women. For them, it was

enough to fight against capitalism to fight for the emancipation of women. It was out of the question to speak of male domination as a system, integrated into the capitalist system of course, but against which we must fight as such. There was only one struggle that counted: the class struggle.

This type of analysis is not PC specific at all. It is moreover an overly simplistic reading of Engels and very dogmatic approach to Marxism, but this was very widespread at the time, including on the far left.

A third element of opposition were the demands of feminists and the denunciation of women's "unpaid" work in the framework of domestic labour. This is what Mireille Bertrand, one of the leaders of the Communist Party, wrote on 12 December 1970 in the PCF review *Cahiers du Communisme*: "The discrimination suffered by women cannot find a solution in the struggle which suggests power within the family for a better distribution of household chores. Under the pretext of equality, women are led astray into an outrageous feminism, a struggle against men in general, who are responsible for and beneficiaries of discrimination against women. [...] It is capitalism, it is the exploitation of man by man which maintains the woman in her position of inferiority, which is harmful not only to the woman, but to the man, to the family, to society. The problems of the emancipation of women are posed permanently by the French Communist Party, it does not content itself with chatting about sexual freedom, the sharing of household chores or psychological problems".

That sums up the PCF's position at the time. In the name of this conception, there was a fierce struggle against the feminist movement. The leadership of the PCF was confronted with criticism from its own activists, in different sectors. However, this position would induce a total refusal of the PCF to set foot in the slightest unitary structure, in the slightest movement claiming to be feminist. So much so that the PCF and the CGT refused to participate in the movement for freedom of abortion and contraception (MLAC) in 1973, which nevertheless played a decisive role in shaking up the government on this issue.

The problems raised by the feminist movement were considered "psychological" problems by the PCF, whereas it spoke of the social and gendered division of labour at all levels of society and the violence suffered by women. The feminists then challenged the militants, always in the same tone of derision: "Revolutionaries of all countries, who washes your socks?" A very good, funny question, but one that poses a fundamental problem. Precisely, the fact that, globally, patriarchal capitalism relies on the subordination of women in the division of labour to make social reproduction as cheap as possible.

But the major obstacle to the recognition of the feminist movement by the PCF was the impossibility for it to accept the principle of "autonomy" of the movement affirmed loud and clear by the different components of the movement, even if not all of them necessarily shared the same conception of this famous "autonomy". For the PCF, this completely called into question its conception inherited from Stalinism, of the links of subordination between the "ruling" Party and mass organizations.

But was there not a change in the place of women in trade unions?

At the end of the 19th century, women's delegations to trade union or party congresses were extremely limited. The presence of women was so rare at trade union congresses that it often happened that a woman would be invited to sit on the podium without being allowed to speak! Three historians have particularly focused on the place of women in the trade union movement in France: Madeleine Guilbert, Marie-Hélène Zylberberg-Hocquard and Michelle Perrot.

In the CGT, then the CGTU and again in the reunified CGT, women's work has always been

considered a central axis for the emancipation of women, unlike the CFTC, then the CFDT until 1964 (a Christian union until that date). Let us think back to a trade unionist like Martha Desrumaux, whose biography was traced in a recent documentary on the LCP channel. She symbolizes very well the type of activists that came to the fore then in the CGT: she was born into an extremely poor family in northern France and went into the factory at a very young age. She unionized. She was a resister during World War II. She devoted herself body and soul to the defence of working people. She was pushed to take responsibility both in the CGT and in the PCF, which she accepted without complaint. It is this model of activist that was highly valued well beyond the 1950s.

In the 1950s, the CGT also created the newspaper *Antoinette* which both reported on women's struggles against employers' policies and reserved a few pages for the daily life of women, such as the one devoted to cooking recipes. Because in the CGT, it was about defending women "as mothers, wives and workers", asking for "specific" measures in terms of reducing working time ... for women. There was therefore no question of questioning the place of women in domestic work. But after 1974, with the development of the action of feminist activists and trade unionists in women's committees or women's groups in a certain number of companies, *Antoinette* was to echo the feminist mobilizations and the questions they raised in the confederation. In 1977, in particular, there was the 6th CGT women's conference, and a real upheaval such as the confederal leadership had not seen for years. Everything was discussed: sexism in the union, the outdatedness of the CGT's analyses, the need for the union to link itself to the feminist movement and so on.

The analyses of Maurice Godelier, a Marxist anthropologist, previously in the sphere of the PCF, also shook the dogmatic references of the mainstream in the CGT. He studied a society called the Baruya in New Guinea. He showed that in this society of horticulturalists where there was no private property, no established social classes but already a strong hierarchy, the violence of male domination, including at the physical level, was reflected in all spheres of society, both material and ideal. [3]

For us feminists, this type of research completely challenged the overly simplistic analysis of seeing male domination as the sole result of capitalism or any other society based on private property.

This opened the way for a reflection on social relations other than class relations and, in fact, gave additional legitimacy to the struggle of women against their "specific" oppression and to their "autonomous" movement. A movement which was essential "before, during and after the revolution" as many feminist activists used to say.

Tensions between activists on these issues were not specific to the CGT, not at all. Jeannette Laot, who was one of the confederal leaders of the CFDT in the 1970s, wrote a book, both personal and political. She explains that at one point, as head of women's issues in the CFDT, she could no longer sit in the canteen next to her male comrades, who set her apart. So she said: "We even wondered if we had the same vision of the type of society for which we were fighting". The violence in internal relations within the trade union movement was very strong. Because a certain proportion of leaders or rank and file activists had the feeling their "power" was being contested. Which was moreover true.

In the far left too, we had to fight. In 1971-72 on the basis of an internal battle, the Ligue communiste recognized the importance of being an activist within the feminist movement, and the existence of an oppression of women. But this did not automatically regulate relations between activists at all. Almost every feminist activist has had the following experience, whatever her organizational affiliation: if she joins a "mixed" body made up of a large majority of men and if she sets herself the goal of advancing the feminist struggle on different themes and to take charge of this struggle collectively so as not to reserve it for the "experts" who are the "leaders" in respect to

these questions, their status turns rather quickly into “troublemaker” number one , to whom we will give the floor to avoid accusations of “sexism” but nothing more.

Unfortunately, this is the very common experience shared by scores of feminist activists who have left their organizations discouraged.

At the end of this overview, which, for lack of space, unfortunately could not go into the details of the struggles and transformations that have occurred in the political and trade union fields, we can recall some general facts and ideas.

Since 1995 in France, all the political, trade union and associative organizations which declare themselves to be “left” have also declared themselves feminists. Moreover, at the end of these long years of feminist struggles in these organizations, most of them have adopted the principle of quotas (as has been the case in the CFDT for a long time) or of parity (as in the CGT). in their leadership bodies to allow women to be better represented. At the CGT, this principle of parity at the confederal level was adopted in a very proactive manner in 1999, in a context of a deep crisis in the trade union movement and in particular in this current, which was called upon to take its independence from the PCF, itself undermined by the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the USSR. As we know, trade unions and political organizations appeal to women when they can no longer avoid it. If the number of women unionized with the CGT is 39% (i.e., 10 points lower than the female employment rate which is 48%), it seems that the feminization of the CGT is progressing since one in two new members joining today is a woman, as Rachel Silvera recalls in an interview on the CGT website.

We can see that a new wave of feminist struggles of a mass and international nature is sweeping the planet against gender-based and sexual violence and on issues of abortion rights in particular. We can only rejoice. Let us hope that this will make it possible to revitalize all feminist struggles within a unitary framework (unions, feminist associations), on questions of support for workers such as chambermaids in big hotels, home helpers, employees in supermarkets, teachers, or workers in nurseries and of course all those who work in hospitals. Because we know that once the emergency of the health crisis is over, (which is not yet the case today) the government in the name of debt reduction will attack all employees, French and immigrants: this is already the case with the reform of unemployment insurance and soon the relaunch of the pension reform. On these questions, feminist activists in unions and associations have many common struggles to their credit, let us know how to make them fruitful.

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P.S.

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Some precisions have been introduced by the author for this version.

Available in French on ESSF.

Footnotes

[1] The word “feminism” only took on its current meaning at the end of the 19th century.

[2] Following the First World War two especially reactionary laws were introduced concerning not only the practice of birth control and abortion but also advocating for them.

[3] Maurice Godelier, “The Making of Great Men”, Cambridge University Press, (1982)