

<https://npa31.org/spip.php?article2918>



The Communist Women's Movement (1921-26)

- Features - Sexual politics -

Publication date: Thursday 7 March 2013

Copyright © International Viewpoint - online socialist magazine - All rights reserved

The following working paper was presented to the Toronto conference of Historical Materialism on May 16, 2010. For Spanish-language translation, see IPS blog de debate. When we celebrate International Women's Day, we often refer to its origins in U.S. labour struggles early in the last century. Less often mentioned, however, how it was relaunched and popularized in the 1920s by the Communist Women's Movement. Moreover, this movement itself has been almost forgotten, as have most of its central leaders.

Structure and function

The Communist Women's Movement was founded by a world gathering of Communist women in 1921, which elected a leadership, the International Women's Secretariat, reporting to the Executive of the Communist International, or Comintern. It also initiated the formation of women's commissions in national parties, which coordinated work by women's bodies on a branch level, and called periodic international conferences of Communist women.

The Secretariat published a monthly journal, and there were also Communist women's publications nationally and locally. It also brought resolutions to Comintern world congresses.

That, at least, was the blueprint. Transforming vision into reality was difficult. Women were then only beginning to emerge into citizenship and political activity. In the pre-1914 Socialist International, according to Clara Zetkin, the few women activists were "treated as a form of domestic help." [1]

Even in the Comintern, Zetkin wrote in 1921, "leaders all too often underrate the importance" of the Communist women's movement, because "they see it as only "women's business." [2] In each of the Comintern world congresses of 1920, 1921, and 1922, women encountered problems winning time to present and discuss their report. [3]

Yet on the whole, despite what Zetkin termed "open or covert opposition," [4] party structures for work among women were in fact established in those years in almost all European countries where Communists could work legally. The women heading up this work were probably the most able and resilient international leadership team produced by the Comintern. Alongside Zetkin, the most respected non-Russian Communist leader, worked Hertha Sturm and Bertha Braunthal of Germany, Marthe Bigot and Lucie Colliard of France, Henriette Roland-Holst of the Netherlands, Dora Montefiore of Britain, Hanna Malm and Aino Kuusinen of Finland, Edda Tennenboom of Poland, Varsenika Kasparova and Klavdiia Nikolaeva of Russia, among others. [5]

Their journal, "Communist Women's International," was a formidable educational tool, which published 1,300 pages over its five years of existence. The writing is talented and often poetic, as in the following portrayal of working people in war-devastated Europe:

Those who reap the crops and bake the bread are hungry.

Those who weave and sew cannot clothe their bodies.

Those who create the nourishing foundation of all culture waste away, deprived of knowledge and beauty. [6]

Edited by Zetkin, the journal expressed the thinking of the International's most consistent defenders of its policy of the united front.

The work of the Women's International centered around two main world campaigns: to build International Women's Day and to support International Workers' Aid for Soviet Russia, emphasizing its aid to Soviet women. In the winter and spring of 1922-23, the women's secretariat in Berlin also led campaigns on inflation, the war danger, and education, anti-abortion laws, and fascism, working directly with women's commissions of Comintern parties. [7]

Movement or sub-committee?

Yet the nature of the Communist Women's International is hard to pin down. Was it a women's movement? Or was it an array of party committees carrying out party tasks?

Clara Zetkin formulated its central task as to win the masses –specifically, the masses of women – in face of an impending show-down with capitalism. [8]She was anticipating here the general line adopted a few months later, after a fractious debate, by the Comintern world congress.

The women leaders saw that this could not be done without special commissions set up for the task. As Zetkin pointed out on another occasion, women's social conditions have created a "special female psychology," such that women themselves are "the quickest, most astute, and most effective in recognizing the key issues in the life of working women." [9]

On another occasion, Zetkin wrote that masses of women were now seized by "new longings, desires, impulses, needs, that before were hidden." [10]

Communists of this period did not utilize the term "women's oppression," yet it seems alive in their thought and action.

It was not enough to build broad action coalitions to influence the masses, although this was necessary. The goal was to bring women into the party and train them as cadres and leaders. In most parties, this was a new project, which confronting chauvinist pressures excluding women from the revolutionary movement.

In 1925, when the women's International was under attack by bureaucratic forces in the Comintern, Zetkin restated these concepts in the form of an account of her discussions with Lenin five years earlier. She quotes Lenin as voicing her well-known view: "We must by all means set up a powerful international women's movement on a clear-cut theoretical basis." Later in their discussion, Lenin added, "We want no separate organizations of Communist women! She who is a Communist belongs as a member to the Party," with "the same rights and duties." But the party needs special organs "with the specific purpose of rousing the broad masses of women." [11]

The commissions were open to all party members, and men were encouraged to join. In fact, men generally stayed away. But they did exert a pressure on priorities. Lenin, for example, told Zetkin that at meetings with working women, Communists should not let "sex and marriage problems come first." [12] Zetkin argued back vigorously. And we can be sure that, whatever the formal agenda, such meetings provided the occasion for what a later generation called "consciousness raising."

Large numbers of women were recruited. The proportion of women among party members ranged from a high of 20% in Czechoslovakia and Norway down to about 2% in France and Italy. In Germany and Russia, it rose gradually in the 1920s to 17% and 14% respectively. [13] The absolute numbers were high: more than 100,000 women were members of the Communist International.

Program for liberation

These women advanced a program seeking "to secure for all women complete and unrestricted social rights, so that ... they can develop every aspect of their full human personality." [14]

The Comintern's program for women's emancipation included "total equality of rights in law and practice," integration of women into political life, the right to free education and medical care, social measures to ease the burden of housework and childcare, and measures to "do away with the sexual double standard for men and women." [15]

Given the depths of women's subjugation at the time, this might seem pure utopia. The Communist women, however, pointed to women's dramatic gains in Soviet Russia, where women had been legal slaves of husbands and fathers before the revolution. I set aside a summary of these gains and their limitations for separate discussion.

â€œOur bodies belong to us'

The Comintern's manifesto for women's emancipation omits mention of women's reproductive rights. Nonetheless, Communist women campaigned on these issues with success.

Communist women in that period viewed childbearing as a social responsibility, and sought to assist "poor women who would like to experience motherhood as the highest joy." At a time when birth control was advocated by many as a means for population control and eugenics, they resisted attempts to browbeat women for having either too few or too many children. They regarded abortion as a symptom of social evils related to women's poverty and subjugation. But anti-abortion laws, they held, brutally punished innocent women. The Communist women denounced the dreadful toll of illegal abortions and demanded abolition of all anti-abortion laws. [16]

In Germany, Communist women led a massive campaign against the anti-abortion law under the slogan, "Your Body Belongs to You." [17]

Violence against women is rarely mentioned in Communist women's literature. However, they pointed to Soviet Russia's measures to assure women freedom to marry and divorce at will and to work outside the home as steps toward freeing them from violent and oppressive relationships.

Absent from this literature, however, is any discussion of rape and sexual harassment.

The Communist women opposed punishment or harassment of prostitutes. They favoured removing the economic causes of the sex trade through homes for jobless women, vocational training and employment. [18]

United front

The Communist Women's Movement noted that the "demands of the bourgeois women's movement" aim merely at "reforming the capitalist order for the benefit of wives and daughters of the possessing classes." However, it stressed that radicalization among women reached into all social layers.

"[F]emale employees, especially intellectuals ... are growing rebellious.... [M]ore and more housewives, including bourgeois housewives, are awakening.... [W]e have to utilise the ferment," Zetkin told the Comintern's Fourth Congress. [\[19\]](#)

A year earlier, Zetkin explained to the previous world congress that "as long as capitalism rules, the stronger sex will threaten to deprive the weaker of livelihood and the means of life." Bourgeois women, she insisted, can assist the struggle – fighting skirmishes, while sowing unrest and turmoil in the bourgeois camp. [\[20\]](#)

In this spirit, assessments of non-proletarian women's gatherings highlighted points of agreement that could be utilized for common action.

In another context, the journal predicts that through the united front, many women, both working-class and privileged, who still shy away from slogans of proletarian dictatorship, "will be present, in joy and determination, to assert their rights as mothers to social welfare, health, and the lives of their children." [\[21\]](#)

The Communist women developed a new term for the victims of capitalism that made a subtle point regarding women. They spoke frequently of "die Schaffenden," a German word combining the meaning of "producers" and "creators." The Schaffenden, Zetkin says, are "all those whose labour, be it with hand or brain, increases the material and cultural heritage of humankind, without exploiting the labour of others." [\[22\]](#) Although Zetkin does not spell this out, the Communist women's term implicitly includes household and childrearing labour, as well as the labour of childbirth, attributing to it productive significance.

Dissolution of the women's International

Born in 1921, the Communist Women's International flourished for two and a half years, and then was thrust into sharp decline by the rise of Stalinism.

In 1924, Comintern veered in an ultraleft direction, away from the united front policies, and Communist women leaders lost influence. In mid-1925, publication of their journal was cancelled, supposedly because it was too costly. In 1926, the Communist women's leadership was moved from Berlin to Moscow, and it was downgraded from an autonomous secretariat to a department of the Comintern executive committee. [\[23\]](#)

In the next few years, most of the Communist women leaders joined the anti-Stalinist oppositions lead by Leon Trotsky, Gregory Zinoviev, and Nikolai Bukharin.

The Soviet Zhenotdel, spearhead of women's advances in the Soviet republics, was shut down in 1930. Women's commissions elsewhere lasted a few years longer. By the middle of that decade, however, Stalinism imposed a return to patriarchal values both in the Soviet Union and in Communist parties abroad. [\[24\]](#)

Legacy of a revolutionary generation

The Communist women's most tangible achievement was to spread the ideas and impetus of women's struggle for emancipation in Russia, and knowledge of these achievements, around the world, where this experience influenced the broader workers' and women's movements.

In their understanding of women's oppression and the road to liberation, the revolutionary women of their generation marked a historical advance. They were children of their time, and on some questions their opinions missed the mark. On other issues, particularly their grasp of how women's liberation interacts with revolution, their understanding and experience has not been surpassed.

The character of the Communist Women's International – autonomous movement or party subcommittee – was ambiguous from start to finish. Their wisdom lay in accepting and managing that ambiguity. When bureaucratic forces ultimately imposed logical consistency, by eliminating the movement's autonomy, this signified its destruction.

The Communist women stood for the consistent pursuit of militant unity of the workers' movement. They sought to unite women from all social layers who were prepared to actively oppose evils of capitalism. They favoured an adroit search for common ground with non-Communist currents among women and in the labour movement. In doing so, they played a significant role in shaping the leadership of the Communist International as a whole.

This is perhaps their most important legacy to us. The Communist Women's International prefigures the leading role of women in movements for social progress both today and tomorrow.

See <http://johnriddell.wordpress.com/20...>

[1] Protokoll des III. Kongresses der Kommunistischen Internatinala (hereafter Third Congress), Hamburg: Verlag der Kommunistischen Internationale, 1921, p. 910.

[2] Kommunistische Fraueninternationale (hereafter KFI), vol. 1, no. 2–3 (1921), p. 55

[3] At the Baku congress, "a proposal to elect three women to the Presiding Committee ... aroused strong objections from some non-party delegates, and a lengthy debate ensued. When three women were unanimously elected to the committee in session 5, however, the entire congress rose to greet them in a thunderous ovation." John Riddell, ed., *To See the Dawn: Baku 1920, First Congress of the Peoples of the East*, Pathfinder:New York, 1993, p. 25.

[4] Third Congress, p. 910.

[5] Bernhard H. Bayerlein, "Zwischen Internationale und Gulag," in *International Newsletter of Communist Studies*, vol. 12 (2006), no. 19, p. 27

[6] KFI, vol. 2 (1922), no. 5–6, p. 519.

[7] Bericht der Executive der Kommunistischen Internationale, 15. Dezember 1922–15 Mai 1923, Moscow, Verlag des EKKI, 1923, pp. 15-16; Bayerlein, p. 34.

[8] KFI, vol. 1, no. 2-3 (1921), pp. 47-48.

The Communist Women's Movement (1921-26)

[9] Protokoll des Vierten Kongresses der Kommunistischen Internationale (hereafter Fourth Congress), Hamburg: Verlag der Kommunistischen Internationale, 1923, vol. 2, p. 727.

[10] KFI, vol. 1, no. 1 (1921), p. 6.

[11] Lenin on the Women's Question <http://www.marxists.org/archive/zet...>

[12] Ibid.

[13] Fourth Congress, vol. 2, p. 738; Bayerlein p. 36; Akina Grossmann, "German Communism and New Women," in Helmut Gruber and Pamela Graves, ed., *Women and Socialism: Socialism and Women*, New York: Berghahn Books, 1998, p. 139.

[14] John Riddell, ed., *Workers of the World and Oppressed Peoples, Unite! Proceedings and Documents of the Second Congress, 1920* (hereafter Second Congress). New York: Pathfinder Press, 1991, vol. 2, pp. 977–78.

[15] Second Congress, vol. 2, pp. 990–92.

[16] See Ketty Guttman, "Zum internationalen Kampf gegen die Bestrafung der Abtreibung," in KFI, vol. 3 (1923), no. 5, pp. 959-68.

[17] Grossman, pp. 142–4.

[18] KFI, "Massnahme zur Bekämpfung der Prostitution in Sowjetrussland," in KFI, vol. 3 (1923), no. 2, pp. 851–55.

[19] Fourth Congress, vol. 2, p. 734.

[20] Third Congress, p. 911. The German word *bürgerlich* can mean "middle-class" as well as "bourgeois."

[21] KFI, vol. 2 (1922), no. 5–6, p. 528

[22] From a speech to the German Reichstag (parliament), March 7, 1923, published that year by the KPD and quoted in Tǃnia Puschnerat, *Clara Zetkin: Bürgerlichkeit und Marxismus* (Essen: Klartext Verlag, 2003) 346.

[23] Bayerlein, pp. 34–40.

[24] Wendy Goldman, *Woman, the State, and Revolution: Soviet Family Policy and Social Life, 1917-1936*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1993, pp. 338–41; Leon Trotsky, *The Revolution Betrayed*, New York: Pathfinder Press, 1972, pp. 144–59.