

Women in the Paris Commune

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DURING THE SEIGE of Paris, women organized their own Vigilance Committee in Montmartre, the political center of the working class. La Révolution politique et sociale devoted a major portion of its pages to reporting on the Vigilance Committee and a variety of women's clubs and societies. This included the Union des Femmes, the women's union that was a section of the First International.

Topics ranged from the role of women in the revolution, women's right to divorce, to discussions on how bosses defrauded women of their wages and how women were subjected to the authority of the Catholic Church. These organizations recruited women to the Commune's medical units, set up soup kitchens and workshops for unemployed women, and defended the Commune. As one of the editors commented:

It is time for us to halt the injustices and prejudices of which women are victims. When we shall have placed every woman in a position where she can earn a living, when strong men no longer steal from them the work that is theirs by right, our daughters will no longer sell their honor to the vilest shop clerk.... I shall never ease to protest against the ill fate that the egoism of modern society has imposed upon them.

Louise Michel, a teacher and member of the First International, remembered: "I spent the finest hours of the siege with the Montmartre Vigilance Committee and with the Club de la Patrie en Danger. One was a little more fully alive there, with the joy of feeling oneself in one's element, in the midst of the intense struggle for liberty."

Since the Commune only lasted two months, most of their plans were never implemented, but the commission of three men and three women who drew up an educational program proposed free and secular education, based on scientific principles, for all children. Nurseries were to be equipped with gardens, bird houses and brightly colored toys for children. They did manage to establish workshops in some districts of Paris where women could apprentice to a trade. A school of industrial arts was opened for women with instruction in drawing, sculpture and carving. The Commission of Education decreed equal wages for male and female teachers.

André Leo, a novelist and journalist, wrote several appeals to the provinces appealing for support to the Commune. In summing up the revolutionary experience of the Commune, she wrote that women had not helped to dethrone the Emperor and God in order to let men take their place. Rather "The revolution means—since we must take its side—liberty and responsibility for every human being, with common rights as their only limit and without any privilege of race or sex."

Louise Michel, one of over 1,000 women tried by military courts, was deported to New Caledonia where she later supported an indigenous uprising. She wrote "In rebellion alone woman is at ease, trampling upon both prejudice and sufferings. All intelligent women will sooner or later rise in rebellion."

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P.S.

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