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# The Communist Women's Movement (1921-26)

Sunday 21 August 2011, by [RIDDELL John](#) (Date first published: 12 June 2011).

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**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 [1]. 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." [2]

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.'" [3] In each of the Comintern world congresses of 1920, 1921, and 1922, women encountered problems winning time to present and discuss their report. [4]

Yet on the whole, despite what Zetkin termed “open or covert opposition,” [5] 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. [6]

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."* [7]

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. [8]

### **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. [9]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.” [10]

On another occasion, Zetkin wrote that masses of women were now seized by “new longings, desires, impulses, needs, that before were hidden.” [11]

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." [12]

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." [13] 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. [14] 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." [15]

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." [16]

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.

### **'Our 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. [17]

In Germany, Communist women led a massive campaign against the anti-abortion law under the slogan, "Your Body Belongs to You." [18]

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. [19]

## **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. [20]

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. [21]

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." [22]

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." [23] 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. [24]

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. [25]

### **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.

**John Riddell**

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### **Researching the socialist/communist women's movement**

**by John Riddell** on July 3, 2011

Here are some thoughts by U.S. socialist Dianne Feeley on my article, "The Communist Women's Movement (1921-26)," posted as a comment to this website and reposted with Dianne's permission. I've added a few comments of my own on the state of research in this field.

*"I found this article thoughtful!"*

"The best practices of the Second International in terms of women's rights that I know about were carried out in the United States and Germany. For example, I think that the reason we won women's suffrage in a number of critical states in the pre-WWI United States had to do with the work of the Socialist Party. Kate Richards O'Hare, a socialist agitator considered second only to Eugene Debs, was also a popular speaker for women's suffrage. Socialist women were also active in the birth control/sex education movement of that period and in some cases were involved in helping provide abortions.

"English socialists were even more able to provide information about birth control to the working class. In the U.S., because of repressive legislation, it was difficult for even the medical profession to learn about birth control! Antoinette Konikow, who was on the SP's women's commission, was a founding CPer. (But when she went to the USSR in 1926, she was very disturbed by the fact that they were not interested in birth control-only abortion-as a woman's right.)

"Many of these socialist activists joined the Third International and brought their ideas and organizational methods with them. However I was surprised by the high figures for women's membership in Czechoslovakia & Norway! I believe the US & German SPs in pre-WWI never had more than 10% women, even with all the campaigns they carried out.

"Although socialists, like feminists, didn't campaign around domestic violence or sexual harassment back then, both did support the right of divorce, which was how they viewed the problem of domestic violence. No one talked about either concept then because those concepts developed out of the 2<sup>nd</sup> wave of feminism in the 1960s."

#### **-Dianne Feeley**

Dianne, a prominent U.S. socialist activist, is correct in stressing the roots of the Communist Women's Movement (CWM) in the pre-1914 socialist movement, both in the U.S. and internationally. Indeed, it was a direct continuation of the Socialist Women's Movement headed by Clara Zetkin before the war. Like the CWM, the Socialist Women's Movement played a leadership role in international socialist struggles as a whole, symbolized by the fact that it was the first world socialist body to speak out for an internationalist stand against the war. For the socialist women's antiwar appeal of 1915, see Lenin's *Struggle for a Revolutionary International* (New York: Pathfinder, 1984), pp. 277-79.

Dianne is also right to emphasize the communist women's practical involvement in efforts to gain increased reproductive and other rights for women.

Thanks also to Fabian Orcival for a useful reference. He writes:

*"Thank you for that interesting piece of writing. You might be interested in watching Elsa Rassbach's His-Story (BRD 1972, 21') which is a fictionalized re-enactment of a meeting between Zetkin and Lenin. Rassbach was mainly a cutter and media activist of the New Left. The film is of course polemic against Lenin's masculinism. I had the pleasure of including this on in a little cycle of films I curated a few years ago for the Zeughauskino in Berlin. Please find the whole program here [http://www.dhm.de/kino/1968\\_in\\_berlin.html](http://www.dhm.de/kino/1968_in_berlin.html)."*

Addition, July 13, 2011: I'd also like to include an important comment just received from Daniel Gaido, who writes:

*The Spanish version of your article on the Communist women's movement can be accessed here*



[http://www.ips.org.ar/?p=2817#\\_ftn16](http://www.ips.org.ar/?p=2817#_ftn16).

*I think you didn't mention Inessa Armand and her role in organizing the First International Conference of Communist Women in July 1920.*

R. C. Elwood, *Inessa Armand: Revolutionary and Feminist*, Cambridge University Press, 2002, pp. 258-59: "Inessa Armand was the dominant figure at the conference. She sat on its presidium, chaired its formal sessions in the Kremlin, and introduced the major resolutions." End of addition

(These and other comments on my website are published together with the article to which they relate. To see comments on all articles, go to the RSS Comments feed on the bottom left of every page).

My working paper on the Communist Women's Movement is by far the most widely downloaded item on my website, and it has been adopted for republication in the Philippines, Australia, and India. This comes as no surprise – the CWM story is not only among the most successful arenas of communist activity in the 1920s but is an experience that speaks strongly to our time.

I have found few historical studies of this movement. I have listed below some relevant English-language works that have come to my attention; I'd appreciate pointers to what I have missed.

The most prominent CWM leader, Clara Zetkin, is often underestimated as a political leader, as I seek to show in "Clara Zetkin's Struggle for the United Front" on this website [26]. Few of her writings are available in English. As German historian Bernhard Bayerlein has noted, most members of her outstanding leadership team are almost forgotten. My forthcoming book on the Fourth Congress of the Communist International (available in November) contains capsule biographies of many of these women leaders.

I wonder if communist history may have acquired an undeserved reputation as a field not friendly to women's studies. Historians of communism today are overwhelmingly male – just as much or more so than were members of the communist movement itself 75-85 years ago. This seems surprising, after all the gains women have made over the intervening decades. I wonder why this is so.

My article was based mainly on German-language sources relating to the CWM as a whole. However, no language barrier obstructs study of the lively communist women's publications in Britain, Canada, the United States, and elsewhere. There seems to be an upturn these days in left-wing writing on communist history – good reason to hope that the activity of communist women – and women historians – will receive its deserved attention.

The next installment of my series of working papers on socialist and communist history will be "Nationality's Role in Social Liberation: The Soviet Legacy." Look for it later this month. See also list of papers posted to date [27].

### **Partial listing of works on the Communist Women's Movement**

Only English-language works have been included.

Clara Zetkin, ed., "Theses for the Communist Women's Movement," in John Riddell, ed., *Workers of the World and Oppressed Peoples, Unite: Proceedings of the Second [Comintern] Congress, 1920*, New York: Pathfinder, 1991. Printed together with the theses of the first international conference of communist women.

"Methods and Forms of Work among Communist Party Women: Theses," in Alan Adler, ed., *Theses, Resolutions and Manifestos of the First Four Congresses of the Third International*, London:

InkLinks, 1980, also at [www.marxists.org](http://www.marxists.org). This unattributed resolution of the third Communist International congress (1921) was unquestionably edited by Clara Zetkin.

Clara Zetkin, *Lenin and the Woman Question*, New York: International Publishers, 1934. See: [www.marxists.org/archive/zetkin/1925/lenin/zetkin2.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/zetkin/1925/lenin/zetkin2.htm).

Margaret Hobbs and Joan Sangster, eds., *The Woman Worker, 1926-1929*, St. John's: Canadian Committee on Labour History, 1999. This book offers extensive excerpts from the Canadian Federation of Women's Labour Leagues publication.

Elizabeth Waters, "In the Shadow of the Comintern: The Communist Women's Movement, 1920-43," in Sonia Kruks, Rayna Rapp, and Marilyn B. Young, eds., *Promissory Notes: Women in the Transition to Socialism*, New York: Monthly Review Press, 1989.

Atina Grossman, "German Communism and New Women: Dilemmas and Contradictions," in Helmut Gruber and Pamela Graves, eds., *Women and Socialism: Socialism and Women*, New York: Berghahn Books, 1998.

Christine Bard and Jean-Louis Robert, "The French Communist Party and Women 1920-39: From 'Feminism' to Familialism," in Gruber and Graves, eds.

Eric D. Weitz, *Creating German Communism, 1890-1990: From Popular Protests to Socialist State*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997. Note his chapter, "The Gendering of German Communism."

The following books do not take up the Communist Women's Movement, but provide background on the portion of its activity devoted to reporting on conditions of women in the Soviet Union.

- Barbara Clements, *Daughters of Revolution: A History of Women in the U.S.S.R.*, 1994
- Michelle Fuqua, *The Politics of the Domestic Sphere: the Zhenotdely, Women's Liberation, and the Search for a Novyi Byt in Early Soviet Russia*, 1996.
- Wendy Goldman, *Women, the State, and Soviet Society: Soviet Family Policy*, 1993.
- Gail Lapidus, *Women in Soviet Society*, 1978.
- Richard Stites, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Russia (1860-1930)*, 1978.

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<http://johnriddell.wordpress.com/2011/07/03/researching-the-socialistcommunist-women's-movement/>

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## Footnotes

[1] <http://www.ips.org.ar/?p=2817>



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

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

[4] 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.

[5] Third Congress, p. 910.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

[13] Ibid.

[14] 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.

[15] 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.

[16] Second Congress, vol. 2, pp. 990-92.

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

[18] Grossman, pp. 142-4.

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

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

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

[22] KFI, vol. 2 (1922), no. 5-6, p. 528

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

[24] Bayerlein, pp. 34-40.

[25] 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.

[26] Available on ESSF (article 22639): [Clara Zetkin's struggle for the united front](#).

[27] <http://johnriddell.wordpress.com/category/communist-international/articles/>