

Women's Day in Russia 1917: A day to prepare for victory - Document: A leaflet issued by Russian socialists 100 years ago

"1917: The View from the Streets" - leaflets of the Russian revolution - #5

Saturday 11 March 2017, by [Petersburg Interdistrict Committee](#) (Date first published: 6 March 1917).

A leaflet issued by Russian socialists 100 years ago to honor Working Women's Day anticipated the revolution that began that day.

One hundred years ago, on or about March 6 (February 21, according to the Julian calendar in use in Russia at the time), the Petrograd Mezhrayonka (or Interdistrict Committee) distributed a leaflet regarding International Women's Day (IWD), coming up in two days' time on March 8. That day in 1917 became the first day of the Russian Revolution, begun by a strike of women textile workers.

Although the origins of IWD were in the United States, German Social Democrat Clara Zetkin proposed in 1910 the annual celebration of the holiday on March 8 (February 23 in Russia). The holiday was first celebrated on this date in 1911 in Germany and several other European countries. Russia followed with a small demonstration in 1913, but IWD was overshadowed in Russia by May Day and the anniversary of Bloody Sunday (January 9, 1905).



Women demonstrate in Petrograd, 1917.

In 1917, Russia's various socialist groups failed to unite behind common slogans for International Women's Day and therefore were unable to carry out a joint action. Without a printing press at the time, the Bolsheviks did not issue any leaflets for IWD.

The Interdistrict Committee, authors of the leaflet below, wanted to rally all Revolutionary Social Democrats in order to present a united socialist front against the war, the autocracy, and liberal attempts to draw workers into a patriotic effort to support the war. During 1917 the Interdistrict Committee, which Leon Trotsky joined when he returned to Russia, fused with the Bolshevik current.

According to historian Tsuyoshi Hasegawa, the Interdistrict Committee intended the leaflet below to educate workers rather than provoke rebellion. None of the male socialists expected that on this holiday, women workers would provide the catalyst for the February Revolution, which would topple the autocracy.

Food shortages had become a routine occurrence by March 1917. On the morning of March 8 (February 23), a fuel shortage in Petrograd stopped bakeries from working. Women (or their children) who had stood in line for hours had no bread to buy. Anticipating the cries of their children hungry for food, women workers reached the limit of their patience. Women textile workers went on strike and appealed to metalworkers to join them. Radical socialists quickly decided to add slogans against the autocracy and war to the calls for bread.

In this way, unexpectedly and on a commemorative day that most radical leftists treated as of minor importance, the February Revolution began.

Selection, translation, and annotation by Barbara Allen.

Russian Social Democratic Workers' Party.

Proletarians of all countries, unite!

Working women comrades!

For ten years, women of all countries have observed February 23rd as Women Workers' Day, as women's "May First." American women were the first to mark this as the day to review their forces on it. Gradually, women of the entire world joined them. On this day, meetings and assemblies are held at which attempts are made to explain the reasons for our difficult situation and to show the way out of it.

It has been a long time since women first entered the factories and mills to earn their bread. For a long time, millions of women have stood at the machines all day on an equal footing with men. Factory owners work both male and female comrades to exhaustion. Both men and women are thrown in jail for going on strike. Both men and women need to struggle against the owners. But women entered the family of workers later than men. Often, they still are afraid and do not know what they should demand and how to demand it. The owners have always used their ignorance and timidity against them and still do.

On this day, especially, comrades, let's think about how we can conquer our enemy, the capitalist, as quickly as possible. We will remember our near and dear ones on the front. We will recall the difficult struggle they waged to wring from the owners each extra ruble of pay and each hour of rest, and each liberty from the government. How many of them fell at the front, or were cast into prison or exile for their brave struggle? You replaced them in the rear, in the mills and factories. Your duty is to continue their great cause - that of emancipating all humanity from oppression and slavery.

Women workers, you should not hold back those male comrades who remain, but rather you should join them in fraternal struggle against the government and the factory owners. It is for their sake that war is waged, so many tears are shed, and so much blood is spilled in all countries. This terrible slaughter has now gone into its third year. Our fathers, husbands, and brothers are perishing. Our dear ones arrive home as unfortunate wretches and cripples. The tsarist government sent them to the front. It maimed and killed them, but it does not care about their sustenance.

There is no end in sight to the shedding of worker blood. Workers were shot down on Bloody Sunday, January 9, 1905, and massacred during the Lena Goldfields strike in April 1912. More recently, workers were shot in Ivanovo-Voznesensk, Shuia, Gorlovka, and Kostroma. Worker blood is

shed on all fronts. The empress trades in the peoples' blood and sells off Russia piece by piece. They send nearly unarmed soldiers to certain death by shooting. They kill hundreds of thousands of people on the front and they profit financially from this.

Under the pretext of war, owners of factories and mills try to turn workers into serfs. The cost of living grows terribly high in all cities. Hunger knocks at everyone's door. From the villages, they take away cattle and the last morsels of bread for the war. For hours, we stand in line for food. Our children are starving. How many of them have been neglected and lost their parents? They run wild and many become hooligans. Hunger has driven many girls, who are still children, to walk the streets. Many children stand at machines doing work beyond their physical capacity until late at night. Grief and tears are all around us.

It is hard for working people not only in Russia, but in all countries. Not long ago the German government cruelly suppressed an uprising of the hungry in Berlin. In France, the police are in a fury. They send people to the front for going on strike. Everywhere the war brings disaster, a high cost of living, and oppression of the working class.

Comrades, working women, for whose sake is war waged? Do we need to kill millions of Austrian and German workers and peasants? German workers did not want to fight either. Our close ones do not go willingly to the front. They are forced to go. The Austrian, English, and German workers go just as unwillingly. Tears accompany them in their countries as in ours. War is waged for the sake of gold, which glitters in the eyes of capitalists, who profit from it. Ministers, mill owners, and bankers hope to fish in troubled waters. They become rich in wartime. After the war, they will not pay military taxes. Workers and peasants will bear all the sacrifices and pay all the costs.

Dear women comrades, will we keep on tolerating this silently for very long, with occasional outbursts of boiling rage against small-time traders? Indeed, it is not they who are at fault for the people's calamities. They are ruined themselves. The government is guilty. It began this war and cannot end it. It ravages the country. It is its fault that you are starving. The capitalists are guilty. It is waged for their profit. It's well-nigh time to shout to them: Enough! Down with the criminal government and its entire gang of thieves and murderers. Long live peace!

Already the day of retribution approaches. A long time ago, we ceased to believe the tales of the government ministers and the masters. Popular rage is increasing in all countries. Workers everywhere are beginning to understand that they can't expect their governments to end the war. If they do conclude peace, it will entail attempts to take others' land, to rob another country, and this will lead to new slaughter. Workers do not need that which belongs to someone else.

Down with the autocracy! Long live the Revolution! Long live the Provisional Revolutionary Government! Down with war! Long live the Democratic Republic! Long live the international solidarity of the proletariat! Long live the united RSDRP.

Petersburg Interdistrict Committee

Published in A.G. Shlyapnikov, Semnadtsatyj god, volume 1, 1923, pp. 306-308.

References

Tsuyoshi Hasegawa, *The February Revolution: Petrograd, 1917*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1981, pp. 215-18.

Barbara C. Allen, *Alexander Shlyapnikov, 1885-1937: Life of an Old Bolshevik*, Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016.

Other leaflets in the "1917: The view from the streets" series

"Down with the war; long live the revolution!" (December 1916, Bolshevik-influenced students):
<https://johnriddell.wordpress.com/2016/12/01/down-with-the-war-long-live-the-revolution/>

"The day of people's wrath is near!" (c. January 22 [9], 1917, Mezhrayonka):
<https://johnriddell.wordpress.com/2017/01/21/the-day-of-the-peoples-wrath-is-near/>

"Only a provisional government can bring freedom and peace" (February 6 [January 24], 1917, Mensheviks):
<https://johnriddell.wordpress.com/2017/02/05/only-a-provisional-government-can-bring-freedom-and-peace/>

"For a provisional revolutionary government of workers and poor peasants" (February 15 [3], 1917, Bolsheviks):
<https://johnriddell.wordpress.com/2017/02/15/for-a-provisional-revolutionary-government-of-workers-and-poor-peasants/>

A note on Russian dates

The Julian calendar used by Russia in 1917 ran 13 days behind the Gregorian calendar that is in general use today. In the "View from the Streets" series, centennial dates are reckoned by the Gregorian calendar; dates are given with the Gregorian ("New Style") date first, followed by the Julian date in parentheses.

P.S.

* March 6, 2017:
<https://johnriddell.wordpress.com/2017/03/06/womens-day-in-russia-1917-a-day-to-prepare-for-victory/>
<https://socialistworker.org/2017/03/06/a-day-to-prepare-for-conquering-power>