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A Survey of Comintern Auxiliary Organizations - Part 4: The Communist Women's Movement (CWM)

Tuesday 5 October 2021, by [RIDDELL John](#) (Date first published: 15 May 2021).

From its inception, the modern socialist movement upheld the social equality of women and opposed the pervasive discrimination to which they were subjected. The socialist movement itself, however, was overwhelmingly masculine in composition, and its members were far from immune to male chauvinist prejudices. Meanwhile, women were widely excluded from political rights.

The revolutionary socialist movement saw women's emancipation as central to the achievement of socialism. As Clara Zetkin wrote in 1920:

"The demand for women's equality signifies much more than sweeping away received prejudices, customs, and practices; much more than sweeping away male privilege. It becomes a struggle against bourgeois class rule and the bourgeois class state, and merges with the onward drive of the proletariat to win state power".[1]

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Given the obstacles then faced by socialist-minded women, Zetkin and the Comintern leadership as a whole saw the need for special structures to facilitate drawing women into the movement and providing channels for their socialist activism.

In this spirit, the First International Conference of Socialist women was held in 1907 in conjunction with a congress of the Second International. The conference launched a movement of socialist women, one of whose achievements was the establishment at its 1910 conference of International

Women's Day, celebrated around the world on March 8.

Following the collapse of the Second International at the outset of World War 1, this socialist women's movement held the first international conference of socialists opposed to the conflict, which took place in Switzerland in March 1915.[2]

The Communist International's founding congress in March 1919 adopted a resolution, drafted by Alexandra Kollontai, "[On the Need to Draw Women Workers into the Struggle for Socialism](#)," proclaiming the need "to work forcefully and energetically to won proletarian women to its ranks." [3] [1]

To this end, the First International Conference of Communist Women, convened simultaneously with the Comintern's Second World Congress, took place on 30 July-3 August 1920. The women's conference adopted a text presenting the main guidelines for the Communist Women's Movement.[4] A monthly international journal was launched, *Die Kommunistische Fraueninternational* (The Communist Women's International), edited by Zetkin in Berlin. The conference resolved to form an international women's secretariat, which was constituted on 20 November 1920 with Zetkin as general secretary and Kollontai as her assistant.

The women's secretariat sought to help establish women's departments, equipped with women's newspapers, in each of the Comintern's national sections. Women's sections enjoyed a measure of autonomy and the right to take initiatives and to place issues for consideration before the Comintern as a whole.

International Campaigns

The CWM initiated coordinated international campaigns, such as raising relief for victims of the 1920-21 famine in Soviet Russia, reviving International Women's Day as a vehicle for women's global mobilization, and initiating struggles on major issues facing working women such as abortion rights, childcare, equal pay for equal work, opposition to discriminatory layoffs, and women's suffrage. Through these efforts, the CWM took the lead in Comintern efforts to promote a workers' united front.

In 1921, the Communist Women's Movement set up a Women's Secretariat for the Near East, which held a conference in Tiflis (now Tbilisi), Georgia on 12 December of that year.

Communist women also contended with backward attitudes within the Communist parties. Many comrades "recognizes theoretically the value of our organisation," stated Gerda Linderot from Sweden at the time, "but in practice remain quite indifferent to us." Yet the movement made headway, in part thanks to strong support from central Comintern leaders, especially Lenin.[5]

Extensive discussion of the CWM and its work took place in both the Third and Fourth World Congresses, with major reports by Zetkin ([1921](#) and [1922](#)).[6]

With the rise of Stalinist bureaucratism in the Communist International, the Communist Women's Movement fell into decline. In 1925, publication of its journal was cancelled. The following year, the movement itself was downgraded from an autonomous secretariat of the Comintern to a department of its executive committee. Communist policy on issues important to women was distorted during the Stalin era by twists and turns of Comintern policy as a whole.

The CWM's achievements are discussed more fully on this website in "[The Communist Women's](#)

[Movement 1921-26 \[2\]](#),” which summarizes the movement’s contribution as follows:

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.

John Riddell

Notes

[1]. Clara Zetkin, “The Tasks of the Second International Communist Women’s Conference,” quoted in Mike Taber and Daria Dyakonova, ed., *The Communist Women’s Movement, 1920-22*, Brill: Leiden, 2022.

[2]. The conference appeal, “Women of the Working People,” is available in John Riddell, ed., *Lenin’s Struggle for a Revolutionary International*, New York: Pathfinder, 1984, pp. 276-79.

[3]. Riddell, ed., *Founding the Communist International*, New York: Pathfinder, 1987, pp. 250-51.

[4]. Riddell, ed., *Workers of the World and Oppressed Peoples (Second Congress)*, vol. 2, pp. 977-1001.

[5]. See Zetkin, “[Lenin on the Women Question](#),” on Marxists Internet Archive.

[6]. See Riddell, *To the Masses (Third Congress)*, pp. 779-95 and *Toward the United Front (Fourth Congress)*, pp. 837-73.

An annotated collection of documents of the Communist Women’s Movement, edited by Mike Taber and Daria Diakonova, is in preparation as part of the [Comintern Publishing Project](#), with the goal of publication by Brill and Haymarket Books in 2022.

P.S.

• John Riddell blog. May 15, 2021:
http://www.europe-solidaire.org/ecrire/?exec=article_edit&id_article=59731

Footnotes

[1] Available on ESSF (article 59733), [First Congress of the Communist International - Resolution on the Role of Working Women](#).

[2] Available on ESSF (article 22640), [The Communist Women's Movement \(1921-26\)](#).