

# Socialism and women's emancipation

Saturday 15 December 2007, by [RIDDELL John](#) (Date first published: 7 December 2007).

**This year marks the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Russian Revolution. In the years following the revolution, its leaders initiated the formation of the Communist (Third) International (Comintern), an international grouping of communist parties. In Venezuela, the leadership of the country's unfolding socialist revolution have issued a call for a new international of Latin American left parties. This article, by John Riddell, is part of an ongoing series on the history of the Comintern.**

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It was socialist women who made the first international appeal against the First World War, at a March 1915 conference organised by German revolutionist Clara Zetkin in Switzerland.

Two years later, a socialist women's celebration of International Women's Day in St. Petersburg set in motion the mass movement that overthrew the Russian tsar.

Yet despite their vanguard role, women were few in number and weak in influence in the socialist movement of the time. Even in the Bolshevik party, they made up only 8% of the membership in 1922.

Not only did women in 1917 lack the vote in all major countries; they were chained in servitude by a thick web of discriminatory laws and patriarchal oppression. In Russia, the Bolshevik-led Soviet government established following the October 1917 revolution took swift action to counter women's oppression, and its achievements defined the Communist International's program on this question.

Women in Soviet Russia achieved full legal and political rights, including the right to hold property, act as head of the household, leave the husband's home, and obtain a divorce on request. Soviet law guaranteed women equal pay for equal work, while providing protection for women on the job. Other laws aimed to protect and assist mothers, while assuring full rights for children born outside marriage. Abortion became legal and free in 1920.

Women's freedom of choice was also strengthened by the soviet law, adopted in 1922, legalising homosexual relations among consenting adults.

Europe's most backward country had achieved more in two years than the advanced capitalist countries accomplished in the previous century — or the half-century that was to follow. But for the Bolsheviks, these measures were but an initial step: new laws had to be translated into social reality, and that could be done only under leadership of women themselves.

## **Combatting domestic slavery**

In 1919, the Bolshevik party created the Zhenotdel (women's department), an organisation that united women in struggle to affirm their new legal rights. Thousands of Zhenotdel workers went to workers' districts and rural villages. They organised "women's clubs" and the election of tens of thousands of women delegates, who received several months' training, served as judges, and helped organise institutions serving women.

Large numbers of women enlisted in the Red Army. Nearly 2000 were killed during the civil war, and 55 were awarded the Order of the Red Banner for valour in combat.

"Notwithstanding all the laws emancipating woman", the leader of the Russian Revolution, V.I. Lenin wrote in 1919, "she continues to be a domestic slave, because petty housework crushes, strangles, stultifies and degrades her, chains her to the kitchen and the nursery, and she wastes her labour on barbarously unproductive, petty, nerve-racking, stultifying and crushing drudgery".

The real emancipation of women, Lenin continued, begins with the "wholesale transformation [of housekeeping] into a large-scale socialist economy", beginning with "public catering establishments, nurseries, kindergartens". Communal kitchens became widespread during the first years of Soviet rule.

The early congresses of the Communist International (Comintern) found little time to discuss women's emancipation. Still, a great deal was achieved, in terms of both program and activity.

"Theses for the Communist Women's Movement" written in 1920 by Zetkin, acknowledged that the pre-1914 Second International had taken a clear stand for women's "full social liberation and full equal rights", but noted a flagrant "gulf between theory and practice". The Second International, Zetkin said, had permitted member parties to ignore the resolution of its 1907 congress in Stuttgart requiring all parties to campaign for the right to vote for all women.

The Comintern sought to ensure action on issues affecting women by establishing in 1920 a women's secretariat, headed by Zetkin and based in Moscow. In order to lead member parties in recruiting and educating women and fighting for women's rights, the secretariat published a monthly magazine, The Communist Women's International, and collaborated with women's committees organised at various levels in the International's member parties.

## **Working class movement**

The socialist movement of the time had a critical stance toward "bourgeois feminists" and sought to win women to the working-class movement. A 1921 resolution of the International affirms that "there is no special women's question, nor should there be a special women's movement." Communism will be won "not by the united efforts of women of different classes, but by the united struggle of all the exploited."

However, the same resolution confirmed the need for commissions for work among women in all member parties, pointing to the example of Zhenotdel — a movement of worker and peasant women committed to women's emancipation.

The Comintern linked women's emancipation with working-class struggle because it believed women's oppression is rooted in private ownership of the productive economy and in class-divided society.

Zetkin's 1920 theses, written together with Zhenotdel leaders, stressed that male supremacy had originated with the arrival of private property, through which the wife, like the slave, had "become the property of the man", with "pariah status in the family and in public life". To achieve women's full social equality, "private property must be uprooted", and "women must be integrated into the social production of a new order free of exploitation and subjugation".

Achieving women's equal rights in law, while significant, will leave working women — the vast majority — "still unfree and exploited ... their humanity stunted, and their rights and interests neglected". For women, "full political equality" is a means to struggle for "a social order cleansed of the domination of private property over human beings."

"Communism", the 1921 resolution added, "creates conditions whereby the conflict between the natural function of woman — maternity — and her social obligations, which hinder her creative work for the collective, will disappear".

Women "will become co-owners of the means of production and distribution and will take part in administering them ... on an equal footing."

With the rise of Stalinism inside Soviet Russia, these moves were reversed: the international women's monthly magazine was closed in 1925, the women's secretariat in 1926, and the Zhenotdel in 1930.

\* For the 1920 theses by Clara Zetkin, see *Workers of the World and Oppressed Peoples, Unite!*, John Riddell, ed. New York: Pathfinder Press, 1991. For the 1921 congress resolutions, see *Theses, Resolutions, and Manifestos of the First Four Congresses of the Third International*, Alan Adler, ed., Ink Links, 1980.

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