REASON IN REVOLT

JACOBIN

The Socialist Origins of International Women’s Day

From the beginning, International Women’s Day has been an occasion to celebrate working women and fight capitalism.

by Cintia Frencia & Daniel Gaido

3.8.17

Cintia Frencia is assistant professor of contemporary history at the National University of Cordoba, Argentina. Daniel Gaido is a researcher at the National Scientific and Technical Research Council (Conicet), Argentina.

Women workers demonstrating in St Petersburg, Russia on International Women's Day 1917.

6.7k

To celebrate International Women’s Day and the 100th anniversary of the February Revolution, print subscriptions to *Jacobin* are only $19.17 today.

In 1894, Clara Zetkin took to the pages of the Social Democratic women’s magazine *Die Gleichheit* (*Equality*), which she had founded three years earlier, to polemicize against the mainstream of German feminism. “Bourgeois feminism and the movement of proletarian women,” Zetkin wrote, “are two fundamentally different social movements.”

According to Zetkin, bourgeois feminists pressed reforms, through a struggle between the sexes and against the men of their own class,

Featured

Neither Washington Nor Brussels

Daniel Finn

The Great God Trump and the White Working Class

Mike Davis

How to Build a Mass Movement

Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor

The Party We Need

Jacobin

Conservatives Against Incarceration?

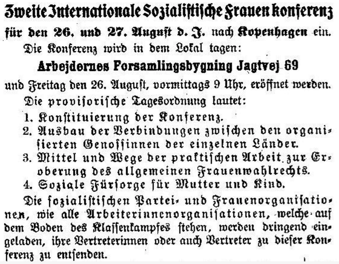
Marie Gottschalk

without questioning the very existence of capitalism. By contrast, working women, through a struggle of class against class and in a joint fight with the men of their class, sought to transcend capitalism.

By 1900, women in the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) were holding biannual conferences immediately before the party congresses — conferences where all the burning issues of the proletarian women's movement were discussed. This ideological and organizational strength turned the German Socialist working women's movement into the backbone of the International Socialist Women Movement.

In 1907, the International Conference of Socialist Women convened in Stuttgart, Germany for its first gathering, proclaiming as its main demand "the right to universal female suffrage without qualifications of property, tax, education or any other kind of barrier which may hinder members of the working class from availing themselves of their political rights." The struggle for the franchise, the delegates insisted, was to be carried out "not together with the women's bourgeois movement, but in close co-operation with socialist parties."

The invitation to the next International Conference of Socialist Women — held three years later in Copenhagen — exhibited the same adherence to the proletarian class struggle: "We urgently call on all the *socialist parties and organizations of socialist women* as well as on all the *working women's organizations* standing on the foundation of the class struggle to send their delegates to this conference."



Zweite Internationale Sozialiſtiſche Frauen konferenz

für den 26. und 27. Auguſt d. J. nach **Kopenhagen** ein.

Die Konferenz wird in dem Lokal tagen:

Arbejdernes Forsamlingsbygning Jagtvej 69

und Freitag den 26. Auguſt, vormittags 9 Uhr, eröffnet werden.

Die proviſoriſche Tagesordnung lautet:

1. Konſtituierung der Konferenz.
2. Ausbau der Verbindungen zwiſchen den organiſierten Genoſſinnen der einzelnen Länder.
3. Mittel und Wege der praktiſchen Arbeit zur Eroberung des allgemeinen Frauenwahlrechts.
4. Soziale Fürſorge für Mutter und Kind.

Die ſozialiſtiſchen Partei- und Frauenorganiſationen, wie alle Arbeiterinnenorganiſationen, welche auf dem Boden des Klaſſenkampfes ſtehen, werden dringend eingeladen, ihre Vertreterinnen oder auch Vertreter zu dieſer Konferenz zu entſenden.

The call issued for the Second International Conference of Socialist Women in Copenhagen.

They were in good company across the Atlantic. The previous year, socialist working women in the US had designated February 28 "Women's Day" — "an event," the Copenhagen conference reported the following year, "that has awakened the attention of our enemies."

Following the example of their American comrades, the German delegate Luise Zietz proposed the proclamation of an "International Women's Day," to be celebrated annually. Zetkin seconded the proposal, along with one hundred female delegates from seventeen countries.

The Women's Day resolution read:

> In agreement with the class-conscious political and trade union organizations of the proletariat of their respective countries, socialist women of all nationalities have to organize a special Women's Day (*Frauentag*), which must, above all, promote the propaganda of female suffrage. This demand must be discussed

Follow us

NEW ISSUE OUT NOW

Jacobin Magazine
250.365 Me gusta
Te gusta
Registrarte

A ti y a 224 amigos más les gusta esto

INTERPRET THE WORLD AND CHANGE IT
MA and PhD in Anthropology and Social Change
Explore Now
California Institute of Integral Studies
Study with us in San Francisco
www.ciis.edu/anth

> in connection with the whole woman's question, according to the socialist conception.

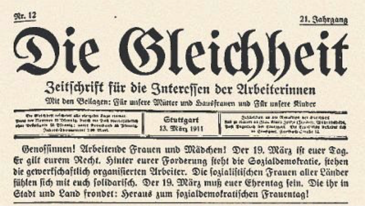
For the delegates, supporting the "socialist conception" meant promoting not just female suffrage, but labor legislation for working women, social assistance for mothers and children, equal treatment of single mothers, provision of nurseries and kindergartens, distribution of free meals and free educational facilities in schools, and international solidarity.

Simply put, International Women's Day was, from the very beginning, a *Working* Women's Day. While its immediate objective was to win universal female suffrage, its aspirations were much grander: the overthrow of capitalism and the triumph of socialism, abolishing both the wage slavery of workers and the domestic slavery of women through the socialization of education and care work.

The First International Women's Day

The first International Women's Day was celebrated not on March 8 but on March 19, 1911. The date was chosen to commemorate the 1848 Revolution in Berlin — the day before, March 18, was dedicated every year to "the fallen heroes of March."

In Germany, two and a half million copies of a flyer urging participation in Women's Day were printed and distributed. *Die Gleichheit* put out its own call: "Comrades! Working Women and Girls! March 19 is your day. It is your right. Behind your demand stands Social Democracy, organized labor. The Socialist women of all countries are in solidarity with you. March 19 should be your day of glory!"



Nr. 12

21. Jahrgang

Die Gleichheit

Zeitſchrift für die Intereſſen der Arbeiterinnen

Mit den Beilagen: Für unſere Mütter und Hausfrauen und Für unſere Kinder

Stuttgart
13. März 1911

Genoſſinnen! Arbeitende Frauen und Mädchen! Der 19. März iſt euer Tag. Er gilt eurem Recht. Hinter eurer Forderung ſteht die Sozialdemokratie, ſtehen die gewerkſchaftlich organiſierten Arbeiter. Die ſozialiſtiſchen Frauen aller Länder fühlen ſich mit euch ſolidariſch. Der 19. März muß euer Ehrentag ſein. Die ihr in Stadt und Land frondet: Heraus zum ſozialdemokratiſchen Frauentag!

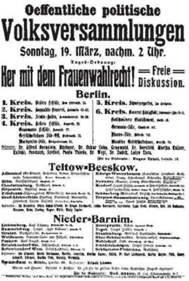
The issue of *Die Gleichheit* (*Equality*) calling for the celebration of International Women's Day on March 19, 1911.

Trumpeting the battle cry "Forward to female suffrage," more than a million women — mostly, but not exclusively, women organized in the SPD and the unions — took to the streets in Germany demanding social and political equality. They organized "popular public political assemblies" — forty-two in Berlin alone — where they discussed the issues affecting their lives.

Legal misogyny in Palestine must end
» Read more
TheNewArab
Progressive. Independent. Free.
News, views and analysis from across the Middle East

Donate

Around the world, working women set aside a day for themselves. In 1911, women workers in United States, Switzerland, Denmark, and Austria chose March 8 as Women's Day. Counterparts in France, Holland, Sweden, Bohemia, and (crucially) Russia soon added themselves to the list of celebrants.



Oeffentliche politische

Volksversammlungen

Sonntag, 19. März, nachm. 2 Uhr.

Her mit dem Frauenwahlrecht! = Freie = Diskussion.

Berlin.

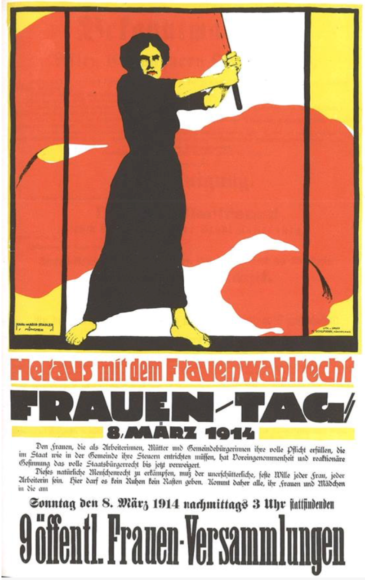
1. Kreis.
2. Kreis.
3. Kreis.
4. Kreis.
5. Kreis.
6. Kreis.

Teltow-Beeskow.

Nieder-Barnim.

A notice announcing, "Public political assemblies" will be held on Sunday, March 19 at 2 PM. "Forward with female suffrage! Free discussion."

Celebrating International Women's Day on March 8 took hold as a worldwide practice in 1914. A famous sign emblazoned with the words "Women's Day / March 8, 1914 – Forward with Female Suffrage," in which a woman dressed in black waves the red flag, marked the occasion. In Germany — overcome with hysteria in the lead-up to World War I — police prohibited the poster from being hung or distributed publicly. The fourth International Women's Day turned into a mass action against the imperialist war that would erupt three months later.



Heraus mit dem Frauenwahlrecht

FRAUEN-TAG

8. MÄRZ 1914

Den Frauen, die als Arbeiterinnen, Mütter und Gemeindebürgerinnen ihre volle Pflicht erfüllen, die im Staat wie in der Gemeinde ihre Steuern entrichten müſſen, hat Voreingenommenheit und reaktionäre Geſinnung das volle Staatsbürgerrecht bis jetzt verweigert.

Dieſes natürliche Menſchenrecht zu erkämpfen, muß der unerſchütterliche, feſte Wille jeder Frau, jeder Arbeiterin ſein. Hier darf es kein Ruhen kein Raſten geben. Kommt daher alle, ihr Frauen und Mädchen in die am

Sonntag den 8. März 1914 nachmittags 3 Uhr ſtattfindenden

9 öffentl. Frauen-Verſammlungen

The famous poster announcing Women's Day 1914.

Three years later, March 8 would acquire a new significance when the February Revolution convulsed Russia (February 23 in the Julian calendar is March 8 in the Gregorian calendar). Russian working women played a leading role in the upheaval. Despite the opposition of every party, including the Bolsheviks, they turned the International Women's Day demonstration into a mass strike that carried away the whole working class of Petrograd and gave birth to the Russian Revolution.

What War Wrought

War broke out in August 1914, inaugurating a new era in the development of the International Socialist Women's Movement.

The entire Second International — and therefore the International Socialist Women's Movement as well — split along national lines, succumbing to chauvinism. In Germany, the SPD (and its affiliate, the General Commission of Trade Unions) adopted a "social peace" policy, making critical demonstrations verboten. Those who flouted the proscription and publicly celebrated International Women's Day suffered repression at the hands of the government and the police.

In early November 1914, Clara Zetkin issued an appeal "To the Socialist Women of All Countries," where she spoke out strongly against the war and in favor of mass actions for peace. As part of this opposition to imperialism, Zetkin convoked the third and final Socialist Women's Conference in April 1915. (Lenin accompanied the Bolshevik delegation, which included his wife Krupskaya and Lilina Zinoviev.)

As imperialist war waged around them, the conference issued the internationalist battle cry "War on war." But principled opposition to militarism was in short supply. Upon returning to Germany, Zetkin was arrested for distributing the manifesto as an illegal leaflet.

An Annual Reminder

After the collapse of the second German Empire and the formation of councils *(Räte)* of workers and soldiers all over Germany in November 1918, the bourgeoisie effected a kind of democratic counter-revolution: they granted women the right to vote, but counterpoised parliament and the constituent assembly assembled in Weimar to the soviets of workers' delegates.

Doing the bourgeoisie's bidding was Social Democratic leader Friedrich Ebert, the first president of the Weimar Republic (and "the Stalin of Social Democracy," in the words of historian Carl Schorske). In his hands — and those of the union bureaucracy — the demand for universal female suffrage, adopted by the revolutionary labor movement as a transitional demand, was turned into a barrier to socialist revolution.

Since International Women's Day had originated in the left wing of the proletarian women's movement, the SPD leadership also stopped celebrating March 8. They argued that, following the extension of female suffrage, the holiday's objectives had been achieved.

To their credit, the Communist Party continued to celebrate International Women's Day under the slogan "All Power to the Councils! All Power to Socialism!" And in June 1921, Clara Zetkin helped make it official. The Second International Conference of Communist Women, chaired by Zetkin and held in Moscow, proclaimed that in the future, International Women's Day would be celebrated around the world on March 8.

Ever since, International Women's Day celebrations have been held on March 8 in countries across the globe — serving as an annual reminder of the revolutionary potential of working women.

Just today, print subscriptions to *Jacobin* are only $19.17.

J

If you like this article, please subscribe or donate.

Share Tweet Google +