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# ALEXANDRA KOLLONTAI

# WOMEN WORKERS STRUGGLE FOR THEIR RIGHTS

translated from the Russian by

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with an introduction and notes by  
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### Preface to the third edition

When this pamphlet was first published, the Women's Liberation Movement in England was very new, and many of us felt the need to argue in defence of its autonomy. In this context we seized on Kollontai's arguments for the separate organisation of women, and published this pamphlet because it argued that position.

The situation now is different. The strength of the Women's Liberation Movement and its achievements make that kind of defensive argument unnecessary as far as we are concerned, and the pamphlet now has a more strictly historical interest for us. It contains a great deal of interesting information about the organisation of women at the turn of the century, and about Kollontai's position, and for this reason we are producing a third edition and keeping the pamphlet in print.

However, it seems clear that the pamphlet's significance for some of the left groupings is rather different, and that it could be used by some people to argue *against* an autonomous Women's Liberation Movement, and for the organisation of women *inside* left groups as a 'higher form' of organisation than the Women's Movement.

This in a sense was Kollontai's position. But as Sheila points out in her introduction, Kollontai's situation is not ours, and the separate women's organisations outside the Party that she knew about can't be equated with the present Women's Liberation Movement. Neither can any of the left groupings be equated with the Party to which Kollontai refers, and which she confidently believed came close to being a perfect expression of the aspirations and organisational achievements of the working class at that time.

We want to emphasise Sheila's statement "without an explicitly socialist feminist theory, and without the bargaining power of an autonomous organisation, the specific oppression of women would be overlaid by the Marxist analysis of the worker". The creation of that socialist feminist theory is the task of the Women's Liberation Movement, and it is within the Women's Liberation Movement that new Marxist analyses of the condition of women and their potential power are being formulated.

Suzie Fleming

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## Introduction

### Early years

Alexandra Kollontai was born in St. Petersburg in 1872, the daughter of a Russian general. She married an engineer, Vladimir Kollontai, but found herself moving away from him as she became increasingly interested in revolutionary ideas. Her early intellectual impetus towards radicalism was through the study of child psychology and educational theory—an interest which remained with her later. In this period, many young women from landowning and middle class families sought their emancipation through teaching, and Froebel's educational methods and kindergartens became closely allied with radicalism. It seemed a natural and useful way to 'go to the people'.

Terrorism as a strategy was proving increasingly ineffective. The 1896 textile strikes in St. Petersburg marked an important turning point. Organised labour was a more effective force for change than village communes. The Russian Social Democratic Party tried to recruit workers. The Social Democrats, who were at their strongest in Germany, believed that real democracy could not be fully realised without economic equality, and that this would only be possible when the means of production were controlled by society as a whole and not be private employers. Following Marx, they believed that the working class was the crucial agent of socialism. Their attitude to organising was marked by ethical humanitarian ideas which resembled the early utopian socialists'.

In St. Petersburg, a group of young Social Democrats, including Lenin, was studying Marx. Some working women, like the tailoress Grigorgeva, were involved in the Social Democratic Party already, and women workers were coming into the revolutionary struggle through industrial action. In 1896 women textile workers downed tools with the men, and women cigar-makers destroyed machinery and resisted the police.

Kollontai was obviously affected by all these developments, for when she went to Zurich in 1898 it was to study political economy, and in her *History of the Women's Labour Movement*†, she describes the militancy of the women in St. Petersburg in the mid 1890s.

Abroad, she began to learn about the socialist movement internationally. In Zurich she met Kautsky and Rosa Luxemburg, prominent in the German Social Democratic Movement, and in 1899 visited England and took a dim view of the Webbs. Within the Russian Party she was aligned to the group who were known as Mensheviks, round the old marxist thinker Plekhanov. She remained with the Mensheviks after Lenin and the Bolsheviks

† Untranslated.



split, in 1903, wanting a much tighter and more professionally organised party. After the first split, new conflicts kept the groups apart. The Mensheviks said Lenin was foisting a harsh barrack room discipline onto socialism, the Bolsheviks saw Plekhanov as a 'soft' academic ready only for propaganda work. However, individuals maintained contact with one another, and as events moved faster and faster in Russia, some of the Mensheviks began to drift towards working with the Bolsheviks because the latter appeared to be more decisive.

Preoccupation with these internal splits meant that when in early 1905 a huge crowd of workers carrying religious icons, led by a priest called Father Gapon, and full of faith in the Czar, tried to present a petition to the Czar and were fired upon, neither Mensheviks nor Bolsheviks could intervene. Strikes in protest followed 'Bloody Sunday', and were followed by peasant revolt and a mutiny on the Battleship Potemkin. The Czar compromised and agreed to call a Consultative Assembly (Duma). Although the workers were not represented, this was an important break with absolute rule. At the end of the year there was a general rising in Moscow which was defeated, and from then on the revolutionary impetus began to subside. The lesson was not lost. It seemed clear to the Bolsheviks that spontaneous revolt led to defeat. The revolution required their conscious direction. By 1907 the Czar's policy of compromise had been replaced by one of severe repression, and the revolutionary movement was once more forced underground.

In 1905, the newly formed Russian feminist movement planned a large meeting. The feminists wanted to bring all women together, but on a basis which obscured the class exploitation of working women. Though the Mensheviks supported this move, Kollontai was sufficiently close to the Bolsheviks to be in opposition. And in 1906, with some other women comrades, she started to organise a club for women workers. The women studied particular questions which would help them secure the reforms they wanted, and practised speaking until a group could speak on various topics. In an account which appeared in the *Woman Worker*† in 1908 Kollontai wrote:—

During our preparations for these Congress speeches, and at the Women's Council meetings, our dread of the police was very great. . . We always had to find some quiet little room, and if an alarm was given, the women would throw a handkerchief over the face of the speaker and get her away quickly.

As a result of this organisation, 45 of the 700 women who assembled at the All-Russian Women's Congress in 1908 were socialists. 30 of these 45 factory workers, some still scarcely able to read.

"They were all very frightened, yet did well, holding the field in all cases for at least fifteen to twenty minutes and astonishing the Congress. . ." —in 1907 she had to flee from Russia. Abroad she continued to take part in the women's movement, attending the Congress at Stuttgart mentioned in this pamphlet. The regular sessions of the Congress were preceded by a con-

† *The Woman Worker*, May 1909. (This is an English newspaper. Kollontai refers to a Bolshevik paper which by coincidence has the same name, on p.26.)

vention of women from various countries to debate questions which related particularly to working class women. The most heated debate arose between the Austrian socialists and the rest over women's suffrage. In Austria male workers were still disenfranchised and the Austrian women suggested waiting until the men could vote before pressing for women's suffrage. Clara Zetkin and most of the other women were completely against this compromise. In the general Congress the main debate was over militarism and the war—the issue which was finally to crack the Second International.

In exile Kollontai became friendly with the 'left' social democrat Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg. It is possible that some of their ideas influenced her and brought her to a 'left' position within the Communist Party later. She lectured at a Russian marxist school in Italy—a kind of revolutionary free university, and started to study protective maternity provision because she had been asked to send a draft for a law by young social democrats in Russia to present to the Duma. This was finally published in 1915 as *Society and Maternity* †

In March 1911 she helped to organise the first International Women's Day which is still celebrated. She was active in organising strikes in Paris and in the north of France in 1911, including one of housewives over high prices. Meanwhile, she was becoming increasingly critical of the cautious, bureaucratic old guard in German social democracy, who were more inclined to emphasise the long term inevitability of communism, than the short term need to do something about bringing it about. Her criticisms brought her still closer to the Bolsheviks. In 1913 she went to England again, and learned about women in the trade union movement. In 1916 she was in New York, and at Lenin's request was collecting information about the American Socialist Party and the Socialist Labour Party, in the course of which she introduced Lenin to the writings of the socialist-syndicalist Daniel de Leon, who believed in industrial unionism—the working class organised into one big union to take over and run production.

## The Revolution

When a general uprising and the overthrow of the Czarist regime were followed by the formation of the 'Provisional Government' in Russia, in February 1917, Kollontai returned home and became involved in revolutionary activity. She was amongst the people who greeted Lenin when he arrived back in Russia at the Finland Station. Lenin spoke to a meeting of the Bolsheviks the following day, denouncing the Mensheviks because they thought it was too early to speak of a socialist revolution in Russia. (They believed that after the 'bourgeois revolution' of February 1917 Russia would have to pass through a capitalist phase under bourgeois rule before there could be a socialist revolution.) Lenin praised the anti-militarism of Lieb-

† Untranslated.



knecht, and announced that the "majority of the official Social Democracy have betrayed socialism",<sup>†</sup> so that the Bolsheviks should henceforth distinguish themselves by the name of Communists. Most of the Bolsheviks were shocked and stunned: only Alexandra Kollontai voted for Lenin's unorthodox 'April Theses'. Some Bolsheviks left the party altogether, others came round to Lenin's position slowly. It was the radicals, those who wanted to carry through directly socialist measures, who very quickly supported Lenin. Kollontai was on the Central Committee of the Bolshevik Party at the time of the Bolshevik revolution of November 1917, and became Minister for Social Welfare; shortly afterwards she became responsible for education.

Kollontai's life reflected the political turns of the revolution, just as her fame since her death has fluctuated. Now honoured, now disgraced, now smothered in silence, now respected as a figurehead. Louise Bryant, an American journalist who wrote of a visit to Russia soon after the revolution in *Six Red Months in Russia*, praised Kollontai's workers' control methods in her Ministry. Kollontai herself moved gradually towards the position of the 'Workers' Opposition' group. Her personal life as well as her political life was stormy. In her forties she fell in love with Dubenko, a man much younger than herself who had been with the Kronstadt sailors when they mutinied against the revolutionary government—a revolt which was harshly repressed by Trotsky. With others she formulated the criticisms of the Bolshevik Party which appeared in the 'Workers' Opposition' pamphlet.<sup>‡</sup> The 'Workers' Opposition' group criticised centralisation and bureaucracy in general, but criticised particularly Trotsky's scheme for control over the Trade unions. The 'Workers' Opposition' wanted the trade unions to control industrial production, where Trotsky felt that the state should have control. The crux of the issue was the degree of autonomy which could be allowed to specific groups without fragmenting the already shaky revolutionary government, and leading to counter-revolution. In 1922 the supporters of the 'Workers' Opposition' were condemned as a faction but not expelled from the Party. The question raised by the 'Workers' Opposition' of autonomous organisation was never resolved. By a terrible irony Stalin was able to use Trotsky's own arguments against him later.

Kollontai's influence in domestic politics was negligible from this point. She joined the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 1923, and between 1923 and 1925 was in Norway, then in Mexico, Norway again from 1927 to 1930 and in Sweden from 1930 to 1945. In 1943 she was made an ambassador, and the following year was responsible for negotiating the Soviet-Finnish armistice. Although her photograph was issued by the Trotskyist Fourth International in America, along with the other members of the early Central Committee who had died in Stalin's purges, over the caption 'missing', and it is possible that she was restrained in various ways, her survival was almost certainly due

<sup>†</sup> I. Deutscher, *Stalin: a Political Biography* (p.149).

<sup>‡</sup> Republished recently as a Solidarity pamphlet.

to the fact that she raised no more awkward questions, and because she was safely out of the way in a prestigious diplomatic position. She died at the age of eighty in 1952, two decades before interest in her ideas revived again in Europe.

### The relevance of her ideas in the Russian revolution and now

The fortunes of her writings have been most curious. The vast majority have not been translated from the original Russian. Many of them sit dustily in the British Museum. Sylvia Pankhurst produced the 'Workers' Opposition' pamphlet, no doubt to Lenin's intense irritation. (She was one of the people he labelled as 'infantile' leftists.) This pamphlet has recently been re-issued by 'Solidarity'. *Communism and the Family* has long been out of print. But it was among the texts recommended by the Czech marxist rebels in 1968, and was republished recently by the somewhat heretical Australian Communist Party and in Britain is being republished by Pluto Press.

Interest in Kollontai has been slowly growing in Women's Liberation in France and Germany as well as Britain, because her arguments with the left on the need for the separate organisation of women, her stress not only on political emancipation, and work, but also on the family and the psychological effect of centuries of oppression on women's consciousness, are very much our concerns as well. Her emphasis on control from below, her distrust of the absolute Party, her understanding of the complexities of the creation of a new culture and the connection between personal experience and political consciousness, are particularly relevant within the revolutionary movement as a whole, where we confront these questions now. Kollontai represents a current within marxism in relation to the liberation of women which has been submerged and which we need to rediscover and develop.

Kollontai's influence on the early years of the revolution was crucial. As soon as they were in power, the Bolsheviks introduced very important changes in the position of women, not only at work but in every area of life. The Decree on Insurance in Case of Sickness, of December 1917, meant that an insurance fund was set up without deductions from wages. In January 1918 the Department for the Protection of Motherhood and Infancy was set up as the result of Kollontai's earlier work. Within six months of the revolution, the church's control of marriage was ended and within a year complete legal equality of rights was established. Marriage was simply a mutual agreement between two partners and was easily dissolved. These were very basic reforms, but they were extraordinary in the Russian context of severe oppression.

The First Congress of Peasant and Working Women was held on November 19th 1918. A special committee was set up to help women understand what their new rights were and how to use them. This for Kollontai was a real advance, and a vindication of her agitation for a separate women's section within the Party which she had been advocating since 1906. A year after this



pamphlet was published, it became evident that something more was needed because the oppression of women went so deep. The Working and Peasant Women's Department (Genotdel) thus replaced the committee. This new department was not just to educate women in marxism, but to mobilise them for practical political activity. Even this did not mean that masculine attitudes of superiority dissolved easily. Jessica Smith in *Women in Soviet Russia* (1928) describes conflict between men and women workers in factories, and R.Schlesinger in *Changing Attitudes in Soviet Russia* records debates in which peasant women accuse the men in the Party of condescension and patronage. The 'Genotdel' became something of an embarrassment, and it was dissolved in 1929 with the official explanation that an independent women's movement was no longer necessary.

It is evident that in 1918, it was hard to envisage Stalinism and the consequences of socialism in one country, and that Kollontai, full of the enthusiasm of the revolution under-estimated the resilience of the old attitudes and culture both within the Party and without. She imagined that the old family and housework were on the point of withering away, because of the dramatic changes in the early years of the revolution. But the old family, which she describes in *Communism and the Family* as the family in which "the man was everything and the woman nothing", showed a capacity to survive the upheavals of revolution, civil war and famine. The family emerged after the crisis and isolation of the Soviet Union and the horrors of the Second World War with a new strength as the symbol of security and retreat. Though women have achieved much greater equality at work and in education, at home the old division of labour continues and with it some of the old subordination.

For us now, the limitations on how far it was possible for Kollontai to go are as clear as the relevance of her ideas for our dilemmas. Many of her attempts to go beyond the ideas of Engels and Bebel were of necessity theoretical rather than practical. For example, factory women criticised her when she wanted the state to pay a third of the cost of alimony, saying it would encourage men to seduce women and leave. This was a natural enough fear when contraception was still not reliable or widespread. Kollontai's belief in free relationships was inevitably problematic when it was still impossible for most women to control their families. The peasant women knew all too well that, as they put it, if you like tobogganing you have to be ready to pull your sledge up hill. This can still be true of course, but it's no longer inevitable.

Because ideas in women's liberation come from our own lives, it forces us not to gloss over the complicated questions. It would be inconceivable for anyone now in women's liberation to be as dismissive of the rights of children as Kollontai is in *Communism and the Family*, or to be so confident that 'the state', socialist or not, is a reliable parent. We are much more involved in the intricacy of particular families, and the specific way in which they contain us. Obviously too, her discussion about the family is in a post revolutionary situation. Our problem is how to organise round the oppression of

women in the family in capitalism. Kollontai saw the modern family as a place of consumption and conditioning, as a means of maintaining the old culture within a new society. Following Margaret Benston's *The Political Economy of Women's Liberation*,† some people in women's liberation have seen the family also as a form of production.

Kollontai's argument for the separate organisation of women is based on the fact that women as mothers have special demands arising from their biologically distinct material situation. She stresses that the strategy we make has to be based on the actual circumstances, biological and social, of women in particular societies. She sees this as the crucial distinction between women who are socialists and the feminists. Feminism she defines not only in the straightforward sense of defending the position of women and seeking to improve it, but as the insistence on abstract equal rights without regard for the actual predicament of women. She thus identifies a characteristic of 'equal rights' feminism in the early twentieth century. She appears not to know about the feminism which had appeared earlier in the utopian socialist movement—though she mentions individual women who took part in the First International. Ironically her criticism of the feminists was to be used against her later in the Soviet Union, because women in the east and peasant women were so remote from her ideas of liberation. It's important to understand that feminism in women's liberation now has assumed a different historical form, and whether we are critical of this or not it is wrong to substitute feminism of the early twentieth century which Kollontai talks about for feminism in the 1970s.

However, Kollontai's criticism of an abstract approach is still useful. For example, we have to be careful when thinking about protective legislation or about anti-discrimination bills to take existing class and sex interests into account, for these are the context in which legislation operates. The idea of abstract equality when put into practice can often mean that the women in the weakest positions lose out.

Kollontai's implacable hostility to feminism was becoming general among women who were socialists immediately before and after the First World War. Rather earlier there had been a much more open and connected relationship between feminism and the left. Undoubtedly it was the recognition of the limitations of the suffrage movement, and the move rightwards of the suffragette leadership towards patriotism and imperialism in Britain, which produced the hostility. Almost certainly now as people dig below the surface they will find that the women who never became prominent had different sympathies, and an understanding of the need for change which went much wider than the vote. Kollontai reluctantly acknowledges the strength of the suffragettes, and the removal of women who were socialists from the mass of working women. Ironically she shows that it was the suffrage movement, and the possibility that women could vote, which led



# Women Workers

## Struggle for their Rights

### In Place of a Foreword

This pamphlet I am publishing is not new. It is a reprint of my articles which were published before the war. But the question of organisation which was put at the Congress of Women Workers brings onto the agenda of our party work a means of agitation among the mass of working women in order to draw them into the Party and thus prepare new forces for the construction of Communist Russia.

Meanwhile we are suffering from an acute lack of material, which could help our party comrades who are involved now in the organisation of the commission for agitation and propaganda among women workers by giving them access to information about the history of the socialist movement of women workers and about how and what was done in the field of organisation of the women proletariat in other countries. The poverty of our party literature on this particular question obliges me to agree to the reprint in hurried format of my previous articles without being able to rework them. If I were to write again on these same facts I would evaluate many of them differently. The war and world revolution have brought essential changes in the character and form of all workers' communist movements; 'the ideal type' of German party work, adapted exclusively to the period of peaceful parliamentary activity, has ceased to be a model for us.<sup>1</sup> The revolutionary struggle has generated new problems, new fighting methods of work. The war and the revolution have shaken what seemed to be the most stable foundations of life. And also, the position of woman has changed before our eyes.

Up until the war, the process whereby women were drawn into the people's economy was carried out with considerably less speed than it has been for these last four and a half years of feverishly rapid development and the growth of female labour in all fields of industrial life. The old family, too, seemed firm and unshakeable; the Party had to fight against its way of life and traditions every time it wanted to bring the woman worker into the class struggle. The fact that housework was dying out and the transition to the state education of children, were regarded not as mature, living, practical problems of the present day, but as a 'historical tendency', as a lengthy process. The feelings of the women workers were strongest in the economic field—the inequality of men's and women's pay—and in the political field—

the absence of voting rights and the inequality in citizenship.

This inequality, on economic and political grounds, together with the enslavement of the woman to her family and the running of the house, created a psychological division between men and women workers, and provided the soil from which grew those independent organisations of women workers which sprang up in all countries alongside the general workers' socialist parties, in the form of societies or unions of women workers, clubs and so on. The more actively the socialist parties became engaged in the business of propaganda amongst women workers, the quicker these specialised organisations for women workers died out.<sup>2</sup>

But only a radical change in the whole existence of the working class woman, in the conditions of her home and family life, as she acquires equal status with men in civil law will wipe out once and for all the barrier which to this day prevents the woman worker letting her forces flow freely into the class struggle.

The war provided an impulse towards a radical break in the social position of women. It remains for the revolution to complete this task. The war drove the 'wet-nurse' to the front; ninety women out of a hundred were forced to provide for themselves and their children. The problem was becoming acute: what to do with the children of all those millions of women who had to spend the greater part of their day in preparing military supplies—grenades, shrapnel and bullets? It was in this way that the question had to be posed—not as a theoretical problem and not as something desirable in the remote future, but as a practical measure: state security for maternity and childhood. The capitalist class governments were forced to worry about the fate of the 'soldier children' and unwillingly, and half-heartedly, they brought about a situation in which the care of children is the responsibility of the state.

The departure of bridegrooms and fiancés to the war, and the woman's fear for the fate of her loved one, provided a natural reason for the increased number of babies born outside marriage. And once again the bourgeois capitalist state was forced, under the pressure of war, to inflict upon itself a blow, to encroach upon one of its most sacred rights—on the prerogative of legal marriage. It was forced for the sake of the soldiers' well being to make equal under the law both legal and extra-marital mothers and children. Germany, France and England were eventually forced to this revolutionary act.

The war not only disrupted the sanctity and stability of the indissoluble church marriage, but also encroached on yet another of the foundations of the family—housework. Rising prices, queues which exhausted the housewife, the system of delaying stocktaking until supplies had run out—all this led to a situation in which the women themselves hastened to do away with the domestic hearth, preferring to use communal facilities.

The work of destroying the social slavery of women as it was then, was carried through by the great workers' revolution. Women workers and peasants participated in the great liberating struggle on an equal footing with



men. The former specialisations of the female sex collapsed as the social structure rocked on its twin pillars, private property and class government. The great fire of the world uprising of the proletariat called woman from her baking tins into the arena of the barricades, the fight for freedom. Woman ceased to feel secure in her own home, alongside her familiar flagstones, drinking troughs and cradles, when all around bullets were whistling and, amazed, she heard the cry of the worker fighters:—'To arms, comrades! All of you who cherish your freedom, who have grown to hate the chains of slavery and deprivation of civil rights! To arms, workers, to arms, women workers! . . .'

The revolution accustomed women workers to great mass movements, to the struggle for the realisation of communism. The revolution in Russia won full political equality and equality of citizenship for women. The revolution fulfilled the demands of women workers from all countries: equal pay for equal work. The revolution made it impossible for women ever again to be tied to their families.<sup>3</sup> The revolution also abolished the previous forms of workers' movements, which had been shaped by the age of peaceful parliamentary rule. We are cut off from the period of the Second International<sup>4</sup> not only by four years, but a whole geological shift in the field of social and economic relations.

And from this point of view, many of the articles printed here are out of date. But the main issue is not out of date. It is still very much alive. That fundamental theme which I have tried to make the main thread running through these articles—namely, the necessity of special work among the women proletariat, separate within the party framework, and the setting up in the Party of a special party machine—a commission, bureau or group—for this purpose.

However profound are the changes which have been accomplished before our eyes in the life and economic structure of our country, brought about by the war and the revolution, however far Soviet Russia has marched forward along the road to communism, the legacy of the capitalist order has still not been eradicated; the conditions of life, the working class family's way of life, the traditions which hold captive the mind of woman, the servitude of housework—all these have still not died away. And in so far as all the factors which prevented a working class woman from taking an active part in the liberating movement of the proletariat before the war are still operative, in so far as even now the Party still has to take into account both the political backwardness of women, and the bondage of the woman worker to her family, so the necessity of intensive work among the women proletariat, with the help of a party machine set up specifically for this purpose, remains as pressing as ever.

The setting up of a commission for agitation and propaganda among women workers in the centre and in the provinces will undoubtedly speed up this work. There was a time when the thought of specialised work within the Party, which I had been advocating since 1906, met with opposition even

among my own comrades. But now, after the decision carried by the All Russian Congress of Women Workers and approved by the Party, it only remains for us to get down to its practical implementation. Our Party does not allow a separate women's movement or any independent unions or societies of women workers, but it has never denied the efficacy of a division of labour within the Party and the setting up of such special party machines as would promise to increase the number of its members or deepen its influence among the masses.

At the moment Soviet Russia is in need of many new fresh forces both for the struggle with the enemy<sup>5</sup> and for the construction of the communist society. To create, to educate these forces from the many millions of the female working population—such are the tasks of the party commission for agitation and propaganda among women workers.

I would hope that this pamphlet might serve as some guidance for those of my comrades who intend to devote themselves to work among the female proletariat in particular. I hope that they will get from it the certainty that in taking upon themselves this difficult and sometimes thankless work, they are serving not the idea of the 'specialisation' of women, not a narrowly feminine business, but the whole task of building a united, strong, world-wide workers' party which before our very eyes is achieving the bright new world of international communism.

A. Kollontai  
Moscow 1st December 1918

## 1. The Socialist Movement of Women Workers in Different Countries

One might think that there could be no clearer or more well-defined notion than that of a 'women's socialist movement'. But meanwhile it arouses so much indignation and we hear so often the exclamations and questions:—What is a women workers' movement? What are its tasks, its aims? Why can't it merge with the general movement of the working class, why can't it be dissolved in the general movement, since the Social Democrats<sup>6</sup> deny the existence of an independent women's question? Isn't it a hangover from bourgeois feminism?

Questions like these are being asked not only in Russia. They are repeated in almost all countries, they can be heard in all languages. But most curious of all, it is where the women workers' movement is least developed,



where organised women workers are least numerous in the Party and in the unions, that one hears loudest and most assured the voices of those who deny the necessity of technically separated work among the women proletariat. And in their simplistic way, they cut through the whole tangled knot of the women's problem and the general social question.

The women workers' movement literally grew out of the womb of capitalist reality. But for a long time it advanced tentatively, seeking its way, hesitating in its choice of methods. The women workers' movement takes extremely motley and varied forms. These forms vary from country to country, they are adapted to the conditions of the particular place, and to the character of the workers' movement. But gradually, especially in countries where social democracy has been strong, definite party machines have arisen to serve the women's socialist movement.

To-day it would be difficult to find a socialist who would quarrel with the necessity for widespread organisation of the female proletariat. Social democrats in all countries pride themselves on the numbers of their 'women's army' and, in weighing up the chances of success in the class struggle, take into account this rapidly growing force. Consequently, if there is disagreement, it is not about the essence of the question, but merely about methods and means of agitation and work among the female half of the working class. However, in all countries the vital victory in this argument goes to the defenders of the German way of working—the fusion of the male and female halves of the working class in the party organisation, while retaining *the separation and autonomy* of agitation among the women of the working class.

The women's socialist movement is still very young: it has only been in existence for some twenty years.

It is true that before, workers' organisations, unions and parties had counted women among their members. But once they had become members of a party or trade union organisation, the women workers did not defend those areas which affect women most closely of all. This was the situation in Germany up to the middle of the twenties,<sup>7</sup> in England up to the twentieth century and in Russia until the 1905 revolution. The exploration of problems which affected women workers as women, and the defence of their interests as mothers and housewives, was left without any struggle in the hands of the feminists of the bourgeois camp.

The middle of the nineties may be considered a turning-point. At the Congress of the Social Democratic Party at Gotha<sup>8</sup> in 1896, and at the insistence of Clara Zetkin, the foundations were laid for special, separate, autonomous agitational work among women. In the same year, at the London International Socialist Congress there took place the first private meeting of thirty socialist women, delegates to the International Congress from England, Germany, America, Holland, Belgium and Poland. This conference marked the beginning of a modest attempt to bring to life a women's socialist movement in other countries as well.<sup>9</sup>

This private meeting was above all concerned to examine the question

of the relationship between bourgeois feminism and the socialist women's movement. It acknowledged the necessity of drawing a clear distinction between them, and noted the desirability of special socialist agitation among women workers in order to draw them into the ranks of the general class party.

Two decades have passed since the time of that first international meeting of socialist women. In those years capitalism has managed to subject to its rule not only new branches of industry but also new countries. Female labour in industry has established itself more firmly with every year, acquiring considerable social importance in the life of the people's economy. But since they lacked unity among themselves, were not involved in organisations, and were not linked by obligations to their male colleagues, women workers did indeed appear as dangerous rivals, undermining the progress of the organised struggle of the workers. In those years the organisation of women workers became an urgent and vital question. But in tackling the problem of the organisation of the female half of the proletariat and adapting themselves to the conditions of the surrounding social reality, each country solved the problem in its own way.

This explains the variety of organisational methods. Women workers joined general, mixed unions, organised themselves into separate women's trade unions, founded their clubs, and societies for self-education, or, finally, formed a special women's collective within the party, which undertook the responsibility for agitational and organisational work among women. It is this last type of work which offers the most convenient and efficient way of involving women workers in the class struggle.†

By 1907 the women workers' movement had already assumed such dimensions that it became possible to call the first International Women's Conference in Stuttgart in connection with the general International Socialist Congress. The women socialists not only exchanged information on what they had achieved in their own countries, but resolved to continue working along the same lines, to promote by all possible means the future growth and development of the women workers movement. After some disagreement, they accepted a motion introduced by the German women socialists concerning the setting up of a separate International Women's Bureau, which would strengthen the links between women workers' organisations in all countries.

The central organ of the international women workers movement recognised the newspaper *Gleichheit (Equality)* published by the German Party.

The Stuttgart Conference consolidated that share of independence which was necessary for further fruitful work among the women proletariat. It emerged quite clearly that although the women proletarian movement is an

† One cannot but remark that the trade unions, too, were eventually convinced of the good sense, even on purely economic grounds, of forming their own 'women's agitational committees' for carrying out work among women workers. Thus, for example, from 1895 onwards the General Commission of German Trade Unions included a central commission for agitational work amongst women.



inseparable part of the general workers' movement, it nevertheless has certain original features of its own, due to the particular conditions of existence of the woman worker and the particular social and political position of woman in modern society. Although the objectives of agitation which is aimed specifically at women correspond to those of the workers' movement at large, and although they constitute one part of an overall objective, yet because they are concerned most immediately with the women's interests they can be best achieved through the initiative of the female representatives of the working class.

Although socialists admit that the question of women forms an integral part of the total social problem of our time, although they maintain that the woman worker is above all a member of a class kept in servitude and deprived of civil rights, and, in striving for her own liberation, must before everything else fight for the liberation of her entire class, they also, alongside this basic principle, concede another, additional proposition. A woman worker is not only a member of the working class, but at the same time she is a representative of one entire half of the human race. As opposed to the feminists, the socialists, demanding equal rights for women in state and society, do not shut their eyes to the fact that the woman's responsibilities towards the social collective, society, will always be somewhat different to men's. The woman is not only an independent worker and citizen—at the same time she is a *mother*, a bearer of the future. This gives rise to a whole series of special demands, in areas such as women's labour protection, security for maternity and early childhood, help with the problems of children's upbringing, reforms in house-keeping and so on. †

In addition to this, in the majority of countries the woman worker finds herself, both in society and in the state, in an exclusively helpless position. Women workers are pariahs even among the modern slaves of capital, and this outlawing of women gives rise to an inequality in the conditions of living between man and woman even in the working class itself. Whether in politics, in the family, in relations between the sexes (prostitution, double morality), or in the work situation, the woman is always allotted 'second place', her lack of rights is underlined by her life itself. . . .

It is natural that even the psychology of a woman, under the influence of century-long slavery, is different from that of a working class man. The man worker is more independent, more decisive, and has more feeling of solidarity; his horizon is wider because he is not confined within the framework of narrow family relationships; it is easier for him to become aware of

† Although the interests of the working class as a whole are bound up with bringing about political equality for women workers, their actual lack of rights, however, even in countries where male workers possess political rights, imposes on the women particularly unpleasant conditions. Joining together in a special collective gives women workers an opportunity to influence their comrades within the Party, to inspire and urge them on to the struggle for political rights for working class women, gaining for women those rights which they themselves possess.

his interests and to connect these to class problems. But for a woman worker to reach the maturity of the views of an average male worker—that means a complete break with the tradition, the concepts, the morals, the customs, which have become part of her since the cradle. These traditions and customs, attempting to retain and hold onto a type of woman produced by past stages of economic development, turn into almost insuperable obstacles in the path of the class-consciousness of the woman worker. From this the conclusion is clear, that one can arouse woman's sleeping brain, and bring to life her will, only by means of a special approach to her, only by using specialised methods of work among women.

The peculiarity of these methods consists in the fact that while not breaking off general links between the general workers' and women workers' movement, while welding both wings into one in the process of struggle, bringing them together under the banner of general class tasks and demands, they nevertheless provide for a separate structure for agitation specifically designed to cater for the working class women. Separation has a double aim: on the one hand, these intra-party collectives (commissions, women workers' bureaux and so on) must carry out special agitational work adapted to the level of the questions women want to have answered; their task is to recruit members among the mass of women who have a low level of consciousness, to educate women workers' consciousness, to raise it to the level of the rest of the party members', to move women into the arena of revolutionary struggle. On the other hand these collectives give women workers the possibility of putting forward and defending in practical ways those interests which touch women most of all: motherhood, protection of children, the rate set for children's and women's labour, the struggle against prostitution, reforms in housekeeping and so on.

It follows that the formation of groups of women workers within the Party on the one hand lightens the task of attracting into the movement the broad masses of less aware women, those with whom one has to speak a different language than with men; and on the other hand, it is an opportunity to concentrate the Party's attention on the special requirements of the women proletariat.

This was the conclusion that the western comrades gradually arrived at. This way of working with women has been adopted by almost all parties.<sup>10</sup> In Austria from 1908, in England from 1906, in the United States from 1908, in the Scandinavian countries, in Belgium and Holland from the beginning of the twentieth century, in Switzerland, in Finland and in France—special collectives of women socialists exist everywhere, carrying on agitational work with women workers and focussing the attention of the workers' party on that part of the socialist programme which affects working class women's interests most closely.

Thanks to this way of working, the women workers' movement is growing both in depth and in breadth. The number of organised women workers grows every year, in fact it even grows relatively more quickly than the



number of men who have been drawn back into the movement. In Germany, for example, in 1907 the Party hardly contained 10,500 women workers, in 1908 there were already 29,458 of them, in 1909—62,259, in 1910—82,846, in 1911—107,000, in 1912—130,000, in 1913—150,000. In other words, in six years the number of women in the Party has increased fifteen times, and the number of men has not even doubled. In 1907 there were about 600,000 in the Party, and in 1913—830,000.

A very short time ago, at the first International Conference of Women Socialists at Stuttgart, in 1907, the organised army of women workers was expressed in such modest figures that the majority of countries did not even cite it.

At that time England took first place in organised numbers, with her 150,000 women workers as members of trade unions. In Germany then, the unions counted 120,000. In Austria the unions contained about 42,000 women workers; in Hungary about 15,000. In the Party<sup>11</sup> the degree of organisation of women was considerably lower. At that time the country which could pride itself on the greatest number of social democrats was little Finland, who had managed to bring into the movement more than 18,000 women workers.

A different and more cheerful picture was given by the accounts presented by delegates at the Second International Women's Socialist Conference in Copenhagen, in August 1910.

Only three years had passed since the first women's conference, but what growth there had been in the army of women workers now actively taking part in the movement! In England the number of women workers organised into unions had already passed the 200,000 mark; in Germany count 131,000 women workers in unions and 82,645 members of the Party; in Austria the Party already contained about 7,000 women members. Other countries too showed considerable progress in the movement.

As evidence for the level of organisation of women workers we give the following data for the last years before the war:

England, 1911, in trade unions . . . . .	292,868
England, 1911, in the Women's Labour League <sup>12</sup> . . . . .	5,000
Germany, 1910, in trade unions . . . . .	161,512
Germany, 1913, in the Social Democratic Party . . . . .	150,000
Austria, 1911, in trade unions . . . . .	47,901
Austria, 1910, in the Social Democratic Party . . . . .	19,000
France, 1908, in trade unions . . . . .	88,906
Italy, 1908, in trade unions . . . . .	41,000
Italy, 1908, in the Social Democratic Party . . . . .	10,711
Holland, 1910, in trade unions . . . . .	44,000
Holland, 1910, in the Party . . . . .	2,943
Switzerland, 1910, in trade unions . . . . .	6,000
Switzerland, 1910, in the Social Democratic Party . . . . .	1,000
Finland, 1910, in the Social Democratic Party . . . . .	17,000

Norway, 1909, in trade unions . . . . .	3,000
Norway, 1909, in the Party . . . . .	1,500

There is no information given here about a number of countries—Belgium, Spain, Denmark, Sweden. Furthermore much of the information given here is out of date, since the women workers' movement began to make particularly quick progress in the most recent years. For this reason one can affirm without exaggeration that in Europe alone the number of organised women workers is over one million.

The basis for these organisational successes is undoubtedly an objective economic factor; the rapid growth of female industrial labour, which is particularly noticeable in countries with a relatively young, intensive, capitalist economy.<sup>13</sup> But, alongside this objective factor, an important role was also played by the conscious active influence of the party on the masses of women and by the specialised, systematic work which, especially in the years just before the war, was carried on energetically and thoughtfully by the party organisations of all countries.

To get a fuller idea of the agitational methods of the women's socialist movement we should examine the history of this movement in somewhat greater detail. In this instance Germany is the most characteristic country; the others repeat, with small modifications, the experience of the German socialist movement and borrow from them the basic model for their work with the women proletariat.

If England as early as the beginning of the nineteenth century was the cradle of trade union movements of women workers (the women weavers of Lancashire joined the weavers' trade union as early as 1824), if in the seventies, on the initiative of Patterson,<sup>14</sup> a first attempt was made to unite the separate women's trade unions in the 'League for the Protection of Women's Labour' (later the 'League of Women's Trade Unions—Trade Union League') and, in this way, link and concentrate the movement, if the English women workers were the first to go to the defence of their violated economic interests, nevertheless it was German Social Democracy that carried within its womb the party political movement of women workers.

However significant were the successes of the trade union organisation of women workers in England, this movement bore a narrowly economic character.<sup>15</sup> On the general social tasks of the liberation of women, on the vital interests of women workers as women, as mothers, there was no discussion in either the mixed, or the separate women's unions. Not only in England, but also in other countries—in Germany, France, America, women workers took part in the trade union movement only for the sake of very immediate practical gains in the field of labour. All general-social questions, affecting the interests of women, were discussed and brought forward only by the growing feminist movement. The feminists for their part altered the demands of the women workers and presented them to the world in a distorted form, in the guise of bare, lifeless formulae of absolute equality of rights between men and women in all fields of life and in all areas. And even now



the women workers' movement in England still bears the imprint of this duality: whereas on economic grounds the woman worker, as a conscious comrade, fights for the interests of her class, in the sphere of social and political ideals the less conscious woman worker still hangs onto the skirts of the Suffragettes and is ready to uphold the principle of the equality of women, albeit to the detriment of her class interests.<sup>16</sup>

The women workers' movement in Germany was of a completely different character. It is true that in the sixties and seventies the organisation of women workers also concentrated, mainly, on unions, but the rapid increase in female labour, with the quickening tempo of capitalist development in Germany, forced the young German Socialist Party to take up a definite position in relation to the question of women.

Two points of view were in conflict within the workers' organisations: some looked upon women's professional labour as an abnormal deviation from the 'natural social order', and hoped to force women back into the house by means of prohibitive laws: others accepted this phenomena as an inevitable stage, leading woman to her final liberation—in her capacity both as a seller of her labour and as a woman.

In this context a decisive role was played by Bebel's book, *Woman and Socialism*, which first came out in 1879. This book cast a bright light on the complicated problem of woman, and opened up new horizons to the Social Democrats. It established a close link between the question of women and the general class aim of the workers, but at the same time also drew attention to the needs and demands peculiar to women, the distinctive things that characterise woman as a representative of her sex. This acknowledgement of the special position of woman in modern society made it necessary, without sinning against the unity of the Party, to delineate a certain area of work with the women proletariat.

The first attempts to bring to life women socialist organisations in Germany took place towards the middle of the eighties. On the initiative of an ex-feminist, who had gone over to the Social Democrats, Guillaume-Schack, societies for self-education or women workers' clubs were set up in Berlin. But the eighties in Germany were a dark period when a law discriminating against socialists was in force. The police powers mercilessly destroyed these innocent organisations, whose creation had cost so much effort. The special decree of 1887 finally wiped from the face of the earth the first beginnings of women's socialist societies.

With the defeat of the law against socialists, the workers' movement in Germany immediately stood on firm ground; the women workers' movement was also revived. The trade unions not only gave access to women, but chose a woman as their president for the General Commission of Trade Unions. The Social Democratic Party, for its part, at the Erfurt Congress decided to take up a completely definite position with regard to the question of women.†

† In both previous socialist programmes, those of Erfurt and Gotha, the Party's atti-

The Erfurt programme of 1891 not only emphasises the demand for political rights for all citizens without distinction according to sex, but in point five expresses a particular demand, in the interests of women: "the abolition of all laws which place women in less favourable conditions of existence than men with regard to political or civil rights."<sup>17</sup> This was an important admission. The Social Democratic Party in this way took upon itself the defence of the interests of the women of the working class, in the widest sense of the word. Already it was not only a question of improving women's working conditions, but also of her liberation as a citizen, as a person.

Consistent with this new aim, it was necessary for the Party to modify the party rules, so as to leave open a place for women in party work. A resolution had already been passed at the Congress at Halle, in 1890, concerning women chairmen at congresses, which allowed these women chairmen to be elected at special women's meetings.‡

At the Berlin Congress the Berlin women's organisation introduced an amendment whereby the title, 'Male Confidential Agent', be replaced simply by 'Confidential Agent',<sup>18</sup> which would give women access to this post.‡ Another women's organisation, from Mannheim, asked that agitational work with women should be extended. But the most decisive step, with regard to the method chosen by the Party for work with women workers, was taken at the congress at Gotha in 1896. The question raised by Clara Zetkin about 'agitation with women workers' set up the basis for specialised, technically separate party work with women. Drawing a boundary line between the conceptions of equality held by the bourgeois camp and by the socialist women, Zetkin nevertheless insisted, in her classically worded resolution, that agitation among women should concentrate, beyond the general aims of the Party, on a whole range of purely 'women's questions': protection at work, insurance for childbirth, security for children, education of children.

tude to the question of women was still ill-defined. The demands affecting women were limited to general desires for the protection of female labour and the recognition of full political rights for adults, without, however, emphasising that this last demand applied to women too.

† At the Berlin Congress of 1892, however, the socialist women themselves opposed this resolution and, arguing that 'women demand equality, not privilege', insisted that the decision be recalled. A typical case, demonstrating the way in which the 'equal rights' principle of the 'equal rights' feminists influenced even the women socialists in that period of the formation of the women workers' movement. However, as early as the 1894 Congress, at the insistence of Zetkin, Auer, Singer and others the resolution was put forward again. "Experience has shown," said Zetkin, "what an error it was to reject this resolution. The fact of the matter is that women are without rights and with all the will in the world cannot participate in the general party organisation. But apart from that, among the masses, women are considerably more backward than men, in general assemblies they cannot stand up for themselves, and this leads to dissatisfaction and bewilderment." From *Proceedings of the Party Congress at Frankfurt am Main, 1894*, p.174.

‡ See *Proceedings of the Party Congress at Berlin, 1894*, p.145.



political education of women, political equality of women, and so on. In the resolution it was suggested that they start publishing literature, pamphlets and leaflets especially for women. In addition to this historic resolution, which shaped the relations of the Party to the women workers' movement and its problems, at the same congress another three resolutions were passed, each supplementing the others; and which undoubtedly defined the Party's new course in the matter of the organisation of women workers.

The Berlin group's resolution suggested intensifying agitational work with women in order to draw them into unions, in view of the fact that the law forbade women to enter the Party openly. The second proposal referred to the organisational sphere: it insisted on the introduction of special posts of 'female confidential agents' in the Party, who would be responsible for systematic agitational work with women in order to raise their class consciousness and to draw them into the Party. The third resolution proposed that several women's meetings should immediately be held in order to elect female confidential agents.

The Gotha Congress officially inaugurated intra-party work for the organisation of women, and systemised agitation with the female proletariat.

The projected line of work developed steadfastly. Subsequent congresses merely introduced partial modifications to the issue of the organisation of women workers and agitational work among them; in general terms the Party kept to the plan of work as it had been outlined at Gotha. It is true that an insuperable obstacle stood in the way of development of a women's socialist movement in Germany—the law forbidding the open entry of women into the Party. In places where there was no local law preventing women from taking part in general movements; for example in Baden, Wurtemberg, Saxony, Hessen, a few small states and free towns—Bremen, Lubeck, Hamburg—there the women workers openly joined the Party. In other places they joined together beneath the flag of 'societies for the self-education of women workers' or came together round a 'confidential agent' in free, unstructured groups. Nevertheless, thanks to the system of 'confidential agents', the special chairmanship of women at congresses, and the existence of the women's paper *Gleichheit* (*Equality*), the women's socialist movement, while developing partly outside the boundaries of the Party, was closely linked to the general movement and always remained under the influence of the Social Democrats.

The review of the party rules in Mainz in 1900, in which the system of male 'confidential agents' was replaced by local committees, did not lead to any alterations in the system of the organisation of the female proletariat. At the 1902 Congress in Munich a resolution was put forward leaving in force the special 'female confidential agents', to whom was entrusted the work of the organisation of women workers and carrying on socialist agitational work with them. At the Mainz Congress, too, the post of 'central female confidential agent' for the whole of Germany was confirmed. The movement had managed to grow in strength so much since the time of the Gotha Conference

that as early as 1900 in Mainz, it became possible to hold the first German Socialist Women's Conference. Since that time these conferences have taken place periodically in Germany every two years: in Mainz 1900, in Munich 1902, in Bremen 1904, in Mannheim 1906, in Nuremberg 1908, and in Jena 1911. The women workers' conferences arose as a natural answer to the growing demands which their lives called for. The question of voting rights for women in the Reichstag and in local Landtags could no longer be put off, nor could the ailing, complicated problem of maternity. Also lined up were the questions of pre-school education for children, of protection for children's and women's labour, reforms of the schools, reforms of housekeeping, organisations for domestic servants, the rates set for the labour of domestic workers, security for nursing mothers and babies, the struggle against infant mortality and so on.

All these questions involved women workers very closely; they grew directly out of their lives, and they gave birth to new demands. The conferences of women socialists examined, discussed, and worked out these demands, and in this way forced the Party, too, to examine with greater care and thought the special needs and aspirations of women workers. In this way, the women's conferences turned into kinds of *special commissions which prepared material for the general workers' congresses on special questions, those which were relevant to women*. The result was some kind of division of labour within the Party, from which the general movement undoubtedly gained a great deal.

It is usual to consider the separation of the women's socialist movement in Germany as arising exclusively from political tactics, and the existence of the law forbidding women from becoming members of political organisations. This idea is mistaken. It is true that in its time the law about unions and organisations forced the women's socialist movement to seek refuge in extra-party 'societies for the self-education of women workers'. But later, when the number of politically conscious women workers had increased, the Party found a means of getting round the watchful eye of the law and, in so far as the unity of the movement required it, had women join organisations in the capacity of 'voluntary donors' to the Party, and then these donations were repeated periodically, serving as the membership fee. Yet the system of 'female confidential agents', special women's meetings, a separate women's bureau with its own organ, *Gleichheit*, women's conferences and so on, remained in force.

Finally, when in 1908 the Prussian law about unions and organisations had ceased to function, and the women workers were thus able to take part in the political movement of the Social Democrats, nothing stood in the way of the abolition of the special work among women. But what did the Party do? Did it renounce its previous methods of work with women of the proletariat?

On the contrary. At the Nuremberg Congress of 1908, after a radical review of the party rules, the women's socialist movement was allowed to have as much technical autonomy as was possible without damaging the



unity of the class movement.

The Party considered it the duty of women workers to enter the Party as equal members, but settled on a lower membership fee for women since they received a lower rate of pay for their work. And although the system of female confidential agents was repealed, the party rules demanded that on each committee there should be a special representation of women workers, depending on the number of women members in a given district. In any case there had to be at least one person on the committee elected by women, who was to be responsible for agitational work and the organisation of women workers. On the central committee of the Party there was also a special representation for women workers. The Women's Bureau of the Party was not abolished, the women worker's paper, *Gleichheit*, not only continued to be published, but alongside this central organ of women workers there grew up a whole range of local or trade union publications, devoted to the interests and demands of women workers. The party rules also left in force the separate meetings for women workers (courses, discussion evenings), and also, where they were needed, the 'societies for self education', and, finally, the separate women's conferences.

In this way, the changes in the law about unions and organisations did not change the type and character of party work in Germany. On the contrary, the 'division of labour' in the Party with regard to agitational work among women, in the years immediately before the war, left greater scope for the development and elucidation among the female proletariat of special women's demands. It is sufficient to mention just the 'Women's Day', and the agitational work for women's voting rights which was done around this new method of arousing the interest of women workers in politics, educating them in revolutionary protest on the grounds of women workers' lack of civil rights.

The women's wing of the German workers' party developed each year wider and more many-sided activities. The Party is indebted to women workers and their initiative for a whole range of actions: on the problems of the cost of living, insurance for maternity, extension of voting rights in communal self-government. The women workers took upon themselves an enormous part of the work at the time of the elections in the Reichstag in January 1912, they played an active part in the election of members of the Sickness Benefit Fund; they carried out tireless agitation to draw women workers into the Party, they held meetings, they organised so-called discussion evenings for women everywhere and specialised educational courses etc. In 1912 the Women's Bureau organised 66 agitation trips across Germany during the year, not counting agitational work carried on by women workers in the provinces. They held 22 open women's meetings, over and above the regular discussion evenings and courses. In 646 District Committees (out of 4,827) women had their own special representation before the war. *Gleichheit* printed an edition of 107,000 copies. During that year the number of members rose to 22½ thousand!

As well as agitational work at the meetings, there was widespread spe-

cial agitational work carried out among the 'wives of workers' at home, which produced splendid results. The special 'Commissions for the Care of Children' were replenished with women. There were 125 of these commissions before the war and their activities were being extended all the time.

In this way German social democracy, independently of whatever external reasons may have existed, adhered to the principle of special, separate work among the female proletariat, based on the principle of 'division of labour' within the Party.

Finding itself in the same situation as the German party, and not having the legal right to get women workers to join political organisations, the Austrian Social Democrats found their own way of solving the problem of how to get women into the workers' movement.

They organised a special 'Women's General State Committee', which officially stood outside the Party, but was linked to it ideologically. However, as early as the Second Conference of Women Workers in 1903 the agenda contained an item on 'women's role in the political struggle'. In spite of the fact that the conference supported the desirability of wider political propaganda among women workers, in spite of the decision taken to form local women's committees for this purpose, women's involvement in politics progressed feebly and with difficulty. In this sense, the grand movement of Austrian workers for the reform of the voting laws in 1905 acted as a spur. Women were drawn into the struggle, and into the general strike. The Women's General State Committee found it necessary after that to introduce, both into the party committee and into the commission of trade unions, the project of organised work among women workers along the lines of the German movement. The Party Congress of 1907 came out in favour of a special agitational section within the Party, and from the third women's conference in 1908 onwards, systematic, separate work was carried on among the female proletariat in Austria on the same lines as in Germany. Even the repeal in 1910 of the law which had hindered the entry of women into political organisations did not bring about any changes in this field.

In England the special task of agitation among women workers was taken up by the Women's Labour League within the Labour Party<sup>19</sup> whilst in the British Social Democratic Party there had existed since 1906 a special Women's Committee for this purpose. In 1908 the American Socialist Party also set up a special, separate women's committee, and from that time on the organisation of women workers in America has achieved considerable success. In Switzerland the Union of Women Workers, founded by Clara Zetkin, comprising about fifteen sections, up until the war took upon itself all the work of socialist propaganda among women workers. The same type of intra-party women's collective-committees, bureaux, secretariats can be found in Finland, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, and Holland. In France there has also been in recent years an attempt to bring to life a similar women's party organisation. Alongside this method of organising women workers, in various countries—the United States, England, Holland, Sweden—there still



exist special organisations, whose official status is outside the Party, although they too come under the ideological leadership of the Social Democrats. The clubs, societies for the self-education of women workers, enlightenment unions and so on also belong to this type of organisation. The goal of these societies comes down to either 'preparing the ground', to carrying on propaganda among the most backward, ignorant masses, or to deepening the theoretical knowledge of women workers, preparing young socialist forces for the role of the leadership of the movement.

We, in Russia, from 1905 have also made attempts to create an organisation of this type. The first attempt took place in the spring of 1906 and consisted in opening 'women workers' clubs' without preliminary permission in some parts of Petrograd.<sup>20</sup> The breaking up of the first Duma<sup>21</sup> interrupted the activity of these clubs.

The second attempt took place in the autumn of 1907. The Social Democrats initiated a Society for the Self-Education of Women Workers, which set itself the task of attracting the broad masses of women with a low level of consciousness into the movement, getting them into unions, and involving them in the Party.

The Czarist regime did not give these attempts any chance to put down roots. In 1909 the workers' movement was again forced underground. But the social democratic women workers came to the first All-Russian Women's Congress in 1908, called by the bourgeois equal rights movement. The social democrat women workers were represented by their own separate class group, numbering forty-five women. Having passed their own independent resolutions on all questions, the women workers finally walked out of this 'ladies' congress.

Later, in 1913, the Social Democratic Party decided to hold a Woman's Day and in Russia this was seen as a symptom of the fact that the Russian working class too was gradually coming to realise the necessity of carrying on special work in the women's proletariat. Simple efficiency dictates this kind of division of labour. The position of women workers in modern society, the special responsibilities, borne by women as mothers and housekeepers, mean that a special type of agitation adapted to the women proletariat is necessary.†

In the final analysis the general class workers' movement stands to gain from such a division, i.e. separate agitation among women workers, since the greater concern for the interests and needs of women increases the popularity of the party among women workers and encourages women to join in

† The 'Woman's Day' was held by the Party in the following three years: in 1913, in 1914 and in historical 1917 on the 25th of February, the day of the beginning of the great revolution. In the spring of 1917, in Petrograd, the Bolsheviks began to publish the paper, *Woman Worker*, and the Mensheviks published *The Voice of the Woman Worker*. The war put a stop to both papers. For more details of the women workers' movement in Russia see my article in the collection: *The Communist Party and the Organisation of Women Workers*.

general party organisation. In this way the special party machine, working for the female half of the working class, not only does not damage the unity of the movement, but on the contrary, increases the numbers, strength and significance of the workers' party, extending by this means the framework of its social-creative work even as regards solving the complicated and confused 'women's question'.

## 2. Forms of Organisation of Women Workers in the West

The forms which have been adopted by the female proletarian movement in various countries are so variegated and idiosyncratic that it is difficult to describe them in a short and cursory outline. The variety of these forms is due, in the main, to the distinctive peculiarities of the social-political and economic conditions of each country; it also depends in part on the *conscious part of the working class and the women workers' movement*. We must not lose sight of the fact that the female proletarian movement in almost all countries is still in its formative period and therefore depends to a considerable degree on the atmosphere of "sympathy" or "indifference" which it meets among its class comrades who have already progressed a long way along the road of the struggle for the better future.

The female proletarian movement is manifested in the following most typical forms. First of all trade unions, which fall into two groups—mixed, that is consisting of men and women, and purely *women's unions*. The first type is the older and the most widespread. As early as 1824 the Lancashire women weavers entered the trade union organisation of weavers, and although women did not even have equal rights with men (for a long time they could take no part in the direction of the English trade unions, they could not be elected for union posts, and so on), all the same their participation in the economic struggle had an enormous educative significance and prepared the ground for the later socialist women's movement.

The trade union organisations of the second type, that is women only, flourished mainly on the soil of male workers' hostile attitudes towards the rivalry of female labour, and at the same time were nurtured by the emancipation movement of the women of the bourgeois classes. As early as the seventies Mrs. Patterson organised the League for the Protection of Women's Labour, which for a long time worked in conjunction with the bourgeois equal rights campaign and only later was transformed into a league of women's trade unions; in later years the League joined the general trade union organisation of workers and is gradually freeing itself from the influence of the feminists.

Trade union organisations confined to women are found in almost all countries (United States, France, Sweden, Denmark, Germany and so on), although gradually and inevitably they are forced out by trade unions of the



proletariat, and which forced many trade unions to close their doors to women. This hostility, this mistaken and narrow-minded conception of their interests has not completely disappeared even now—one still comes across echoes of it in England, in the Scandinavian countries, in France and even in Germany: sound notions of the unity of the movement, corresponding to the real interests of the working class as a whole, are only gradually making headway.

But of course it is only a small thing to open up working organisations to women; to awaken women's consciousness, to give scope to its activity, new methods and a new approach to masses of women were needed. Germany was the first to progress along these lines. August Bebel's book, *Women and Socialism*—the gospel of every woman socialist—did much to assess the question and elucidate it correctly. Having established that the 'woman question' depended on the solution of general socialist problems of our times, it nevertheless noted the specific peculiarities of the position of women in capitalist society, which of themselves define the necessity of separate work with the female proletariat.

It is usually thought that the separation of the women's movement in Germany was made necessary by external reasons, enforced by the existence of laws which forbade women access to political organisations. This conception is radically wrong. One must not forget that after 1892 the restricting paragraph only referred to women's participation in political organisations. Access to trade union organisations was, consequently, perfectly free. Moreover in the nineties in Germany it was precisely in the trade unions that separate, special, agitational work among the female proletariat was being carried out, preparing the ground for socialist propaganda among women workers. To cite this ill-starred paragraph of the German Imperial Laws is also inappropriate because, when the time was ripe and the interests of the Party demanded it, means were found to get round the embarrassing paragraph as well as everything else.

Finally, when the law forbidding women to take part in political organisations was repealed, there was no longer, in 1908, any valid external reason for dividing the proletariat according to sex. The organisation became general, but the necessity of special work with women was by no means made superfluous. At the Nuremberg Conference in 1908, when they were working out new party rules, the German Social Democrats recognised the necessity of retaining special work with women, separate women's meetings, women's own local and central representation, the women's central newspaper, women's conferences, and so on.

Two essential moments—economic and political—in the history of the workers' movement defined the necessity for separate work with the female proletariat. As the number of women workers grew, as they represented more intensified competition on the labour market, the question of trade union organisations for women workers became vital and acute. In the name of the interests of the trade union movement, in the name of the successes

of the struggle of the proletariat, it was necessary to 'render harmless' these scattered, dispersed, and unconscious elements, which appeared as a serious hindrance to the movement; in other words, women too had to be drawn into the trade union struggle. In 1895 the General Commission of Trade Unions of Germany founded a Women's Agitation Commission, sought out new methods of approaching the female masses and carried out special agitation and propaganda among women workers. And throughout the nineties *Gleichheit* appeared as the spokeswoman for a women's movement which was predominantly trade union-economic and not political.

The second moment which determined the necessity for separate work among women, within the framework of the Social Democratic Party, was the *political* moment. In a whole range of countries over the last ten years the question of electoral reform, of the further democratisation of the state system, had become more and more urgent and acute. Under this influence, there was a noticeable change in the attitude of the political workers' organisation to the women workers' movement. While theoretically acknowledging the advantage of attracting the female proletarian elements into the political struggle, the Party had not felt in this the same sense of urgency as had encouraged the trade unions to look for new ways and methods, which would provide a way into the mind and heart of the woman worker. In the nineties not one workers' party throughout the world had manifested its activity in the field of organisation of the female proletariat. Although at the Party Congress at Gotha, in 1896, at the insistence of a group of women Social Democrats it had confirmed the post of 'female confidential agent' who would undertake responsibility for all work among the female proletariat, the German Party, when it drew up its new party rules in Mainz in 1900, *forgot* to include this point. . . but all it took was for the question of electoral reform in the German Landtags to come onto the 'agenda', and their attitude to the women workers' movement changed.

The Party's indifference to this question had deep and vital roots in the following: while women were deprived of political rights, the involvement of women in the party cadres had incomparably less significance for the immediate successes of the Social Democrats, than energetic work among the male proletariat. Agitation among women workers was somehow intangible—it was work, not for the "present"<sup>22</sup>, but only for the remote future. The question of radical reform of the electoral system brought women too into the circle of the political fight. Getting women workers, these possible future voters, into party life acquired a topical interest. . . The women's socialist movement in Germany began to make rapid progress from the beginning of the twentieth century, since from then on it met with full sympathy from part of the Party; that is precisely the moment when the struggle for electoral reform was flaring up in the country.

We observe the same picture in other countries. In England the indifference of the socialist parties towards the women workers' movement can be explained by the success of the Suffragettes among women workers. For a



long time the Suffragettes were the only active spokeswomen for the political demands of women. But the revival of the question of the radical reform of the whole system of representation in England also generated an interest in the women workers' movement. In 1906 the Women's Labour League was formed,<sup>23</sup> presenting itself as the women's wing of the Labour Party, and setting itself the aim of firstly uniting all the forces of the female proletariat, and then gaining the equality of political rights for women. In 1909 the Social Democratic Party of England set up a separate committee for carrying out special propaganda among women: members of the Party, predominantly women, raised the campaign for universal franchise, to counterbalance the demands the Suffragettes were making for electoral qualification.<sup>24</sup>

The struggle for electoral reform in Austria, in spite of the removal from the agenda of the fifth article of the electoral rules, acted as a spur to the revival of party propaganda among women and led to the definite and systematic organisation of this special branch of party work.

In Belgium the beginning of the women's socialist movement dates from the time of the struggle for electoral reform.

In the United States, where many 'urgent class problems' flared up before the workers and where the movement constantly stumbled against obstacles which were connected with the flaws in the worn out system of bourgeois parliamentarianism, the drawing of women workers into active political struggle was dictated by the interests of the Party. In 1908 the Socialist Party of America organised a women's committee for agitation and propaganda among women workers. On the other hand, in countries such as France or Switzerland, where questions of further democratisation of the state system were not being raised, the women's socialist movement was only weakly developed.

In conclusion, one cannot help noting that in every country (except Germany) the majority of women's cells (commissions, bureaux, and so on) within the party structure are of very recent origin, having crystallised during the five or six years immediately before the war. The progress made during these last years in drawing women workers into the party is all the more striking, and the Women Workers' Conference in Copenhagen was a bright testimony of this. There is no doubt that with the help that the work among the female proletariat is now receiving from the Social Democrats, the involvement of the women workers in the class struggle will go forward at an even faster rate . . .

The participation of women workers in a general proletarian movement has ceased to be 'a luxury' and has become a basic necessity for the success of the revolutionary struggle.

## Editors' Notes

1. Kollontai is referring here to the First World War and the changes brought about in the international socialist movement by the war and the Russian revolution. Before the First World War, all the socialist parties were organised in the Second International. In 1918, when this pamphlet was published, negotiations for affiliation to the Third International were underway. This Third Communist International (the Comintern) was initiated by the Bolsheviks after the revolution, and European socialists at this time had to choose between two distinct forms of organising. Those who continued their affiliation to the Second International were committed to socialism by reform, while those who joined the Third International were committed to socialism through revolution.

It is important to remember that at the time of the Russian revolution, marxists assumed that revolution in Europe would follow very quickly, and that socialism in Russia would not come about in isolation.

2. By "independent organisations of women workers" she means organisations outside the socialist parties. The "special organisations" to which she refers are these same organisations, not the separate women's sections within the parties. This is made clear later in the pamphlet.

3. See Sheila's introduction, p.vi, on Kollontai's underestimation of the resilience of old attitudes and culture.

4. See note 1 above.

5. i.e., the White Russians and the foreign interventionist troops (including troops sent by England, which were used both to fight against the Red Army and to train the White Russian forces).

6. The Social Democratic Party was the name for the marxist party before the Third International. After the formation of the Third International, it was called the Communist Party. See Sheila's introduction, pp.iii/iv.

7. i.e., the 1820s.

8. Before 1917, Germany was the centre of marxism, with by far the largest marxist party, the Social Democratic Party. The founders of social democracy in Germany, Bebel and Leibknecht, and leading members of the German S.D.P. like Kautsky, Luxemburg, Zetkin and others, were known internationally.

9. Rosa Luxemburg and Clara Zetkin were among the women delegates from abroad who attended this conference, which was organised by the British section of the Second International. Numerous British organisations sent delegates—the Fabian Society, the Independent Labour Party, the Social Democratic Federation, Hammersmith Socialist Society, Oxford District Socialist Union, the Labour Church Union, Trades and Labour Councils and Trade Unions were all represented. (Information from *Report of the Proceedings of the International Socialist and Trade Union Congress held in London, 1896*. British Museum.)

10. When Kollontai talks about "the parties" in Europe, she seems to be referring in the British context to both the marxist party—i.e. the Social Democratic Federation founded by Hyndman, called the Social Democratic Party from October 1907 (which joined with other marxists in forming the British Socialist Party in May 1912)—and the non-marxist Labour Party.

11. This concept of "the Party", which in the context of other European countries is used to indicate the Social Democratic Party of that country, is used rather loosely in the British context. See note 12 below.

12. The Women's Labour League was founded by members of the Independent Labour Party in 1906, and affiliated to the Labour Party in the same year. After the General



Election of 1906, when it won 29 seats in Parliament, the Labour Party was recognised for the first time as a party of national importance.

The women had helped to build the movement from its very commencement; they had full recognition in the Party of their citizenship and their right and duty to take part in public work. Yet, owing largely to the fact that the Party is composed in the main of trade unionists, men were coming by hundreds and thousands into the ranks, and the wives and sweethearts were being left outside. If the new Party was not to be a purely masculine affair, we saw that a special effort must be made to reach the women and enlist their support. We do not want to organise ourselves separately from the men, but we have found that the best way to co-operate with them is to educate ourselves; to teach ourselves to discuss and understand and take responsibility in our own meetings, and thus to increase our power and at the same time our powers for the right. We are affiliated nationally to the Labour Party, and our local Leagues work with the local Labour councillors. We have about half a hundred branches now. . .

Object of the League: To form an organisation of women to work for Independent Labour Representation in connection with the Labour Party, and to obtain direct Labour Representation of women in Parliament and on all local bodies. (Margaret MacDonald, founder member of the Women's Labour League, writing in *Women Workers, Souvenir Pamphlet of Women's Labour Day, July 1909*. London School of Economics Library.)

It is interesting that where for other countries figures for trade union membership are followed by those for membership of the national Social Democratic Party, for England they are followed by figures for membership of the women's section of the Labour Party, rather than for the Social Democratic Party's women's section.

It seems likely that Kollontai's knowledge of events and organisations in England was somewhat sketchy, and that she was not clear about the distinction which existed at that time between the British Labour Party, and the marxist Social Democratic Party of Britain and other countries. In fact, as the Social Democratic parties grew more revisionist and less openly marxist—notably the German S.D.P.—the distinction between them and the British Labour Party became a fine one. Notice also that she refers to the Social Democratic Party in Britain, when after 1912 it had become the British Socialist Party, and that her second account of dates of the foundation of the Women's Committee of the Social Democratic Federation is incorrect. Sheila points out in her introduction that Kollontai appeared to know nothing of the activities of the East London Federation of Suffragettes.

13. In the early stages of the industrial revolution, women went into the factories, but many were still employed doing outwork at home or in domestic service. At the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth century, technological change, the growth of light industry and the growth of a mass market were beginning to change the structure of women's work again. This is the period during which women became unionised in significant numbers for the first time.

14. Mrs. Emma Patterson was the first secretary of the National Society for Women's Suffrage in 1871. She set up the Women's Provident and Protective Labour League, in 1874, deliberately avoiding the use of 'trade union' in the title out of deference to the middle class well-wishers who at that time were prominent in the organisation (though from the first, trade unionists were involved). The League helped set up women's trade unions in the 1870s, most of which were short-lived (though one, the Union of Working Women in Bristol, survived until the 1890s, and tried to convince the T.U.C. of the importance of organising women. Later it became the Trade Union League, with an overwhelmingly working class composition).

15. By "a narrowly economic character", Kollontai means that the English trade unionists limited themselves to economic demands at work, without connecting these to the general oppression of women in society.

16. Before the First World War, many working women backed the suffragette demand for the vote 'on equal terms with men', even though the terms on which men had the

vote embodied property qualifications which disqualified many working men from voting, and would have disqualified most working women, since they had even less money and property than the men. By 1914, however, some of the suffragettes, notably the East London Federation of Suffragettes, were calling for universal manhood and womanhood suffrage, without property qualifications of any kind.

17. Controversy over the 'Woman Question' had been going on for some time. Though Engels and Bebel supported women's rights, many German party members thought that women weren't ready for rights, and refused to include women's liberation on the party programme. In later years, Clara Zetkin continued the struggle in Germany for the recognition of the importance of working with and for women.

18. "Confidential Agent"—a party post.

19. See note 12 on the foundation of the Women's Labour League. The Women's Committee of the Social Democratic Party was founded in the spring of 1905 "for the purpose of educating women in socialism and other matters appertaining to it. . . We have started Women's Circles in many parts, which are conducted in a strictly business-like manner, so that when the members know enough of socialism they join the local branch of the S.D.P. and are well acquainted with the business methods of the branch." (Quoted from the Introduction by Clara Hendin to *Some Words to Socialist Women* by Mrs. Montefiore. 1907. Marx Memorial Library.)

21. The Duma was the Consultative Assembly, conceded by the Czar in 1905.

22. The Russian word used for 'present' in the text can also mean 'real'. (Tr.)

23. See notes 12 and 19 above. Kollontai's date for the formation of the Social Democratic Party's Women's Committee is wrong here.

24. The suffragettes were not in fact making demands for electoral (property) qualifications. They were demanding the vote 'on equal terms with men'; and while before the war this amounted to accepting the imposition of property qualifications, most of the suffragettes made it clear that they demanded the vote on these terms as *better than nothing*, and did not specifically support the principle of property qualifications. See note 16 above.



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