



International Women's Day

Alexandra Kollontai



Published in 2017 by Manifesto Press Cooperative Limited
First Published: Mezhdunarodnyi den' rabotnitz, Moscow 1920

ISBN 978-1-907464-21-8

Typeset in Bodoni and Gill
Printed in Britain by manifesto press



International Women's Day

Alexandra Kollontai





Alexandra Kollontai

Introduction: IWD in history

On March 8 1908, garment workers in New York went on strike over working conditions. The following year, the Socialist Party of America designated a special day in their honour. Then, the year after that, Clara Zetkin, a leading German socialist, championed the idea of celebrating the anniversary of this pioneering activity at the Copenhagen congress of the Socialist International and its women's conference. What later became International Women's Day was initially called International Working Women's Day. The Day would honour the movement for women's rights and to build support for achieving universal suffrage for women.

International Women's Day was marked for the first time the following year, in 1911, in Austria, Denmark, Germany and Switzerland, where more than one million women and men attended rallies. In addition to the right to vote and to hold public office, they demanded women's rights to work, to vocational training and to an end to discrimination on the job.

Women's Day in Russia was first openly celebrated, albeit illegally, in St. Petersburg in 1913. After the Bolshevik revolution, it was decided in 1922 to establish this day as a special holiday in commemoration of women's participation in the street demonstration in Petrograd in on March 8, 1917. Women had marched to the imperial palace with the demand "Give us bread" but were fired on by the police, an important trigger point in the events that followed. Four days later, the Tsar abdicated and the provisional Government granted women the right to vote, within months, full Soviet power was established.

Most of the written history of the February days focuses on the massive Putilov strike that had started the day before the women's protest. But it was probably on Alexandra Kollontai's recommendation that the Petrograd Bolshevik Party Committee called on women to openly demonstrate for *Bread, Peace, Land*. A slogan some revolutionists opposed as not being revolutionary enough. (Kollontai had been a delegate in Copenhagen in 1910.)

The response of women might have been massive but it was also spontaneous and unusual. Many socialists were not noted for thinking women could be significant in such struggles but the Petrograd Party had been won by Kollontai, who was aware of the way the 1915 Glasgow rent strike had prompted the Clydeside munitions revolt.

Kollontai was familiar with British suffrage campaigners who had joined the British Communist Party at its foundation. She replied to greetings from Dora Montefiori, a member of the Party's new executive on 13 September 1920. "We live in a new world where the beautiful hopes of the future real Communism are mixed up with so many remains of the old capitalistic world. It is a hard struggle to make of Russia a real Communistic state, but little by little the work goes on ... it seems we have stepped forward many centuries from the time of the beginning of the imperialist war. Also, the place of the women in the state and family has changed: all women have to work, for

‘who does not work does not eat’ in Soviet Russia.” [*The Communist*, 21 October 1920]

British women who visited the Soviet Union in the 1920s brought back stories of how a special day for women was part of Kollontai’s new world. But IWD took big strides forward when the Nazis took power in Germany and Clara Zetkin was exiled to the Soviet Union. She, and other senior Communist women now promoted it around the globe via the Comintern. By 1936 Communist women in Sheffield were marking the day and others followed, so that, by 1940, the *Daily Worker* was seeing many local events advertised.

In Britain, a national committee for International Women’s Day was formed during the Second World War and this broad movement succeeded in making the date more widely known and recognised in Britain. As well as celebrating the day itself, the movement published a Women’s Charter, which demanded equal political rights, equal economic rights (pay, opportunity, and training), social rights such as health services and housing, plus the right to an end to poverty and war.

Celebrating IWD had mushroomed during the war but British Communist women kept it going all during the cold war, when it was shunned by the Labour Party and seen as being slightly odd. Only in the 1970s as the feminist movement partly overlapped with the Communist Party did the idea become once again popular. With the adoption in 1975 of International Women’s Year by the United Nations, it was not difficult for progressive women to finally urge the celebrating of International Women’s Day on 8 March. With the 1980s IWD became much more accepted within the British trade union and labour movement. But it had largely begun with the determination of the author of this 1920 article praising IWD not to forget the role women had played in the destruction of the Tsarist dictatorship.

Alexandra Kollontai (March 31 1872 – 9 March 1952) was an active socialist and fighter for women’s rights in Russia from 1899. A member of the Russian Social Democratic and Labour Party who was at first independent of the factions, she joined the Bolsheviks in 1915. The only woman member of the Bolshevik central committee, she also served as Commissar of Welfare of the Soviet Republic and head of the Women’s Section of the Bolshevik Party.

After the Bolshevik revolution in October 1917 Kollontai became People’s Commissar for Social Welfare and founded the *Zhenotdel* or “Women’s Department” in 1919. In the first days of soviet power, this worked to improve the conditions of women’s lives in the Soviet Union, fighting illiteracy and educating women about the new marriage, education, and working laws put in place by the Revolution.

In 1923, she was appointed Soviet Ambassador to Norway, becoming the world’s second female ambassador in modern times. She later served as Ambassador to Mexico (1926–27) and Sweden (1930–1945) and was also a member of the Soviet delegation to the League of Nations.

Kollontai and Zetkin between them were between them largely responsible for establishing IWD and its international significance came out of the Russian Revolution.

6 International Women’s Day

International Women's Day

by Alexandra Kollontai

A Militant Celebration

Women's Day or Working Women's Day is a day of international solidarity, and a day for reviewing the strength and organisation of proletarian women.

But this is not a special day for women alone. The 8th of March is a historic and memorable day for the workers and peasants, for all the Russian workers and for the workers of the whole world. In 1917, on this day, the great February revolution broke out. [Ed note: A medieval calendar was then still being used, which was 13 days behind that used in most of the rest of the world. Thus, March 8 was deemed February 23rd at that time. Therefore, the March 1917 revolution is called "the February revolution" and that of November 1917, "the October revolution."] It was the working women of Petersburg who began this revolution; it was they who first decided to raise the banner of opposition to the Tsar and his associates. And so, working women's day is a double celebration for us.

But if this is a general holiday for all the proletariat, why do we call it "Women's Day"? Why then do we hold special celebrations and meetings aimed above all at the women workers and the peasant women? Doesn't this jeopardize the unity and solidarity of the working class? To answer these questions, we have to look back and see how Women's Day came about and for what purpose it was organized.

How and Why was Women's Day Organised?

Not very long ago, in fact about ten years ago, the question of women's equality, and the question of whether women could take part in government alongside men was being hotly debated. The working class in all capitalist countries struggled for the rights of working women: the bourgeoisie did not want to accept these rights. It was not in the interest of the bourgeoisie to strengthen the vote of the working class in parliament; and in every country, they hindered the passing of laws that gave the right to working women.

Socialists in North America insisted upon their demands for the vote with particular persistence. On the 28th of February, 1909, the women socialists of the U.S.A. organized huge demonstrations and meetings all over the country demanding political rights for working women. This was the first "Woman's Day". The initiative on organizing a woman's day thus belongs to the working women of America.

In 1910, at the Second International Conference of Working Women, Clara Zetkin brought forward the question of organizing an International Working Women's Day.

[Zetkin was a leader of the German Socialists and later Communists.] The conference decided that every year, in every country, they should celebrate on the same day a “Women’s Day” under the slogan “The vote for women will unite our strength in the struggle for socialism”.

During these years, the question of making parliament more democratic, i.e., of widening the franchise and extending the vote to women, was a vital issue. Even before the first world war, the workers had the right to vote in all bourgeois countries except Russia. [Only in 1918, in the UK, did the Representation of the People Act finally enfranchise all sections of the male working class that had still not been able to due to property qualifications.] A smaller percentage of working class men in the United States could not vote – in particular immigrant men. In the South of the US black men were often prevented from voting. The middle-class suffrage movements in all the European countries did not fight to give votes to either working class women or men.

Only women, along with the insane, remained without these rights. Yet, at the same time, the harsh reality of capitalism demanded the participation of women in the country’s economy. Every year there was an increase in the number of women who had to work in the factories and workshops, or as servants and charwomen. Women worked alongside men and the wealth of the country was created by their hands. But women remained without the vote.

But in the last years before the war the rise in prices forced even the most peaceful housewife to take an interest in questions of politics and to protest loudly against the bourgeoisie’s economy of plunder. “Housewives uprisings” became increasingly frequent, flaring up at different times in Austria, England, France and Germany.

The working women understood that it wasn’t enough to break up the stalls at the market or threaten the odd merchant: They understood that such action doesn’t bring down the cost of living. You have to change the politics of the government. And to achieve this, the working class has to see that the franchise is widened.

It was decided to have a Woman’s Day in every country as a form of struggle in getting working women to vote. This day was to be a day of international solidarity in the fight for common objectives and a day for reviewing the organized strength of working women under the banner of socialism.

The First International Women’s Day

The decision taken at the Second International Congress of Socialist Women was not left on paper. It was decided to hold the first International Women’s Day on the 19th of March, 1911.

This date was not chosen at random. Our German comrades picked the day because of its historic importance for the German proletariat. On the 19th of March in the year of 1848 revolution, the Prussian king recognized for the first time the

strength of the armed people and gave way before the threat of a proletarian uprising. Among the many promises he made, which he later failed to keep, was the introduction of votes for women.

After January 11, efforts were made in Germany and Austria to prepare for Women's Day. They made known the plans for a demonstration both by word of mouth and in the press. During the week before Women's Day two journals appeared: *The Vote for Women in Germany* and *Women's Day in Austria*. The various articles devoted to Women's Day – "Women and Parliament," "The Working Women and Municipal Affairs," "What Has the Housewife got to do with Politics?", etc. – analysed thoroughly the question of the equality of women in the government and in society. All the articles emphasized the same point: that it was absolutely necessary to make parliament more democratic by extending the franchise to women.

The first International Women's Day took place in 1911. Its success succeeded all expectation. Germany and Austria on Working Women's Day was one seething, trembling sea of women. Meetings were organized everywhere – in the small towns and even in the villages halls were packed so full that they had to ask male workers to give up their places for the women.

This was certainly the first show of militancy by the working woman. Men stayed at home with their children for a change, and their wives, the captive housewives, went to meetings. During the largest street demonstrations, in which 30,000 were taking part, the police decided to remove the demonstrators' banners: the women workers made a stand. In the scuffle that followed, bloodshed was averted only with the help of the socialist deputies in Parliament.

In 1913 International Women's Day was transferred to the 8th of March. This day has remained the working women's day of militancy.

Is Women's Day Necessary?

Women's Day in America and Europe had amazing results. It's true that not a single bourgeois parliament thought of making concessions to the workers or of responding to the women's demands. For at that time, the bourgeoisie was not threatened by a socialist revolution.

But Women's Day did achieve something. It turned out above all to be an excellent method of agitation among the less political of our proletarian sisters. They could not help but turn their attention to the meetings, demonstrations, posters, pamphlets and newspapers that were devoted to Women's Day. Even the politically backward working woman thought to herself: "This is our day, the festival for working women," and she hurried to the meetings and demonstrations. After each Working Women's Day, more women joined the socialist parties and the trade unions grew. Organizations improved and political consciousness developed.

Women's Day served yet another function; it strengthened the international

solidarity of the workers. The parties in different countries usually exchange speakers for this occasion: German comrades go to England, English comrades go to Holland, etc. The international cohesion of the working class has become strong and firm and this means that the fighting strength of the proletariat as a whole has grown.

These are the results of working women's day of militancy. The day of working women's militancy helps increase the consciousness and organization of proletarian women. And this means that its contribution is essential to the success of those fighting for a better future for the working class.

Women Workers Day In Russia

The Russia working woman first took part in "Working Women's Day" in 1913. This was a time of reaction when Tsarism held the workers and peasants in its vice like a grip. There could be no thought of celebrating "Working Women's Day" by open demonstrations. But the organized working women were able to mark their international day. Both the legal newspapers of the working class – the Bolshevik Pravda and the Menshevik Luch – carried articles about the International Women's Day: they carried special articles, portraits of some of those taking part in the working women's movement and greetings from comrades such as Bebel and Zetkin. [August Bebel (1840-1913), a leader of the German Social-Democratic Party and supporter of the women's movement].

In those bleak years meetings were forbidden. But in Petrograd, at the Kalashnikov Exchange, those women workers who belonged to the Party organized a public forum on "The Woman Question." Entrance was five kopecks. This was an illegal meeting but the hall was absolutely packed. Members of the Party spoke. But this animated "closed" meeting had hardly finished when the police, alarmed at such proceedings, intervened and arrested many of the speakers.

It was of great significance for the workers of the world that the women of Russia, who lived under Tsarist repression, should join in and somehow manage to acknowledge with actions International Women's Day. This was a welcome sign that Russia was waking up and the Tsarist prisons and gallows were powerless to kill the workers' spirit of struggle and protest.

In 1914, "Women Workers Day" in Russia was better organized. Both the workers' newspapers concerned themselves with the celebration. Our comrades put a lot of effort into the preparation of "Women Workers Day." Because of police intervention, they didn't manage to organize a demonstration. Those involved in the planning of "Women Workers Day" found themselves in the Tsarist prisons, and many were later sent to the cold north. For the slogan "for the working women's vote" had naturally become in Russia an open call for the overthrow of Tsarist autocracy.

Women Workers Day During the Imperialist War

The first world war broke out. The working class in every country was covered with the blood of war. [Most socialists in Britain, Germany, Austria, and France supported the war, with minorities agreeing with the Bolsheviks that it was wrong.] In 1915 and 1916 “Working Women’s Day” abroad was a feeble affair – left wing socialist women who shared the views of the Russian Bolshevik Party tried to turn March 8th into a demonstration of working women against the war. But those socialist party traitors in Germany and other countries would not allow the socialist women to organize gatherings; and the socialist women were refused passports to go to neutral countries where the working women wanted to hold International meetings and show that in spite of the desire of the bourgeoisie, the spirit of International solidarity lived on.

In 1915, it was only in Norway that they managed to organize an international demonstration on Women’s Day; representatives from Russia and neutral countries attended. There could be no thought of organizing a Women’s Day in Russia, for here the power of Tsarism and the military machine was unbridled.

Then came the great, great year of 1917. Hunger, cold and trials of war broke the patience of the women workers and the peasant women of Russia. In 1917, on the 8th of March (23rd of February), on Working Women’s Day, they came out boldly in the streets of Petrograd. The women – some were workers, some were wives of soldiers – demanded “Bread for our children” and “The return of our husbands from the trenches.” At this decisive time the protests of the working women posed such a threat that even the Tsarist security forces did not dare take the usual measures against the rebels but looked on in confusion at the stormy sea of the people’s anger.

The 1917 Working Women’s Day has become memorable in history. On this day, the Russian women raised the torch of proletarian revolution and set the world on fire. The February revolution marks its beginning from this day.

Our Call To Battle

“Working Women’s Day” was first organized ten years ago, in the campaign for the political equality of women and the struggle for socialism. This aim has been achieved by the working-class women in Russia. In the soviet republic, the working women and peasants don’t need to fight for the franchise and for civil rights. They have already won these rights. The Russian workers and the peasant women are equal citizens – in their hands is a powerful weapon to make the struggle for a better life easier – the right to vote, to take part in the Soviets and in all collective organizations. [Soviet means “council” in Russian and were initially bodies in which delegates were elected in factory and neighbourhood meetings.]

But rights alone are not enough. We have to learn to make use of them. The right to vote is a weapon which we have to learn to master for our own benefit, and for

the good of the workers' republic. In the two years of Soviet Power, life itself has not been absolutely changed. We are only in the process of struggling for communism and we are surrounded by the world we have inherited from the dark and repressive past. The shackles of the family, of housework, of prostitution still weigh heavily on the working woman. Working women and peasant women can only rid themselves of this situation and achieve equality in life itself, and not just in law, if they put all their energies into making Russia a truly communist society.

And to quicken this coming, we have first to put right Russia's shattered economy. We must consider the solving of our two most immediate tasks – the creation of a well organized and politically conscious labour force and the re-establishment of transport. If our army of labour works well, we shall soon have steam engines once more; the railways will begin to function. This means that the working men and women will get the bread and firewood they desperately need.

Getting transport back to normal will speed up the victory of communism. And with the victory of communism will come the complete and fundamental equality of women. This is why the message of "Working Women's Day" must this year be: "Working women, peasant women, mothers, wives and sisters, all efforts to helping the workers and comrades in overcoming the chaos of the railways and re-establishing transport. Everyone in the struggle for bread and firewood and raw materials."

Last year the slogan of the Day of Women Workers was: "All to the victory of the Red Front." [In 1919, Soviet Russia was faced with both invasion by outside forces, including Britain, and internal armed counter-revolution.] Now we call working women to rally their strength on a new bloodless front – the labour front! The Red Army defeated the external enemy because it was organized, disciplined and ready for self-sacrifice. With organization, hard work, self-discipline and self-sacrifice, the workers' republic will overcome the internal foe – the dislocation (of) transport and the economy, hunger, cold and disease. "Everyone to the victory on the bloodless labour front! Everyone to this victory!"

The New Tasks of Working Women's Day

The October revolution gave women equality with men as far as civil rights are concerned. The women of the Russian proletariat, who were not so long ago the most unfortunate and oppressed, are now in the Soviet Republic able to show with pride to comrades in other countries the path to political equality through the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat and soviet power.

The situation is very different in the capitalist countries where women are still overworked and underprivileged. In these countries, the voice of the working woman is weak and lifeless. It is true that in various countries – in Norway, Australia, Finland and in some of the States of North America – women had won civil rights even before the [1914-18] war. [In Britain, a coalition government passed the

Representation of the People Act 1918, enfranchising women over the age of 30 who met minimum property qualifications. Ten years later, in 1928, the Representation of the People (Equal Franchise) Act gave the vote to all women over the age of 21.]

In Germany, after the Kaiser had been thrown out and a bourgeois republic established, headed by the “compromisers,” thirty-six women entered parliament – but not a single communist! [Social Democratic Party leaders who formed a new capitalist government in Germany after the fall of the Kaiser in 1918 and then actively supported militarised counter-revolution after coming to office.]

In 1919, in England, a woman was for the first time elected a Member of Parliament. But who was she? A “lady.” That means a landowner, an aristocrat. [This is a reference to Lady Astor, who was the first woman to serve in the UK parliament. Constance Markievicz was the first woman elected to parliament but as this was the 1918 parliament and her party, Sinn Fein, refused to take the oath of loyalty to the monarch, she did not actually serve.] In France, too, the question has been coming up lately of extending the franchise to women.

But what use are these rights to working women in the framework of bourgeois parliaments? While the power is in the hands of the capitalists and property owners, no political rights will save the working woman from the traditional position of slavery in the home and society. The French bourgeoisie are ready to throw another sop to the working class, in the face of growing Bolshevik ideas amongst the proletariat: they are prepared to give women the vote. [In fact, resistance to the measure followed, through fear of revolution and, although the measure was signed into law on April 21, 1944 under a provisional government, French women did not actually cast their ballot for the first time until April 29, 1945, in what were the country’s first general elections after liberation from German occupation.]

Mr. Bourgeois, Sir – It Is Too Late!

After the experience of the Russian October revolution, it is clear to every working woman in France, in England and in other countries that only the dictatorship of the working class, only the power of the soviets can guarantee complete and absolute equality, the ultimate victory of communism will tear down the century-old chains of repression and lack of rights. If the task of “International Working Women’s Day” was earlier in the face of the supremacy of the bourgeois parliaments to fight for the right of women to vote, the working class now has a new task: to organize working women around the fighting slogans of the Third International. Instead of taking part in the working of the bourgeois parliament, listen to the call from Russia:

“Working women of all countries! Organize a united proletarian front in the struggle against those who are plundering the world! Down with the parliamentarianism of the bourgeoisie! We welcome soviet power! Away with inequalities suffered by the working men and women! We will fight with the workers

for the triumph of world communism!”

This call was first heard amidst the trials of a new order, in the battles of civil war it will be heard by and it will strike a chord in the hearts of working women of other countries. The working woman will listen and believe this call to be right. Until recently they thought that if they managed to send a few representatives to parliament their lives would be easier and the oppression of capitalism more bearable. Now they know otherwise.

Only the overthrow of capitalism and the establishment of soviet power will save them from the world of suffering, humiliations and inequality that makes the life of the working woman in the capitalist countries so hard. The “Working Woman’s Day” turns from a day of struggle for the franchise into an international day of struggle for the full and absolute liberation of women, which means a struggle for the victory of the soviets and for communism!

- Down with the world of Property and the Power of Capital!
- Away with Inequality, Lack of Rights and the Oppression of Women – The Legacy of the Bourgeois World!
- Forward To the International Unity of Working Women and Male Workers in the Struggle for the Dictatorship of the Proletariat – The Proletariat of Both Sexes!

.



19172017



International Women's Day is now celebrated throughout the world and its close links to the revolutionary struggles of the 20th century become more relevant as systemic crisis grips the capitalist world.

On March 8, as war loomed 1914 Sylvia Pankhurst was arrested as a women's suffrage march from Bow approached Trafalgar Square.

March 8 demonstrations cover picture marking International Women's Day in Saint Petersburg sparked the February Revolution. Women went on strike that day for 'Bread and Peace'.

Following the Russian Revolution International Women's Day was established as a national holiday and Alexandra Kollontai became head of the Women's Department and People's Commissar for welfare and led the campaign to improve women's living conditions, eradicate illiteracy and establish a new legal and social framework for women's liberation.

Manifesto Press publishes this reprint of Alexandra Kollontai's writing on International Women's Day as part of its programme to mark the centenary of the great October Socialist Revolution



£2.50 ISBN 978-1-907464-21-8

Manifesto Press Co-operative Ltd
Ruskin House 23 Coombe Road Croydon CR0 1BD
www.manifestopress.org.uk