

Clara Zetkin

Organising Working Women

(November 1922)

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The following extracts are taken from the speech Clara Zetkin made to the Fourth Congress of the Communist International in November 1922. At the time she was the German representative on the Executive Committee of the International, and General Secretary of the International Women's Secretariat.

The Fourth Congress took place at a time of retrenchment in the face of attacks from the employing class, after the defeat of the revolutionary wave that swept Europe at the end of the first world war. The United Front and mass work were now the strategies that were necessary.

Although the historical circumstances are very different today, the arguments Zetkin raises are still valid because the question of how to reach and organise working class women is once again on the agenda.

The forty years from the early 1920's to the 1960's saw the almost complete suppression of revolutionary socialist ideas. In the atmosphere created by Stalinism the ideas of fighting for an end to women's oppression and actively seeking to organise women had no place. Only with the outbursts of 1968, the explosion of the student movement, and the enormous possibilities that opened up for revolutionary organisations, did the women's movement begin to develop again. Most revolutionary socialists shied away from the debate. They argued against involvement in the women's movement, seeing it as middle-class rather than developing a strategy for intervening in it and organising among working-class women. Now women are in the front line of attack in the economic crisis. And with thousands of

women angry at the prospect of unemployment, being denied equal pay and equal jobs, demonstrating in huge numbers against the cuts and closures, socialists have to find a way of pulling them towards revolutionary ideas. Something is inevitably lost in shortening an extremely long speech. But the substance of the argument is here. The central argument which Clara Zetkin raised is as relevant today as it was in 1922.

Comrades, before I begin my report on the activities of the International Women's Secretariat and the development of Communist activity among women, allow me a few short remarks. They are necessary because our work is still misunderstood not only by our opponents but even by our own comrades. This is with some the remains of an old view, and with others it is wilful prejudice because they do not sympathise with our cause, and even partly oppose it.

The International Women's Secretariat is a branch of the Executive of the Comintern. It conducts its activity not only in constant cooperation with the Executive, but under its immediate leadership. What we usually designate the Communist Women's Movement is not an independent women's movement. It exists for systematic Communist propaganda among women. This has a double purpose: First, to incorporate within the national sections of the Comintern those women who are already filled with the Communist ideal, making them conscious co-workers in the activity of those sections. Second, to win over to the Communist ideal the indifferent women and draw them into the struggles of the proletariat. The masses of working women should be mobilised for these fights. There is no work in the Party, no struggle of the movement in any country in which we women do not regard it as our first duty to participate. Moreover, we desire to take our place in the Communist Parties and in the International where the work is hardest and the bullets fly thickest, without shunning the most menial, most modest every-day work.

One thing has become apparent; we require special organs to carry on the Communist work of organisation and education among women and to make it a part of the life of the Party. Communist agitation among women is not only a women's task, it is the task of the whole Communist Party of each country, of the Communist International. To accomplish our purpose it is necessary to set up party organs, Women's Secretariats, Women's Departments, or whatever we may call them, to carry on this work.

Of course we do not deny the possibility that some strong personality, man or woman, might be able to do the same work in some local or district organisation, But however much we may admit such individual accomplishments in the Party, we must ask ourselves how much greater the benefits would have been if instead of the work of a single

individual we had the co-operation of many forces. United action by many towards a common goal must be our slogan in the Party, in the International, and in our work with women.

As a matter of expediency, of practical division of labour, women are usually the best fitted to take part in the special organs for Communist work among women. We cannot escape the fact that the large masses of the women live and work to-day under special conditions. That is why, in general, women usually find the best and quickest method of approach to the working woman to begin Communist propaganda. Just as we Communist women consider it as our right and duty to take part in every activity in the Party – from the most modest work of distributing leaflets to the final, tremendous, decisive fight – just as we would regard it as an insult to be considered unworthy of taking part in the great historical life of the Party and the Communist International, so do we not exclude any man from taking part in the special Communist work among women.

During the last year we have had evidence of the good and the bad sides of Communist work among women. We have seen the good sides in those countries where the Communist sections of the International have created bodies, as in Bulgaria and Germany where the Women's Secretariats have carried on the work of organising the educating the women Communists, mobilising the working women, and led them into the social struggle. In those countries, the Communist Women's movement has become one of the strong points of the general life of the Party. In those countries we have many women members and militants in the Party and still larger masses of women as comrades-in-arms outside the Party.

“Where there's a will there's a way. We have the will to world revolution, therefore we must find the way to reach the masses of the exploited and the enslaved women, whether the historical conditions make it easy or difficult.”

Let me give you a few examples of the bad effects of the lack of special organs for work among women in Communist parties. Whenever there are no Women's Secretariats or similar bodies, we have observed a falling off in the participation of women in the life of the Communist Party and the withdrawal of the feminine proletariat from the struggle of their class. In Poland, the Party has refused until now to set up special bodies for work among women. The Party was content to allow women to fight in its ranks, and participate

in strikes and mass movements. However, we are beginning to realise that this is not sufficient to permeate to the feminine proletariat with the Communist ideal. The last elections to the Diet have proved that reaction finds its strongest support among the ignorant masses of women who have not yet been permeated by Communism. This should never happen again.

In England, organisation for conducting systematic agitation among the feminine proletariat is altogether lacking, the Communist Party of Great Britain excused itself by its weakness, and has continually refused or postponed the setting up of a special body for systematic agitation among women. All the exhortation of the International Women's Secretariat have been in vain. No Women's Secretariat has been established: the only thing that has been done is the appointment of a women comrade as general Party agitator. Our women comrades have organised various meetings for the political education of the Communist women out of their own feeble numbers. These meetings have achieved such good results that the establishment of similar meetings must be encouraged by the Communist Party.

The attitude of the Executive of the Communist Party of Great Britain is, in my opinion, not only an outcome of its financial weakness, but partly also to its youth and the shortcomings resulting from it. I do not want to submit the Party to severe criticism here. The success of the British Communist Party at the last general election in Great Britain is proof of its strong determination and its practical success. However, this election victory, as well as the political activity and reorganisation which were decided upon, make incumbent on the British Communist Party at a time when from being a small propagandist party, it goes right into the masses, to strive to organise the proletarian women. The British section of the International cannot remain indifferent to the fact that in its country many millions of proletarian women are organised in women's suffrage societies, women's trade unions of the old type, in consumers' co-operatives, in the Labour Party and in the Independent Labour Party. It behoves the Communist Party to struggle with all these organisations for the capture of the minds, the hearts, the will power and the actions of the proletarian women. Therefore it will in the long run realise the necessity for the organisation of special organs by means of which it will be able to organise and train the Communist women within the Party, and make the proletarian women outside the Party willing fighters for the interests of their class.

In various countries, the Communist women, under the leadership of their Party, have used every opportunity to awaken the proletarian women and to lead them into the struggle against the capitalist system. Such was the case for instance in Germany in the fight against the so-called Abortion Law, which was used for a far-reaching and successful campaign against bourgeois class rule and the bourgeois State. This campaign secured for

us the sympathy and adherence of large masses of women. It was presented, not as a women's question, but as a political question of the proletariat.

We fully realise the importance of spirited and thorough work in the trade unions and co-operatives. In order to carry on energetic and systematic work in these two fields, it is necessary that we gain influence over large sections of women and recruit them for the struggle. This we shall do by influencing working women through their trade unions, and proletarian and petty bourgeois house wives through the co-operative movement. However, I want to point out that in our work we must not raise false illusions. We must, on the contrary, do our utmost to destroy the illusion that the trade union movement and co-operative movements within the capitalist system are capable of bringing about legislation for the benefit of the proletariat and of destroying the foundations of capitalism. However useful and indispensable the work of trade unions and co-operatives they cannot undermine the overthrow capitalism.

The conditions are especially favourable for rallying also non-proletarian women around the banner of Communism. The capitalist decay has created in Great Britain, in Germany and other bourgeois states a large new class of new rich as well as a large class of new poor. The middle class is being proletarianised. Consequently the exigencies of life are pulling at the heart strings as well as the purse strings of many women who hitherto had a terribly secure and happy existence under the capitalist system. Many professional women, especially the intellectuals, such as teachers, civil servants and office employees of all kinds are getting rebellious and are pressed into the struggle against capitalism. Comrades, we must take advantage of the ferment in these women's circles and fan their resigned hopelessness into a flame of indignation that will lead to revolutionary consciousness and action.

What about the conditions that can make this possible? I have already mentioned what pitiless inroads present day conditions make into the lives of millions of women, causing many of them to awaken from their torpor. All that has hampered us previously, the political backwardness and the indifference of women in general, can, under the pressure of unbearable suffering, bring adult women into the Communist camp. Their mentality is less affected by the false and deceptive watchword of the Social Democratic reformists, or the bourgeois reformers. Their mentality is frequently like a blank sheet, so we shall subsequently find it easier to bring the hitherto indifferent female masses into our struggle without the preliminary transition through suffrage, pacifist and other reformist organisations. However, I want to sound a note of warning. We must not be too sanguine and expect that the women will join immediately in the struggle for our final aims, but we may depend on them in our defensive struggle against the general offensive of the bourgeoisie.

I believe that our women comrades in Bulgaria have shown us a good way to organise women. They have established Unions of sympathising women. These unions are not only preparatory training centres for entry into the Communist Party, but are also effective rallying points for the attraction of the female masses to all the activities and actions of the Party. Our Italian women comrades have begun to follow this example. They have also established groups of sympathising women, including women who are still loath to enter political parties, or attend political meetings. The example must not only receive the recognition of all those who do Communist work among women in all countries, but must also be followed.

Comrades, are the Communist women within the sections of the International endowed with the consciousness, the will and energy required for this work among the female masses? We must not conceal the fact that the women as well as the men Communists (for on the whole we are not worse, or more stupid than you are), frequently lack the necessary fundamental, theoretical and practical training. The backwardness and weakness of the women in the political movement only reflects the backwardness and the weakness in the Communist ranks in general. It is of the greatest importance to overcome as quickly as possible the lack of training and weakness of those who are to carry out the Communist work among the female proletariat. Therefore I enjoin you all to take care that the Communist women within your ranks are individually made responsible for the carrying out of the practical tasks of the Party. See to it that they have all the educational opportunities possible. Comrades, the fundamental and practical training of women into valuable Communist workers in the Communist struggle is part of your own educational work, and is an important and indispensable prerequisite for your success.

All the signs of the times show us that society is objectively ripe, nay even over-ripe for the overthrow of capitalism. But we have had no proof that the will of the proletariat, the will of the class destined to be the grave-digger of the capitalist order is ripe in the historical sense of the word. But Comrades, this historic situation is like an alpine landscape in which the gigantic masses of snow repose on the mountain tops for centuries, seemingly impervious to sun, rain or storm. But despite appearances they are undermined, they have grown soft and are 'ripe' to be hurled down. Perhaps the beating of a little bird's wings will be enough to move this avalanche which will bury the valleys under its weight. We do not know how soon we, men and women, will be faced with the world revolution. Therefore, we must not lose a single hour, nay, let a single minute pass without working for the world revolution. World revolution does not only mean world destruction and the destruction of capitalism. It also means world construction and the creation of Communism. Let us get our inspiration from the real meaning of the word: let us be ready, and let us make the masses ready, in order that they might become the world creators of Communism.

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