

WORKERS OF ALL COUNTRIES, UNITE!

V.I. LENIN

***ON THE WOMAN
QUESTION***

(Clara Zetkin's recollections of Lenin)

PUBLISHER'S NOTE

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V.I. LENIN

Comrade Lenin repeatedly discussed with me the problem of women's rights. He obviously attached great importance to the women's movement, which was to him an essential component of the mass movement that in certain circumstances might become decisive. Needless to say he saw full social equality of women as a principle which no communist could dispute.

We had our first lengthy talk on this subject in the autumn of 1920, in Lenin's big study in the Kremlin. Lenin sat at his desk, which was covered with books and papers, indicating study and work without the "brilliant disorder" associated with genius.

"We must by all means set up a powerful international women's movement on a clear-cut theoretical basis," he began after greeting me. "It is clear that without Marxist theory we cannot have proper practice. Here, too, we communists need the greatest clarity of principle. We must draw a sharp line between us and all other parties. Our Second Internation-

al Congress¹ unfortunately did not come up to expectations in discussing the question of women. It posed the question but did not get around to taking a definite stand. A committee is still in charge of the matter. It is to draft a resolution, theses and directives but has made little progress so far. You must help it."

I had already heard from others what Lenin was now telling me and I expressed my amazement. I was full of enthusiasm for everything Russian women had done during the revolution and what they were doing now for its defence and further development. As for the standing and activity of women in the Bolshevik Party, I thought that it was a model party — indeed, *the* model party. It alone supplied the international communist women's movement with a valuable trained and experienced force and set a great example for history.

"That is true, it's wonderful," Lenin remarked with a faint smile. "In Petrograd, here in Moscow, and in other cities and industrial centres, proletarian women showed up splendidly during the revolution. We would not have won without them, or hardly. That is my opinion. What courage they showed and how courageous they still are! Imagine the suffering and privation they are enduring. But they are holding out because they want to defend the Soviets, because they want freedom and communism. Yes, our working women are magnificent class fighters. They are worthy of

admiration and love. In general, it must be acknowledged that even the ladies of the 'Constitutional Democrats' in Petrograd showed greater courage in fighting us than those wretched military Cadets.²

"It's true that we have reliable, intelligent and tireless women in our Party. They hold important posts in the Soviets, Executive Committees, People's Commissariats, and public offices of every kind. Many of them work day and night either in the Party or among the workers and peasants or in the Red Army. That is of great value to us. It is important for women all over the world, as it is evidence of the capacity of women, of the great value of the work they do for society. The first proletarian dictatorship is truly paving the way for the complete social equality of women. It eradicates more prejudice than volumes of feminist literature. However, in spite of all this, we do not yet have an international communist women's movement and we must have one without fail. We must immediately set about starting it. Without such a movement, the work of our International and of its parties is incomplete and never will be complete. Yet our revolutionary work has to be fulfilled in its entirety. Tell me how communist work is getting on abroad."

I did — as well as I could at the time, with the links between the Comintern parties still very loose and irregular. Lenin listened attentively, leaning slightly forward, with no sign

of boredom, impatience or fatigue, keenly following even details of secondary importance. I have never known anyone who was a better listener or who could coordinate and generalize all that he had heard as fast as he did. That was evident from the short and always very specific questions he asked from time to time about what I told him, and from the fact that he returned to this or that particular of my narrative later on. Lenin made some brief notes.

Naturally, I spoke in great detail about the state of affairs in Germany. I told Lenin of the vast importance which Rosa Luxemburg attached to drawing the greatest number of women into the revolutionary struggle. When the Communist Party had been founded, she insisted that a women's newspaper be published. When Leo Jogiches and I met for the last time — 36 hours before he was murdered — he discussed the Party's plan of work with me. He gave me various tasks to perform, among them a plan for the organization of work among working women. The Party tackled this question at its first illegal conference. The trained and experienced women agitators and leaders who had become prominent before and during the war had almost without exception remained Social-Democrats of the one or the other shade, and kept the agitated and active proletarian women under their sway. However, there was already a small nucleus of energetic, devoted

women who took part in the Party's every job and every battle. Furthermore, the Party itself had already organized methodical activity among the working women. Of course all this was merely a start, but a good start nevertheless.

“Not bad, not bad at all,” Lenin said. “The communist women's energy, devotion and enthusiasm, their courage and intelligence during the illegal and semi-legal periods, promise well for the development of our work. It would be useful for the expansion of the Party and the growth of its strength to win over the masses and carry through actions. But how about giving all the comrades a clear understanding of the fundamentals of this question and training them — how are you getting along in this respect? This is what counts most in the work among the masses. It is very important in terms of the ideas we convey to the masses, and of the things we want the masses to adopt and take inspiration from. I cannot remember at the moment who said ‘It takes inspiration to do great deeds.’ We and the working people of the whole world still have really great deeds to perform. What inspires your comrades, the proletarian women of Germany? What about their proletarian class-consciousness? Do their interests and activities centre on the political demands of the moment? What is the focal point of their thoughts?

“I have heard strange things about that

from Russian and German comrades. I must tell you what I mean. I understand that in Hamburg a gifted communist woman is bringing out a newspaper for prostitutes, and is trying to organize them for the revolutionary struggle. Now Rosa, a true communist, felt and acted like a human being when she wrote an article in defence of prostitutes who have landed in jail for violating a police regulation concerning their sad trade. They are unfortunate double victims of bourgeois society. Victims, first, of its accursed system of property and, secondly, of its accursed moral hypocrisy. There's no doubt about this. Only a coarse-grained and short-sighted person could forget this. To understand this is one thing, but it is quite another thing — how shall I put it? — to organize the prostitutes as a special revolutionary guild contingent and publish a trade union paper for them. Are there really no industrial working women left in Germany who need organizing, who need a newspaper, who should be enlisted in your struggle? This is a morbid deviation. It strongly reminds me of the literary vogue which made a sweet madonna out of every prostitute. Its origin was sound too: social sympathy, and indignation against the moral hypocrisy of the honourable bourgeoisie. But the healthy principle underwent bourgeois corrosion and degenerated. The question of prostitution will confront us even in our country with many a difficult problem. Return the prostitute to productive

work, find her a place in the social economy — that is the thing to do. But the present state of our economy and all the other circumstances make it a difficult and complicated matter. Here you have an aspect of the woman problem which faces us in all its magnitude, after the proletariat has come to power, and demands a practical solution. It will still require a great deal of effort here in Soviet Russia. But to return to your special problem in Germany. Under no circumstances should the Party look calmly upon such improper acts of its members. It causes confusion and splits our forces. Now what have *you* done to stop it?”

Before I could answer Lenin continued:

“The record of your sins, Clara, is even worse. I have been told that at the evenings arranged for reading and discussion with working women, sex and marriage problems come first. They are said to be the main objects of interest in your political instruction and educational work. I could not believe my ears when I heard that. The first state of proletarian dictatorship is battling with the counter-revolutionaries of the whole world. The situation in Germany itself calls for the greatest unity of all proletarian revolutionary forces, so that they can repel the counter-revolution which is pushing on. But active communist women are busy discussing sex problems and the forms of marriage — ‘past, present and future.’ They consider it their

most important task to enlighten working women on these questions. It is said that a pamphlet on the sex question written by a communist authoress from Vienna enjoys the greatest popularity. What rot that booklet is! The workers read what is right in it long ago in Bebel. Only not in the tedious, cut-and-dried form found in the pamphlet but in the form of gripping agitation that strikes out at bourgeois society. The mention of Freud's hypotheses is designed to give the pamphlet a scientific veneer, but it is so much bungling by an amateur. Freud's theory has now become a fad. I mistrust sex theories expounded in articles, treatises, pamphlets, etc. — in short, the theories dealt with in that specific literature which sprouts so luxuriantly on the dung heap of bourgeois society. I mistrust those who are always absorbed in the sex problems, the way an Indian saint is absorbed in the contemplation of his navel. It seems to me that this superabundance of sex theories, which for the most part are mere hypotheses, and often quite arbitrary ones, stems from a personal need. It springs from the desire to justify one's own abnormal or excessive sex life before bourgeois morality and to plead for tolerance towards oneself. This veiled respect for bourgeois morality is as repugnant to me as rooting about in all that bears on sex. No matter how rebellious and revolutionary it may be made to appear, it is in the final analysis thoroughly bourgeois. Intellectuals and

others like them are particularly keen on this. There is no room for it in the Party, among the class-conscious, fighting proletariat.”

I interposed that where private property and the bourgeois social order prevail, questions of sex and marriage gave rise to manifold problems, conflicts and suffering for women of all social classes and strata. As far as women are concerned, the war and its consequences exacerbated the existing conflicts and suffering to the utmost precisely in the sphere of sexual relations. Problems formerly concealed from women were now laid bare. To this was added the atmosphere of incipient revolution. The world of old emotions and thoughts was cracking up. Former social connections were loosening and breaking. The makings of new relations between people were appearing. Interest in the relevant problems was an expression of the need for enlightenment and a new orientation. It was also a reaction against the distortions and hypocrisy of bourgeois society. Knowledge of the modifications of the forms of marriage and family that took place in the course of history, and of their dependence on economics, would serve to rid the minds of working women of their preconceived idea of the eternity of bourgeois society. The critically historical attitude to this had to lead to an unrelenting analysis of bourgeois society, an exposure of its essence and its consequences, including the branding of false sex morality. All roads

led to Rome. Every truly Marxist analysis of an important part of the ideological superstructure of society, of an outstanding social phenomenon, had to lead to an analysis of bourgeois society and its foundation, private property. It should lead to the conclusion that "Carthage must be destroyed."

Lenin nodded with a smile.

"There you are! You defend your comrades and your Party like a lawyer. What you say is of course true. But that can at best excuse, not justify, the mistake made in Germany. It remains a mistake. Can you assure me in all sincerity that during those reading and discussion evenings, questions of sex and marriage are dealt with from the point of view of mature, vital historical materialism? This presupposes wide-ranging, profound knowledge, and the fullest Marxist mastery of a vast amount of material. Do you now have the forces you need for that? Had you had them, a pamphlet like the one we spoke about would not have been used for instruction during reading and discussion evenings. It is being recommended and disseminated instead of being criticized. Why is the approach to this problem inadequate and un-Marxist? Because sex and marriage problems are not treated as only part of the main social problem. Conversely, the main social problem is presented as a part, an appendage to the sex problem. The important point recedes into the background. Thus not only is this question ob-

scured, but also thought, and the class-consciousness of working women in general, is dulled.

“Besides, and this isn’t the least important point, Solomon the Wise said there is a time for everything. I ask you, is this the time to keep working women busy for months at a stretch with such questions as how to love or be loved, how to woo or be wooed? This, of course, with regard to the ‘past, present and future,’ and among the various races. And it is proudly styled historical materialism. Nowadays all the thoughts of communist women, of working women, should be centred on the proletarian revolution, which will lay the foundation, among other things, for the necessary revision of material and sexual relations. Just now we must really give priority to problems other than the forms of marriage prevalent among Australia’s aborigines, or marriage between brother and sister in ancient times. For the German proletariat, the problem of the Soviets, of the Versailles Treaty³ and its impact on the lives of women, the problem of unemployment, of falling wages, of taxes and many other things remain the order of the day. To be brief, I am still of the opinion that this sort of political and social education of working women is wrong, absolutely wrong. How could you keep quiet about it? You should have set your authority against it.”

I told my fervent friend that I had never

failed to criticize and to remonstrate with the leading women comrades in various places. But, as he knew, no prophet is honoured in his own country or in his own house. By my criticism I had drawn upon myself the suspicion that “survivals of a Social-Democratic attitude and old-fashioned philistinism were still strong” in my mind. However, in the end my criticism had proved effective. Sex and marriage were no longer the focal point in lectures at discussion evenings. Lenin resumed the thread of his argument.

“Yes, yes, I know that,” he said. “Many people rather suspect *me* of philistinism on this account, although such an attitude is repugnant to me — it conceals so much narrow-mindedness and hypocrisy. Well, I’m unruffled by it. Yellow-beaked fledgelings newly hatched from their bourgeois-tainted eggs are all so terribly clever. We have to put up with that without mending our ways. The youth movement is also affected with the modern approach to the sex problem and with excessive interest in it.”

Lenin emphasized the word “modern” with an ironical, deprecating gesture.

“I was also told that sex problems are a favourite subject in your youth organizations too, and that there are hardly enough lecturers on this subject. This nonsense is especially dangerous and damaging to the youth movement. It can easily lead to sexual excesses, to overstimulation of sex life and to wasted

health and strength of young people. You must fight that too. There is no lack of contact between the youth movement and the women's movement. Our communist women everywhere should cooperate methodically with young people. This will be a continuation of motherhood, will elevate it and extend it from the individual to the social sphere. Women's incipient social life and activities must be promoted, so that they can outgrow the narrowness of their philistine, individualistic psychology centred on home and family. But this is incidental.

“In our country, too, considerable numbers of young people are busy ‘revising bourgeois conceptions and morals’ in the sex question. And let me add that this involves a considerable section of our best boys and girls, of our truly promising youth. It is as you have just said. In the atmosphere created by the aftermath of war and by the revolution which has begun, old ideological values, finding themselves in a society whose economic foundations are undergoing a radical change, perish, and lose their restraining force. New values crystallize slowly, in the struggle. With regard to relations between people, and between man and woman, feelings and thoughts are also becoming revolutionized. New boundaries are being drawn between the rights of the individual and those of the community, and hence also the duties of the individual. Things are still in complete, chaotic

ferment. The direction and potentiality of the various contradictory tendencies can still not be seen clearly enough. It is a slow and often very painful process of passing away and coming into being. All this applies also to the field of sexual relations, marriage and the family. The decay, putrescence, and filth of bourgeois marriage with its difficult dissolution, its licence for the husband and bondage for the wife, and its disgustingly false sex morality and relations fill the best and most spiritually active of people with the utmost loathing.

“The coercion of bourgeois marriage and bourgeois legislation on the family enhance the evil and aggravate the conflicts. It is the coercion of ‘sacrosanct’ property. It sanctifies venality, baseness and dirt. The conventional hypocrisy of ‘respectable’ bourgeois society takes care of the rest. People revolt against the prevailing abominations and perversions. And at a time when mighty nations are being destroyed, when the former power relations are being disrupted, when a whole social world is beginning to decline, the sensations of the individual undergo a rapid change. A stimulating thirst for different forms of enjoyment easily acquires an irresistible force. Sexual and marriage reforms in the bourgeois sense will not do. In the sphere of sexual relations and marriage, a revolution is approaching — in keeping with the proletarian revolution. Of course, women and young people are taking a deep interest in the complex tangle of

problems which have arisen as a result of this. Both the former and the latter suffer greatly from the present messy state of sex relations. Young people rebel against them with the vehemence of their years. This is only natural. Nothing could be falser than to preach monastic self-denial and the sanctity of the filthy bourgeois morals to young people. However, it is hardly a good thing that sex, already strongly felt in the physical sense, should at such a time assume so much prominence in the psychology of young people. The consequences are nothing short of fatal. Ask Comrade Lilina about it. She ought to have had many experiences in her extensive work at educational institutions of various kinds and you know that she is a communist through and through, and has no prejudices.

“Youth’s altered attitude to questions of sex is of course ‘fundamental’ and based on theory. Many people call it ‘revolutionary’ and ‘communist.’ They sincerely believe that this is so. I am an old man, and I do not like it. I may be a morose ascetic, but quite often this so-called ‘new sex life’ of young people — and frequently of the adults too — seems to me purely bourgeois and simply an extension of the good old bourgeois brothel. All this has nothing in common with free love as we communists understand it. No doubt you have heard about the famous theory that in communist society satisfying sexual desire and the craving for love is as simple and trivi-

al as 'drinking a glass of water.' A section of our youth has gone mad, absolutely mad, over this 'glass-of-water theory.' It has been fatal to many a young boy and girl. Its devotees assert that it is a Marxist theory. I want no part of the kind of Marxism which infers all phenomena and all changes in the ideological superstructure of society directly and blandly from its economic basis, for things are not as simple as all that. A certain Frederick Engels has established this a long time ago with regard to historical materialism.

"I consider the famous 'glass-of-water' theory as completely un-Marxist and, moreover, as anti-social. It is not only what nature has given but also what has become culture, whether of a high or low level, that comes into play in sexual life. Engels pointed out in his *Origin of the Family* how significant it was that the common sexual relations had developed into individual sex love and thus became purer. The relations between the sexes are not simply the expression of a mutual influence between economics and a physical want deliberately singled out for physiological examination. It would be rationalism and not Marxism to attempt to refer the change in these relations directly to the economic basis of society in isolation from its connection with the ideology as a whole. To be sure, thirst has to be quenched. But would a normal person normally lie down in the gutter and drink from a puddle? Or even from a glass whose

edge has been greased by many lips? But the social aspect is more important than anything else. The drinking of water is really an individual matter. But it takes two people to make love, and a third person, a new life, is likely to come into being. This deed has a social complexion and constitutes a duty to the community.

“As a communist I have no liking at all for the ‘glass-of-water’ theory, despite its attractive label: ‘emancipation of love.’ Besides, emancipation of love is neither a novel nor a communistic idea. You will recall that it was advanced in fine literature around the middle of the past century as ‘emancipation of the heart.’ In bourgeois practice it materialized into emancipation of the flesh. It was preached with greater talent than now, though I cannot judge how it was practised. Not that I want my criticism to breed asceticism. That is farthest from my thoughts. Communism should not bring asceticism, but joy and strength, stemming, among other things, from a consummate love life. Whereas today, in my opinion, the obtaining plethora of sex life yields neither joy nor strength. On the contrary, it impairs them. This is bad, very bad, indeed, in the epoch of revolution.

“Young people are particularly in need of joy and strength. Healthy sports, such as gymnastics, swimming, hiking, physical exercises of every description and a wide range of intellectual interests is what they need, as well

as learning, study and research, and as far as possible collectively. This will be far more useful to young people than endless lectures and discussions on sex problems and the so-called living by one's nature. *Mens sana in corpore sano*. Be neither monk nor Don Juan, but not anything in between either, like a German philistine. You know the young comrade X. He is a splendid lad, and highly gifted. For all that, I am afraid that he will never amount to anything. He has one love affair after another. This is not good for the political struggle and for the revolution. I will not vouch for the reliability or the endurance of women whose love affair is intertwined with politics, or for the men who run after every petticoat and let themselves in with every young female. No, no, that does not go well with revolution."

Lenin sprang to his feet, slapped the table with his hand and paced up and down the room.

"The revolution calls for concentration and rallying of every nerve by the masses and by the individual. It does not tolerate orgiastic conditions so common among d'Annunzio's decadent heroes and heroines. Promiscuity in sexual matters is bourgeois. It is a sign of degeneration. The proletariat is a rising class. It does not need an intoxicant to stupefy or stimulate it, neither the intoxicant of sexual laxity or of alcohol. It should and will not forget the vileness, the filth and the barbarity of capitalism. It derives its strongest

inspiration to fight from its class position, from the communist ideal. What it needs is clarity, clarity and more clarity. Therefore, I repeat, there must be no weakening, no waste and no dissipation of energy. Self-control and self-discipline are not slavery; not in matters of love either. But excuse me, Clara, I have strayed far from the point which we set out to discuss. Why have you not called me to order? Worry has set me talking. I take the future of our youth very close to heart. It is part and parcel of the revolution. Whenever harmful elements appear, which creep from bourgeois society to the world of the revolution and spread like the roots of prolific weeds, it is better to take action against them quickly. The questions we have dealt with are also part of the women's problems."

Lenin spoke with great animation and deep persuasion. I could feel that his every word came from the heart, and the expression on his face added to this feeling. From time to time he punctuated some idea with energetic gestures. I was astonished to see how much attention he devoted to trivial matters and how familiar he was with them, side by side with highly important political problems. And not only as concerned Soviet Russia, but also the still capitalist countries. Splendid Marxist that he was, he grasped the particular wherever and in whatever form it revealed itself, in its relation to, and its bearing upon, the whole. All his zest and purpose was concen-

trated with unshakeable singleness, like irresistible forces of nature, upon the one goal of speeding the revolution as a work of the masses. He evaluated everything in terms of its effect on the conscious motive forces of the revolution, both national and international, for while he evaluated the historically conditioned features of the individual countries and their different stages of development, he always had his eyes on the indivisible worldwide proletarian revolution.

“Comrade Lenin, how I regret,” I exclaimed, “that your words have not been heard by hundreds and thousands of people. As you know, you do not have to convert me. But how important it would be for friend and foe to hear your opinion!”

Lenin smiled amiably.

“I may speak or write some day on the questions we have discussed. But later, not now. Now all our time and strength must be concentrated on other things. There are bigger and more difficult jobs to do. The struggle to maintain and strengthen the Soviet state is not yet over by any means. We have to digest the outcome of the Polish War⁴ and to make the most we can of it. Wrangel is still hanging on in the South. It is true, I am deeply convinced that we shall cope with him. That will give the British and French imperialists and their small vassals something to think about. But the most difficult part of our task, reconstruction, is still ahead. That will also bring

the problems of sex relations, marriage and the family to the foreground. In the meantime, you will have to handle it as best you can where and when it is necessary. You should not allow these questions to be handled in an un-Marxist way or to serve as the basis for disruptive deviations and intrigues. Now at last I come to your work.”

Lenin consulted his watch.

“Half of the time I have at my disposal for you,” he said, “has already expired. I have chatted too long. You are to work out the leading theses on communist work among women. I know your principled approach and practical experience. So our talk about this will be brief; you had better get busy. What do you think the theses should be?”

I gave him a concise account on this score. Lenin nodded approvingly a few times without interrupting. When I was through I looked at him questioningly.

“Right,” he remarked. “It would also be a good thing if you were to inform a meeting of responsible women Party comrades about it and to discuss it with them. Too bad Comrade Inessa* is not here. She is sick and has gone to the Caucasus. Put the theses in writing after the discussion. A committee will look them over and the Executive Committee will make the final decision. I give my opinion on only some of the main points, on which I fully

* Inessa Armand — *Ed.*

share your views. They seem important to me also for our present agitation and propaganda work if it is to pave the way for action, for successful fighting.

“The theses must emphasize strongly that true emancipation of women is not possible except through communism. You must lay stress on the unbreakable connection between woman’s human and social position and the private ownership of the means of production. This will draw a strong, ineradicable line against the bourgeois movement for the ‘emancipation of women.’ This will also give us a basis for examining the woman question as part of the social, working-class question, and to bind it firmly with the proletarian class struggle and the revolution. The communist women’s movement itself must be a mass movement, a part of the general mass movements; and not only of the proletarians, but of all the exploited and oppressed, of all victims of capitalism or of the dominant class. Therein, too, lies the significance of the women’s movement for the class struggle of the proletariat and its historic mission, the creation of a communist society. We can be legitimately proud that we have the flower of revolutionary womanhood in our Party, in the Comintern. But this is not decisive, we have to win over the millions of working women in town and country for our struggle and, particularly, for the communist reconstruction of society. There can be no real mass movement without

the women.

“We derive our organizational ideas from our ideological conceptions. We want no separate organizations of communist women! She who is a communist belongs as a member to the Party, just as he who is a communist. They have the same rights and duties. There can be no difference of opinion on that score. However, we must not shut our eyes to the facts. The Party must have organs — working groups, commissions, committees, sections or whatever else they may be called — with the specific purpose of rousing the broad masses of women, bringing them into contact with the Party and keeping them under its influence. This naturally requires that we carry on systematic work among the women. We must teach the awakened women, win them over for the proletarian class struggle under the leadership of the Communist Party, and equip them for it. When I say this I have in mind not only proletarian women, whether they work in mills or cook the family meal. I also have in mind the peasant women and the women of the various sections of the lower middle class. They, too, are victims of capitalism, and more than ever since the war. The lack of interest in politics and the otherwise anti-social and backward psychology of these masses of women, the narrow scope of their activities and the whole pattern of their lives are undeniable facts. It would be silly to ignore them, absolutely silly. We must have our

own groups to work among them, special methods of agitation and special forms of organization. This is not bourgeois 'feminism'; it is a practical revolutionary expediency."

I told Lenin that his arguments were a valuable encouragement for me. Many comrades, very good ones, too, vehemently opposed the Party's setting up special groups for planned work among women. They denounced it as a return to the notorious "emancipation of women" movement, to Social-Democratic traditions. They claimed that since the communist parties gave equality to women they should, consequently, carry on work without differentiation among all the working people in general. The approach to men and to women should be the same. Any attempt to consider the circumstances which Lenin had noted concerning agitation and organization would be branded by the exponents of this view as opportunism, as renunciation and betrayal of fundamental principles.

"This is not new and not conclusive," Lenin said. "Do not let it mislead you. Why are there nowhere as many women in the Party as men, not even in Soviet Russia? Why is the number of women in the trade unions so small? These facts give one food for thought. Denial of the indispensable special groups for work among the masses of women is part of the very principled, very radical attitude of our dear friends of the Communist Workers' Party.⁵ They are of the opinion that only one

form of organization should exist — a workers' union. I know about it. Principles are invoked by many revolutionary-minded but confused people whenever there is a lack of understanding, i.e., whenever the mind refuses to grasp the obvious facts that ought to be heeded. How do such guardians of the 'purity of principles' cope with the historical necessities of our revolutionary policy? All their talk collapses in face of the inexorable necessities. We cannot exercise the dictatorship of the proletariat without having millions of women on our side. Nor can we engage in communist construction without them. We must find a way to reach them. We must study and search in order to find this way.

“It is therefore perfectly right for us to put forward demands for the benefit of women. This is not a minimum program, nor a program of reform in the Social-Democratic sense, in the sense of the Second International.⁶ It does not go to show that we believe the bourgeoisie and its state will last forever, or even for a long time. Nor is it an attempt to pacify the masses of women with reforms and to divert them from the path of revolutionary struggle. It is nothing of the sort, and not any sort of reformist humbug either. Our demands are no more than practical conclusions, drawn by us from the crying needs and disgraceful humiliations that weak and underprivileged woman must bear under the bourgeois system. We demonstrate thereby that we are

aware of these needs and of the oppression of women, that we are conscious of the privileged position of the men, and that we hate — yes, hate — and want to remove whatever oppresses and harasses the working woman, the wife of the worker, the peasant woman, the wife of the little man, and even in many respects the woman of the propertied classes. The rights and social measures we demand of bourgeois society for women are proof that we understand the position and interests of women and that we will take note of them under the proletarian dictatorship. Naturally, not as soporific and patronizing reformists. No, by no means. But as revolutionaries who call upon the women to take a hand as equals in the reconstruction of the economy and of the ideological superstructure.”

I assured Lenin that I was of the same opinion, but that it would no doubt be opposed. Uncertain and timid minds would reject it as suspicious opportunism. Nor could it be denied that our present demands for women might be incorrectly understood and interpreted.

“What of it?” Lenin exclaimed, somewhat annoyed. “This risk exists in everything we say and do. If we are going to let fear of this stop us from doing the advisable and necessary, we might as well turn into Indian stylites. We mustn’t budge, we mustn’t budge on any account, or we shall tumble from the lofty pillar of our principles! In our case it is not

only a matter of what we demand, but also of how we demand. I believe I have made that sufficiently clear. It stands to reason that in our propaganda we must not make a fetish out of our demands for women. No, we must fight now for these and now for other demands, depending on the existing conditions, and naturally always in association with the general interests of the proletariat.

“Every tussle of this kind sets us at loggerheads with the respectable bourgeois clique and its no less respectable reformist lackeys. This compels the latter either to fight under our leadership — which they do not want — or to drop their disguise. Thus, the struggle fences us off from them and shows our communist face. It wins us the confidence of the mass of women, who feel themselves exploited, enslaved and crushed by the domination of the man, by the power of their employers and by bourgeois society as a whole. Betrayed and abandoned by all, working women come to realize that they must fight together with us. Must I avow, or make you avow, that the struggle for women’s rights must also be linked with our principal aim — the conquest of power and the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat? At present, this is, and will continue to be, our alpha and omega. That is clear, absolutely clear. But the broad masses of working women will not feel irresistibly drawn to the struggle for state power if we harp on just this one demand,

even though we may blare it forth on the trumpets of Jericho. No, a thousand times no! We must combine our appeal politically in the minds of the female masses with the sufferings, the needs and the wishes of the working women. They should all know what the proletarian dictatorship will mean to them — complete equality of rights with men, both legal and in practice, in the family, the state and in society, and that it also spells the annihilation of the power of the bourgeoisie.”

“Soviet Russia proves this,” I exclaimed. “This will be our great example!”

Lenin went on:

“Soviet Russia casts a new light on our demands for women. Under the dictatorship of the proletariat they are no longer an object of struggle between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. Once they are carried out, they serve as bricks for the building of communist society. This shows the women on the other side of the border the decisive importance of the conquest of power by the proletariat. The difference between their status here and there must be demonstrated in bold relief in order to win the support of the masses of women in the revolutionary class struggles of the proletariat. Mobilization of the female masses, carried out with a clear understanding of principles and on a firm organizational basis, is a vital question for the communist parties and their victories. But let us not deceive ourselves. Our national sections still lack the

proper understanding of this question. They adopt a passive, wait-and-see attitude when it comes to creating a mass movement of working women under communist leadership. They do not realize that developing and leading such a mass movement is an important part of all Party activity, as much as half of all the Party work. Their occasional recognition of the need and value of a purposeful, strong and numerous communist women's movement is but platonic lip-service rather than a steady concern and task of the Party.

“They regard agitation and propaganda among women and the task of rousing and revolutionizing them as of secondary importance, as the job of just the women communists. None but the latter are rebuked because the matter does not move ahead more quickly and strongly. This is wrong, fundamentally wrong! It is outright separatism. It is equality of women *à rebours*, as the French say, i.e. equality reversed. What is at the bottom of the incorrect attitude of our national sections? (I am not speaking of Soviet Russia). In the final analysis, it is an underestimation of women and of their accomplishments. That's just what it is! Unfortunately, we may still say of many of our comrades, ‘Scratch the communist and a philistine appears.’ To be sure, you have to scratch the sensitive spots — such as their mentality regarding women. Could there be any more palpable proof than the common sight of a man calmly watching a

woman wear herself out with trivial, monotonous, strength- and time-consuming work, such as her housework, and watching her spirit shrinking, her mind growing dull, her heartbeat growing faint and her will growing slack? It goes without saying that I am not referring to the bourgeois ladies who dump all housework and the care for their children on the hired help. What I say applies to the vast majority of women, including the wives of workers, even if these spend the day at the factory and earn money.

“Very few husbands, not even the proletarians, think of how much they could lighten the burdens and worries of their wives, or relieve them entirely, if they lent a hand in this ‘women’s work.’ But no, that would go against the ‘privilege and dignity of the husband.’ He demands that he have rest and comfort. The domestic life of the woman is a daily sacrifice of self to a thousand insignificant trifles. The ancient rights of her husband, her lord and master, survive unnoticed. Objectively, his slave takes her revenge. Also in concealed form. Her backwardness and her lack of understanding for her husband’s revolutionary ideals act as a drag on his fighting spirit, on his determination to fight. They are like tiny worms, gnawing and undermining imperceptibly, slowly but surely. I know the life of the workers, and not only from books. Our communist work among the masses of women, and our political work in general, in-

volves considerable educational work among the men. We must root out the old slave-owner's point of view, both in the Party and among the masses. That is one of our political tasks, a task just as urgently necessary as the formation of a staff composed of comrades, men and women, with thorough theoretical and practical training for Party work among working women."

To my question about present-day conditions in Soviet Russia, Lenin replied:

"The government of the proletarian dictatorship — jointly with the Communist Party and the trade unions of course — makes every effort to overcome the backward views of men and women and thus uproot the old, non-communist psychology. It goes without saying that men and women are absolutely equal before the law. A sincere desire to give effect to this equality is evident in all spheres. We are enlisting women to work in the economy, the administration, legislation and government. All courses and educational institutions are open to them, so that they can improve their professional and social training. We are organizing community kitchens and public dining-rooms, laundries and repair shops, crèches, kindergartens, children's homes and educational institutions of every kind. In brief, we are quite in earnest about carrying out the requirements of our program to shift the functions of housekeeping and education from the individual household to society. Woman is

thus being relieved from her old domestic slavery and all dependence on her husband. She is enabled to give her capabilities and inclinations full play in society. Children are offered better opportunities for their development than at home. We have the most progressive female labour legislation in the world, and it is enforced by authorized representatives of organized labour. We are establishing maternity homes, mother-and-child homes, mothers' health centres, courses for infant and child care, exhibitions of mother and child care and the like. We are making every effort to provide for needy and unemployed women.

“We know perfectly well that all this is still too little, considering the needs of the working women, and that it is still far from sufficient for their real emancipation. Yet it is an immense stride forward from what there was in Tsarist and capitalist Russia. Moreover, it is a lot as compared with the state of affairs where capitalism still holds undivided sway. It is a good start in the right direction, and we shall continue to develop it consistently, and with all available energy, too. You abroad may rest assured. Because with each day that passes it becomes clearer that we cannot make progress without the millions of women. Think what this means in a country where the peasants comprise a solid 80% of the population. Small peasant farming implies individual housekeeping and the bondage of

women. You will be far better off than we are in this respect, provided your proletarians at last grasp that the time is historically ripe for seizure of power, for revolution. In the meantime, we are not giving way to despair, despite the great difficulties. Our forces grow as the latter increase. Practical necessity will also impel us to find new ways of emancipating the masses of women. In combination with the Soviet state, comradely solidarity will accomplish wonders. To be sure, I mean comradely solidarity in the communist, not in the bourgeois, sense, in which it is preached by the reformists, whose revolutionary enthusiasm has evaporated like the smell of cheap vinegar. Personal initiative, which grows into, and fuses with collective activity, should accompany comradely solidarity. Under the proletarian dictatorship the emancipation of women through the realization of communism will proceed also in the countryside. In this respect I expect much from the electrification of our industry and agriculture. That is a grand scheme! The difficulties in its way are great, monstrously great. Powerful forces latent in the masses will have to be released and trained to overcome them. Millions of women must take part in this.”

Someone had knocked twice in the last ten minutes, but Lenin had continued to speak. Now he opened the door and shouted:

“I’m coming!”

Turning in my direction, he added with a

smile:

“You know, Clara, I am going to take advantage of the fact that I was conversing with a woman and will name the notorious female loquacity as the excuse for being late. Although this time it was the man and not the woman who did most of the talking. In general, I must say that you are really a good listener. But it was this that probably prompted me to talk so much.”

With this jocular remark Lenin helped me on with my coat.

“You should dress more warmly,” he suggested solicitously. “Moscow is not Stuttgart. You need someone to look after you. Don’t catch a cold. Goodbye.”

He shook my hand firmly.

* * *

I had another talk with Lenin on the women’s movement about a fortnight later. Lenin came to see me. As almost always, his visit was unexpected. It was an impromptu visit and occurred during an intermission in the gigantic burden of work accomplished by the leader of the victorious revolution. Lenin looked very tired and worried. Wrangel had not yet been crushed and the question of supplying the big cities with food confronted the Soviet government like an inexorable sphinx.

Lenin asked how the theses were coming along. I told him that a big commission had been in session, which all prominent women

communists then in Moscow had attended and where they had spoken their opinions. The theses were ready and were now to be discussed by a small committee. Lenin pointed out that we should strive to have the Third World Congress⁷ examine the problem with due thoroughness. This fact alone would break down the prejudice of many comrades. Anyhow, the women communists should be the first to take things in hand, and with vigour.

“Don’t twitter like a bunch of chatterboxes, but speak out loudly and clearly like fighters should,” Lenin exclaimed with animation. “A congress is not a parlour where women display their charm, as we read in novels. A congress is a battlefield in which we fight for the knowledge we need for revolutionary action. Show that you can fight. In the first place, of course, against our enemies, but also within the Party, should the need arise. After all, the broad masses of women are at stake. Our Russian Party will back all proposals and measures that will help to win these masses. If the women are not with us, the counter-revolutionaries may succeed in setting them against us. We must always bear this in mind.”

“We must win the mass of women over even if they are riveted to heaven by chains, as Stralsund puts it,” I said, pursuing Lenin’s idea. “Here, in the centre of the revolution with its richly seething life, with its strong,

rapid pulse, a plan has occurred to me of a big, joint international action among the working women. It was prompted primarily by your big non-partisan women's conferences and congresses. We should try to transform them from national into international ones. It is a fact that the world war and its aftermath have deeply shaken the bulk of the women of various classes and sections of society. They are in ferment. They have been set in motion. Their distressing worries about securing a livelihood and the search for the purpose of life confront them with problems which most of them had hardly suspected and only a small minority had grasped in the past. Bourgeois society is unable to provide a satisfactory answer to their questions. Only communism can do it. We must rouse the broad masses of women in the capitalist countries to consciousness and should for that purpose call a non-partisan international women's congress."

Lenin did not reply at once. He sat lost in thought, considering the problem, his lips pursed, the lower lip protruding slightly.

"Yes, we ought to do it," he said finally. "The plan is good. But a good plan, even an excellent one, is worthless unless it is well executed. Have you thought about how it should be executed? What are your ideas on this score?"

I set out my ideas to Lenin in detail. To begin with, we ought to form a committee of

communist women from various countries in close and constant contact with our national sections. This committee would prepare, conduct and make use of the congress. It had to be decided whether it would be desirable for the committee to work openly and officially from the very beginning. At any rate, it would be the first task of the committee members to make contact with the leaders of the organized female workers in each country, the proletarian political women's movement, bourgeois women's organizations of every trend and description, and finally the prominent female physicians, teachers, writers, etc., and to form national non-partisan preparatory committees. An international committee would be formed from among the members of these national committees to prepare and convene the international congress, to draw up its agenda and to pick the time and place for the congress.

In my opinion the congress ought first to discuss the women's right to engage in trades and professions. In doing so it should deal with the questions of unemployment, equal pay for equal work, legislation on the 8-hour day and labour protection for women, organization of trade unions, social care of mother and child, social measures to relieve housewives and mothers, etc. Furthermore, the agenda should deal with the status of women in marriage and family legislation and in public and political law. After substantiating

these proposals I explained how the national committees in the various countries should thoroughly prepare the ground for the congress by a planned campaign at meetings and in the press. This campaign was particularly important in rousing the biggest possible number of women, to stimulate a serious study of the problems submitted for discussion, and to draw their attention to the congress and thereby to communism and the parties of the Communist International. The campaign had to reach the working women of all social strata. It would have to secure attendance and participation in the congress of representatives of all organizations concerned, and also of delegates from public women's meetings. The congress was to be a "popular representative body" entirely different from a bourgeois parliament.

It went without saying that women communists were to be not merely the motive but also the leading force in the preparatory work, and should have the energetic support of our sections. Naturally, the same applied also to the work of the international committee, the work of the congress itself, and to its extensive use. Communist theses and resolutions on all items on the agenda should be submitted to the congress. They should be carefully worded and well reasoned with scholarly mastery of the relevant social facts. These theses should be discussed and approved beforehand by the Executive Committee of the Comin-

tern. The communist solutions and slogans should be the focal point on which the work of the congress and public attention would concentrate. After the congress they should be disseminated among the broad masses of women by means of agitation and propagan-da, so that they may become determinative for international women's mass actions. Needless to say, all this requires as an essential condition that women communists work in all the committees and at the congress itself as a firm, solid body and that they act together on a lucid and unshakeable plan. There should be no out-of-turn actions.

In the course of my explanation Lenin nodded several times in approval and interposed a few remarks.

“It seems to me, dear comrade,” he said, “that you have considered the matter very thoroughly in the political sense, and also the main points of the organizational angle. I fully agree that such a congress could accomplish much in the present situation. It offers us the opportunity of winning over the broad masses of women, particularly women in the various trades and professions, the industrial women workers and homeworkers, the teachers and other professional women. This would be wonderful. Think of the situation in the big economic struggles or political strikes. What a reinforcement the revolutionary proletariat would gain in the class-conscious masses of women. Provided, of course, that we are able

to win them over and keep them on our side. Our gain would be great. It would be nothing short of immense. But what would you say to the following few questions? The authorities will probably frown very severely upon the idea of this congress and will try to prevent it. However they are not likely to dare suppress it by brute force. Whatever they do will not frighten you. But are you not afraid that the women communists will be overwhelmed in the committees and at the congress itself by the numerical superiority of the bourgeois and reformist delegates and their unquestionably greater experience? Besides, and most important, do you really have confidence in the Marxist schooling of our communist comrades, and are you sure that a shock group can be picked among them that will come out of the battle with honour?"

I told Lenin in reply that the authorities were not likely to use the mailed fist against the congress. Intrigues and boorish attacks against it would only act in its favour, and ours. We communists could more than match the greater number and experience of the non-communist elements by the scientific superiority of historical materialism with its study and illumination of social problems, the perseverance with which we would demand that they be solved, and last but not least, by references to the victory of the proletarian revolution in Russia and its fundamental accomplishments in the work of emancipating the

women. The weakness and lack of training of some of our comrades, their inexperience, could be compensated by planned preparation and teamwork. In this respect, I expect the very best from the Russian women comrades. They would form the iron core of our phalanx. In their company I would calmly brave much more hazardous clashes than the congress battles. Besides, even if we are outvoted, the very fact that we fought will put communism in the foreground and will have a big propaganda effect. Furthermore, it will give us points of departure for subsequent work.

Lenin laughed heartily.

“You are as enthusiastic as ever about the Russian women revolutionaries. Yes indeed, old love is not forgotten. I think you are right. Even defeat after a stubborn struggle would be a gain; it would prepare the ground for future gains among the working women. All things considered, it is a risk worth taking. It cannot possibly prove a total failure. But naturally, I hope for victory and wish you success from the bottom of my heart. It would considerably enhance our strength, it would widen and fortify our battlefront, it would put life into our ranks and set them in motion. That is always useful. Moreover, the congress would foment and increase unrest, uncertainty, contradictions and conflicts in the camp of the bourgeoisie and its reformist friends. One can just imagine who is going to sit down with the ‘hyenas of the revolution,’ and, if things go

well, to deliberate under their leadership. It will be the brave, well-disciplined female Social-Democrats under the supreme guidance of Scheidemann, Dittmann and Legien; the pious Christian women blessed by the Pope or devoted to Luther; daughters of privy counsellors, wives of newly-appointed councillors of state, lady-like English pacifists and ardent French suffragettes. What a picture of chaos, of the decay of the bourgeois world the congress is bound to present! What a portrayal of its hopeless conditions! The congress would add to the division and thereby weaken the forces of the counter-revolution. Every weakening of the enemy is tantamount to a strengthening of our forces. I am in favour of the congress. You will get our vigorous support. So get started, and I wish you luck in the struggle.”

We spoke then about the situation in Germany, particularly the impending “Unity Congress” of the old Spartacists⁸ and the Left wing of the Independents.⁹ Thereupon, Lenin left in a hurry, exchanging friendly greetings with several comrades working in the room he had had to cross.

I set about the preparatory work with high hopes. However, the congress floundered, because it was opposed by the German and Bulgarian women comrades who were then leaders of the biggest communist women’s movements outside Soviet Russia. They were flatly against calling the congress.

When I informed Lenin of this he answered:

“It is a pity, a great pity! These comrades missed a splendid opportunity to give a new and better outlook of hope for the masses of women and thereby to draw them into the revolutionary struggles of the proletariat. Who can tell whether such a favourable opportunity will recur in the near future? One should strike while the iron is hot. But the task remains. You must look for a way to reach the masses of women whom capitalism has plunged into dire need. You must look for it on all accounts. There is no evading this imperative task. Without the organized activity of the masses under communist leadership there can be no victory over capitalism and no building of communism. And so the hitherto dormant masses of women must be finally set into motion.”

* * *

The first year spent by the revolutionary proletariat without Lenin has passed. It has shown the strength of his cause. It has proved the leader's great genius. It has shown how great and irreplaceable the loss has been. Salvoes mark the sad hour when Lenin closed his far-seeing, penetrating eyes forever a year ago. I see an endless procession of mourning working people as they go to Lenin's resting place. Their mourning is my mourning, the mourning of the millions. My newly-

awakened grief evokes overwhelming memories in me of the reality that makes the painful present recede. I hear again every word Lenin spoke in conversation with me. I see every change in his face... Banners are lowered at Lenin's tomb. They are banners steeped in the blood of fighters for the revolution. Laurel wreaths are laid. Not one of them is superfluous. And I add to them these modest lines.

NOTES

¹ The *Second Congress of the Communist International* met between July 19 and August 7, 1920.

² *Military Cadets* — in Tsarist Russia those attending officer schools. During the Great October Socialist Revolution and in the period that immediately followed they offered armed resistance to the insurgent people and Soviet power in Petrograd, Moscow and some other towns but were everywhere defeated.

³ *The Treaty of Versailles* — imperialist peace treaty which concluded the First World War. It was signed in Versailles on June 28, 1919 by the USA, Great Britain, France, Italy, Japan and other countries, on the one hand, and defeated Germany, on the other.

The Versailles Treaty was designed to consolidate the redivision of the capitalist world in favour of the victor powers. France obtained Alsace-Lorraine, the Saar region was put under the administration of the League of Nations for 15 years and the collieries in this region became French property. The German colonies were divided among the victor countries. Germany had to pay an enormous sum of reparations.

The whole burden imposed by the Treaty of Versailles was borne by the German people, who had to pay huge taxes and suffer the ordeal of chronic unemployment. As for the imperialist industrial tycoons, they retained their dominant positions in the country and continued to pocket huge profits.

⁴ The reference is to the war launched by the bourgeois-landowning Poland against the Soviet Republic in April 1920.

⁵ *Communist Workers' Party of Germany* — anarchist-syndicalist petty-bourgeois group formed in 1919 by the “Left” elements which had split from the Communist Party of Germany. Lacking support among the German workers, the group degenerated into an insignificant sect hostile to the Communist Party and the working class.

⁶ *The Second International* — an international union of socialist parties founded in 1889. When the First World War broke out, the leaders of the Second International betrayed socialism and went over to the side of their imperialist governments. Thus the Second International collapsed. The Left groups and parties affiliated with the Second International joined the Communist (Third) International founded in Moscow in 1919. The Second International was resurrected at a conference in Berne (Switzerland) in the same year 1919. Only the parties which represented the Right, opportunist wing of the socialist movement joined it.

⁷ *The Third Congress of the Comintern* held on June 22-July 12, 1921, heard a report by Clara Zetkin on the revolutionary women's movement and adopted the following resolutions: 1) On strengthening international ties of women communists and the tasks of the International Secretariat of the Comintern with regard to work among women and 2) On the forms and methods of communist work among women.

⁸ *The Spartacists* — members of the Spartacus League, a revolutionary organization of the German Left Social-Democrats founded at the beginning of the First World War by Karl Liebknecht, Rosa Luxemburg, Franz Mehring, Clara Zetkin, Jogiches (Tyszka) and others. Members of the Spartacus League carried on revolutionary propa-

ganda among the masses against the imperialist war and exposed the predatory policy of the German imperialists and the treachery of Social-Democratic leaders. On a number of theoretical and tactical questions, however, they held erroneous views. Lenin criticized their mistakes in "The Junius Pamphlet", "The Caricature of Marxism and 'Imperialist Economism,'" and other works. In April 1917 the Spartacus League affiliated with the centrist Independent Social-Democratic Party of Germany retaining its organizational independence. After the November 1918 revolution in Germany the Spartacus League broke with the "Independents" and founded the Communist Party of Germany in December 1918.

⁹ The *Independent Social-Democratic Party of Germany* — centrist party formed in April 1917 from the opposition groups within the German Social-Democratic Party.

In October 1920 the party split at its congress in Halle. The greater part united with the Communist Party of Germany in December 1920, the right-wing elements forming a separate party and adopting the old name of the Independent Social-Democratic Party. In 1922 the "Independents" rejoined the German Social-Democratic Party.



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