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# Women's liberation:? The Marxist tradition

- Features - Feminism -

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**“If women’s liberation is unthinkable without communism, then communism is unthinkable without women’s liberation.” [1]**

“Russian revolutionary Inessa Armand

The classical Marxists of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, Clara Zetkin, Rosa Luxemburg, V. I. Lenin, Alexandra Kollontai, and Leon Trotsky—developed a theoretical framework tying the fight for women’s liberation to the struggle for socialism. While their theory requires updating, [2] their enormous contributions have too often been dismissed or ignored.

Moreover, the history of those who carried on the Marxist tradition on women’s oppression during the mid-twentieth century has frequently been rendered invisible—yet these activists and theorists provided an indispensable thread that continued between the victory of women’s suffrage in the 1920s (often referred to as US feminism’s “first wave” and the rise of the 1960s movements for women’s liberation (known as its “second wave”).

Marx and Engels located the root of women’s oppression in their role within the nuclear family in class societies. They understood that women’s role as biological “reproducers” results in their subordinate status inside the nuclear family, and consequently throughout society. In capitalist societies, women in property-holding families reproduce heirs; women in working-class families reproduce generations of labor power for the system.

The capitalist class has become dependent on this method of “privatized reproduction” within the working-class family because it lessens its own financial responsibility for the reproduction of labor power, which is instead largely supplied by unpaid domestic labor performed primarily by women. The precondition for women’s liberation thus requires an end to their unpaid labor inside the family. This, in turn, necessitates a socialist transformation of society, which cannot be achieved gradually but only through a process of social revolution, in a decisive battle between classes.

Marx and Engels early on identified the revolutionary agency of the working class, or proletariat, as the only class capable of leading the transformation to a socialist society. In *The Communist Manifesto*, they stated, “What the bourgeoisie therefore produces, above all, are its own grave-diggers. Its fall and the victory of the proletariat are equally inevitable.” [3] As Hal Draper noted:

*The classic formulation of the self-emancipation principle by Marx was written down in 1864 as the first premise of the Rules of the First International—in fact, as its first clause:*

*“CONSIDERING, That the emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves . . . ” [4]*

This class-based revolutionary strategy did not downplay the importance of combatting women’s oppression among Marxist theorists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As Leon Trotsky argued, “In order to change the conditions of life, we must learn to see them through the eyes of women.” [5]

Like Marx and Engels before them, this generation of Marxists recognized the revolutionary agency of the entire working class—and regarded working-class women as a key component in achieving its revolutionary potential. They emphasized the plight of working-class women and attempted to organize explicitly working-class women’s

movements.

European Marxists from Germany to Russia were often at the forefront of the fight for women's liberation, while advancing Marxist theory on what was then called "the woman question." They did so not only in an era of growing inter-imperialist conflict leading to World War I but also in the context of rising revolutionary socialist movements. The outbreak of war brought about a whirlwind of patriotism in all the belligerent countries and became the dividing question within the socialist movement itself, as entire socialist parties of the Second International plunged themselves into the war efforts of their "own" ruling classes.

The chasm between revolutionary socialists and those they called "bourgeois feminists" was not due to minor tactical or strategic differences but those of crucial political principles. In the case of Tsarist Russia, for example, ruling-class women threw themselves into the war effort as a trade-off in return for voting rights. The League for Women's Equality called on Russian women to "devote all our energy, intellect, and knowledge to our country. This is our obligation to our fatherland, and this will give us the right to participate as the equals of men in the new life of a victorious Russia." [6]

As socialists Hal Draper and Anne G. Lipow described, revolutionary socialists

. . . gave strong support to all the democratic demands for women's equal rights. But this movement differed from the bourgeois feminists not only in the programmatic context in which it put these "democratic demands", but also "and consequently" in its choice of immediate demands to emphasize. It viewed itself, in Marxist terms, as a class movement, and this translates into working-women's movement. [7]

## The self-organization of socialist women

Engels encouraged German socialist August Bebel, who had authored *Woman and Socialism* in 1878, to assist with the founding of a socialist working women's movement within the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SDP). The result was the formation of a women-led party bureau in 1891, with Clara Zetkin "a leading member of the SPD" at its political and organizational center.

Zetkin led this work until the Second International split over support for World War I, when she left to join a small number of other anti-war revolutionaries, including members of the Russian Bolshevik Party to found a principled international socialist movement against the imperialist war. After that, Zetkin continued her work outside the Second International.

At the time of the founding of the SPD women's bureau in 1891, women in Prussia were legally barred from attending political meetings or joining political parties. Finally in 1902, as Bebel noted, "the Prussian secretary of state condescended to give women permission to attend the meetings of political clubs, but under the condition that they had to take their seats in a part of the hall specially set aside for them." [8]

The achievements of the women's bureau, viewed in this context, were substantial. Its publication, *Gleichheit* ("Equality"), reached a circulation of 23,000 by 1905 and 112,000 by 1913. Meanwhile, female membership in the party grew from roughly 4,000 women in the party in 1905 to 141,000 by 1913. [9]

The German working-women's movement soon became the epicenter of an international movement of socialist women under the rubric of the Second International, with organizing women workers into trade unions its priority. In 1907, Zetkin organized the first international conference of socialist women in Stuttgart, held in the days leading up to the Second International's full congress. At that congress, the Second International voted for universal suffrage for all women and men.

The issue of whether to fight for “universal” or “partial” women’s suffrage was a point of strong controversy. Some women’s suffrage organizations demanded (and in some European countries, won) partial suffrage for women—with voting rights based upon property holding and the payment of taxes (i.e., restricting voting rights to those women of financial means). But in many of these same societies, male suffrage was also partial, denying working-class men the right to vote. Thus, partial suffrage merely increased the voting power of the upper classes.

Leading women of the Second International, including Zetkin, Luxemburg, Kollontai, and Eleanor Marx clearly distinguished the socialist demand for women’s suffrage from that of “middle-class women.” They championed universal suffrage in the context of the class struggle.

In a position paper in preparation for the 1907 Stuttgart women’s conference, Zetkin argued for the right to vote for all women, regardless of class:

*But when we demand Woman Suffrage, we can only do so on the ground, not that it should be a right attached to the possession of a certain amount of property, but that it should be inherent in the woman herself . . .*

*From this point of view of history, we demand the political equality of women and the right to vote as a recognition of the political rights due to our sex. This is a question which applies to the whole of women without exception. All women, whatever be their position, should demand political equality as a means of a freer life, and one calculated to yield rich blessings to society. Besides, in the women’s world, as well as in the men’s world, there exists the class law and the class struggle, and it appears as fully established that sometimes between the Socialist working women and those belonging to the middle class there may be antagonisms. . . . This middle class should agitate for the Suffrage, not only in their own interests, in order to weaken the power of the male sex, but they should also labour in the cause of the whole of social reform, and give what help they can in that matter. But while we are ready as Socialists to use all our political might to bring about this change, yet we are bound to notice the difference between us and them. [10]*

## Social class and women’s oppression

In 1909, Russian revolutionary Alexandra Kollontai wrote what proved to be a defining contribution to the Marxist analysis of women’s oppression, “The Social Basis of the Woman Question” in which she argued:

*The women’s world is divided, just as is the world of men, into two camps: the interests and aspirations of one group bring it close to the bourgeois class, while the other group has close connections to the proletariat, and its claims for liberation encompass a full solution to the woman question. Thus, although both camps follow the general slogan of the “liberation of women,” their aims and interests are different. Each of the groups unconsciously takes its starting point from the interests and aspirations of its own class, which gives a specific class coloring to the targets and tasks it sets for itself . . . however apparently radical the demands of the feminists, one must not lose sight of the fact that the feminists cannot, on account of their class position, fight for that fundamental transformation of society, without which the liberation of women cannot be complete. [11]*

But the other side of Kollontai’s approach involved an effort to convince working-class men of the need to support the demands of women workers. The Bolsheviks intervened in strikes and struggles involving a majority of male workers, arguing that working men’s class interests lay in fighting for demands such as maternity protection and equal pay for women.

In preparation for the First All-Russian Congress of Trade Unions in 1917, Kollontai called upon working-class men to support equal pay for women workers arguing,

The class-conscious worker must understand that the value of male labor is dependent on the value of female labor,

and that by threatening to replace male workers with cheaper female labor, the capitalist can put pressure on men's wages, lowering them to the level of women's wages. Therefore, only a lack of understanding could lead one to see the question of equal pay for equal work as purely a "woman's issue." [12]

At the same time, it would be inaccurate to assume that classical Marxists disregarded the plight of middle-class or even bourgeois women. On the contrary, Clara Zetkin expressed clear empathy with all women subjugated within the nuclear family. As she argues in 1896, family law dictates to upper-class wives that their husbands are their superiors: "[S]he is still dependent upon her husband. The guardianship of the weaker sex has survived in the family law which still states: And he shall be your master." [13] She also argues:

*The bourgeois woman not only demands her own bread but she also requests spiritual nourishment and wants to develop her individuality. It is exactly among these strata that we find these tragic, yet psychologically interesting Nora figures, women who are tired of living like dolls in doll houses and who want to share in the development of modern culture. **The economic as well as the intellectual and moral endeavors of bourgeois women's rights advocates are completely justified.*** [Emphasis added.] [14]

In the same contribution, Zetkin also argues that middle-class women are not equal to men in the form of possessors of private property as they are in the upper circles. The women of these circles have yet to achieve their economic equality with men and they can only do so by making two demands: The demand for equal professional training and the demand for equal job opportunities for both sexes. This battle of competition pushes the women of these social strata towards demanding their political rights so that they may, by fighting politically, tear down all barriers which have been created against their economic activity. [15]

There is an important distinction, noted by Zetkin above, between ruling-class and middle-class women. Middle-class women, like all members of the middle class, experience wide-ranging financial, employment, and life circumstances. The upper-middle class approaches the lifestyle of the ruling-class, while the lower-middle class faces conditions barely discernible from workers. Thus, middle-class women can be pulled in different political directions—some gravitating toward the bourgeoisie and others identifying with the interests of workers.

Indeed, Zetkin, writing in 1896 with tremendous foresight, remarked on the increasing tendency toward the proletarianization of "mental labor" affecting academics and other professions—a factor that is far more relevant today than in Zetkin's time:

*Within the bourgeois intelligentsia, another circumstance leads to the worsening of the living conditions: capitalism needs the intelligent and scientifically trained work force. It therefore favored an overproduction of mental-work proletarians and contributed to the phenomenon that the formerly respected and profitable societal positions of members of the professional class are more and more eroding.* [16]

## The early US movement for women's liberation

The early twentieth century movement for women's suffrage in the US differed somewhat from its European counterparts, but its dynamics were similar. While the US government had granted "universal suffrage" to men, it did not block Southern states from imposing Jim Crow poll taxes and other restrictions intended to deny the vote specifically to Black men.

Thus, Jim Crow segregation effectively imposed partial suffrage on men, denying the right to vote to Black men within former Confederate states. Sidestepping this vital issue, US suffragists called for "universal suffrage" for women (even though Black women would also be denied the right to vote in Jim Crow states). The white-led National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) allowed Southern affiliates to practice racial segregation and to call for votes for white women only.

Overt racism was not limited to Southern chapters, however, as demonstrated in a letter to a local congressman from NWP leader Carrie Chapman Catt: "The women of New York are now the political equals of the men of New York, but the white women of the south are the political inferiors of the negroes." [17]

African-American women, including Mary Church Terrell and Ida B. Wells-Barnett, organized for women's suffrage in conjunction with the NAWSA, but primarily through the National Association of Colored Women and the Alpha Suffrage Club. Wells-Barnett played a key role in integrating the 1913 women's suffrage parade, yet she was asked to walk at the end of the march. She responded in anger, "If the Illinois women do not take a stand now in this great democratic parade then the colored women are lost." [18]

US socialists and radicals could have joined their European counterparts in fighting for full suffrage for both men and women, regardless of their class or race. Unfortunately, this did not prove to be the case.

In the United States in the early twentieth century, socialists and other radicals held frequently overlapping membership in both the anarcho-syndicalist Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) and the Socialist Party (SP), part of the Second International. Both the IWW and the SP were committed to the emancipation of working-class women and closely linked the class struggle with winning women's right to birth control, although they disagreed on the value of winning women's suffrage.

While the IWW was unapologetically antiracist, it refused to involve itself in electoral activity and flatly opposed the suffrage movement, which they labeled "rich faddists for woman suffrage." [19] The IWW's fiery organizer Elizabeth Gurley Flynn stated plainly, "To us society moves in grooves of class not sex." [20]

Lucy Parsons, widow of Haymarket martyr Albert Parsons and a leading radical in her own right, emphasized the power of women workers in her speech to the IWW's founding conference in 1905:

*We, the women of this country, have no ballot even if we wished to use it, and the only way that we can be represented is to take a man to represent us. You men have made such a mess of it in representing us that we have not much confidence in asking you, and I for one feel very backward in asking the men to represent me . . .*

*[Women] are the slaves of slaves. We are exploited more ruthlessly than men. Whenever wages are to be reduced the capitalist class use women to reduce them, and if there is anything that you men should do in the future it is to organize the women.* [21]

In contrast to the IWW's effective boycott of the suffrage movement, the SP worked alongside suffragists—but without a policy to systematically challenge its adherence to the segregationist status quo. Indeed, the SP was divided between its left and right wings on the crucial issue of racial segregation. On its left wing, Eugene Debs, perhaps the SP's most inspirational orator, opposed racial segregation and refused to speak in front of segregated audiences. On the right, Victor Berger argued that socialism in the US and Canada would only be possible if they remain "white man's" countries. Berger also warned that if the tide of immigration into the US was not stopped, "this country is absolutely sure to become a black-and-yellow country within a few generations." [22]

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While Debs tended to shun internal SP debates, Berger and the party's right wing dominated the party's organizational apparatus, thereby exercising considerable influence over SP policy.

The right wing of the SP placed a premium on winning electoral office, and increasingly regarded this as the path to winning a socialist society. After some internal debate, the SP voted to establish a National Woman's Commission in 1908â€”charged not only with overseeing work among women, including suffrage, but also “for organizing the attack upon male superiority among Socialists.” [23]

Much of this work centered around educating and aiding working-class women in accessing reliable birth control, as a way to limit family size and repeated pregnancies in conditions of pervasive poverty. Historians have focused much attention on the pioneering role in the early birth control movement of then-socialist Margaret Sanger, who later converted to a racist eugenics viewpoint.

But many other women radicals in the IWW and SP received far less acclaim yet maintained a lifetime commitment to fighting for the right of women to control their own reproductive lives. At a time when dispensing even information about contraception was illegal, these activists faced police raids and arrest as they continued their work among women.

Antoinette Konikow, a Russian revolutionary who migrated to the United States in 1893, dedicated herself to this project while remaining central to the US revolutionary socialist movement until her death in 1946. Konikow explicitly tied women's right to control their fertility to the fight for women's equality. As she wrote in her 1923 pamphlet, *Voluntary Motherhood*, “Women can never obtain real independence unless her functions of procreation are under her own control.” [24] Konikow never veered from this approach, presaging themes that emerged in women's liberation movements of the 1960s.

Konikow's offices were raided regularly, so she kept her medical files in code to prevent police from prosecuting her patients. As socialist-feminist Diane Feeley commented, “Although the overwhelming majority of her patients were poor immigrant women, whenever Dr. Konikow was arrested, she found that bond was quickly posted by some wealthy woman, who, given Massachusetts' repressive laws, may have had to turn to this revolutionary for help.” [25]

As a medical doctor, Konikow described how university training left doctors ignorant of birth control methods and therefore unable to help their women patients urgently seeking to control their fertility. In response, she authored *The Physician's Manual of Birth Control* in 1931, which included not only a detailed discussion of the female anatomy but also information on what she considered the most reliable method of birth control at the timeâ€”the diaphragm and spermicidal jelly. [26]

The SP also devoted itself to supporting striking women workers and encouraging their union organization into the American Federation of Labor (AFL), even though the labor federation did not welcome women, Blacks or immigrants into its fold. In this project, women SP members collaborated with suffragists and other middle-class reformers, although substantial friction sometimes existed between these reformers and women workers. [27]

The New York City garment workers' strike of 1909–10, often referred to by labor historians as “the uprising of the 20,000,” involved a largely immigrant and teenage female workforce who fought their way to the bitter end, with mostâ€”though not allâ€”shops winning union recognition with Local 25 of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union.

When the strike began, the strikers received strong support not only from the SP, but also from suffragists and the middle-class Women's Trade Union League (WTUL), known as “allies” of the strikers. The SP maintained its

commitment to the strike throughout, although the interest of the middle-class allies waned as the strike dragged on and the strikers voted down a contract proposal from the employers. One angry member of the WTUL made a proposal to "start a campaign against socialism," because "socialism is a menace . . . It just makes those ignorant foreigners discontented, sets them against the government, makes them want to tear down." [28]

But the inspiration of the garment workers was profound. When the Socialist Party organized "Women's Day" marches in 1910, their march through the streets of New York City was a massive display of solidarity and class consciousness among women workers, including sizeable contingents of garment workers, putting forward demands for higher wages, better working conditions, along with the demand for the right to vote.

The heroism of the New York City garment workers inspired Clara Zetkin to move a resolution at the 1910 Second International Conference of Working Women to declare International Women's Day an annual socialist holiday, a tradition that continues to this day.

In February 1917, women textile workers in Petrograd organized a demonstration for International Women's Day under the theme "Opposition to the war, high prices, and the situation of the woman worker," resulting in a massive strike movement which, in turn, overthrew the tsar. This day became, effectively, the first day of the Russian Revolution.

## Revolutionary Russia and the challenges to realizing women's liberation

The leaders of the Russian Revolution of 1917 had from the beginning made combatting women's oppression a central aspect of their revolutionary project. During its brief existence, this revolutionary government offered a glimpse of what a genuinely socialist society could offer in creating the material conditions for women to be liberated—but also the challenges that must be faced in making women's liberation a reality in a post-revolutionary context.

Below I briefly examine the legal achievements and also the limitations of these in achieving genuine equality for women—indicating the degree to which further struggle will be necessary after a socialist revolution to eradicate women's oppression.

To be sure, the revolutionary government enacted legislation establishing full social and political equality for women: the right to vote and to hold public office, the right to divorce at the request of either partner, the principle of equal pay for equal work, paid maternity leave for four months before and after childbirth, and child care at government expense. Abortion—viewed only as a health matter—was made legal in 1920, and women won the right to obtain free abortions in state hospitals. Only those who performed abortions for profit were considered criminals.

In addition, the revolution repealed all laws criminalizing homosexuality along with other laws regulating sexuality. [29] Bolshevik Grigorii Btakis described the impact of the October Revolution on sexuality in 1923:

*[Soviet legislation] declares the absolute non-interference of the state and society into sexual matters, so long as nobody is injured, and no one's interests are encroached upon—concerning homosexuality, sodomy, and various other forms of sexual gratification, which are set down in European legislation as offences against morality—Soviet legislation treats these exactly as so-called "natural" intercourse. [30]*

But legal equality, while crucial, did not achieve liberation in everyday life within the family. As Lenin explained in 1919:

*Laws alone are not enough, and we are by no means content with mere decrees. In the sphere of legislation, however, we have done everything required of us to put women in a position of equality and we have every right to be proud of it. The position of women in Soviet Russia is now ideal as compared with their position in the most advanced states. We tell ourselves, however, that this, of course, is only the beginning.* [31]

Lenin commonly referred to women's oppression within the family as "domestic slavery," and he expressed alarm at its continuation in post-revolutionary Russia. In a 1920 interview with Zetkin, several years after the revolution, Lenin spoke in detail about the obstacles women continued to encounter in their domestic lives. The following quote from Lenin makes clear that Russian Marxists did not expect women's oppression to automatically disappear after the revolution, but recognized the need for continued struggle:

*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 . . . 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, involves considerable education 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.* [32]

Trotsky likewise argued, "To institute the political equality of men and women in the Soviet state was one problem and the simplest . . . But to achieve the actual equality of man and woman within the family is an infinitely more arduous problem." He concluded, "All our domestic habits must be revolutionized before that can happen. And yet it is quite obvious that unless there is actual equality of husband and wife in the family, in a normal sense as well as in the conditions of life, we cannot speak seriously of their equality in social work or even in politics." [33]

The Bolsheviks thus never harbored the illusion that a victorious socialist revolution is all that is required to end women's oppression. Old customs and attitudes cannot be expected to change overnight, but can only shift over time, as new generations grow up without the ideological baggage perpetuated by oppressive class societies over the course of centuries.

Indeed, it is more appropriate to appreciate the degree to which the Bolsheviks understood that the revolution was not the end, but the beginning of the struggle to win women's liberation. Most importantly, they understood the centrality of freeing women from the drudgery of "domestic slavery," however difficult, as the key to their future liberation in all spheres of life.

## The revolutionary turning point

The 1917 Russian Revolution had inspired a wave of revolutionary struggle across Europe. The possibility that the revolution would spread to more economically advanced societies, particularly in Germany, kept the revolutionary government's hopes alive in its first few years. That hope was erased with the final defeat of the German revolution in 1923. Russia, its economy in shambles, was left isolated. The political terrain was thereby transformed: the decade that followed witnessed Stalinist counterrevolution in Russia and the ascendancy of fascism in Europe.

The Russian revolution also marked a turning point for the Left in the United States. The SP had managed to survive the war intact because the party maintained a firm antiwar stance. But in 1919, Russian revolutionaries formed the Third, or Communist, International with the affiliation of nineteen organizations and parties. The Russian revolution thus accelerated the already escalating conflict between the SP's left and right wings, as the party's revolutionaries cheered the Bolsheviks and the reform wing opposed them. By 1919, the SP lost its left-wing majority, that went on to form what became the Communist Party (CP)â€”affiliated with the Third International. Most IWW membersâ€”many having already left or been expelled by the SPâ€”followed suit.

The 1920s, however, proved a difficult period for those seeking to uphold the Marxist tradition. The US government conducted mass raids and deportations of immigrants suspected of socialist or anarchist activity. Moreover, as Stalin consolidated his power in the Soviet Union in 1928, the CP expelled the minority in the party who supported the Trotskyist opposition to Stalinism.

The result was the emergence of two distinct socialist movementsâ€”one pro-Stalin, and the other pro-Trotskyâ€”together comprising the political wings of the socialist left until the emergence of the New Left in the 1960s.

In this way, some of the most dedicated and talented women leaders from the early twentieth century ended up in different organizations with opposing political views on some fundamental political questions. Konikow, one of the founding members of the US Trotskyist movement, continued her work around delivering safe contraception, and wrote extensively on women's right to birth control in the Trotskyist Militant newspaper in the 1930s and early 1940s. Gurley Flynn joined the CP in 1936 and penned a regular column for the Daily Worker.

In this way, women veterans of the early twentieth century radical movements played a key role in transmitting their commitment to women's emancipation to a younger generation of women in the US Left.

## Organizing among women in the Great Depression

In the tumultuous movement for union recognition in the 1930s, the commitment to women's emancipation often played out in the course of the class struggleâ€”without an explicit call for women's political equality.

One of the most striking examples from the labor movement is the momentous Flint sit-down strike during the winter of 1936â€“37, when Trotskyists (at that time members of the Socialist Party) and Communists worked together in brilliant cohesion to lead their strike against General Motors (GM) to victory. SP member Genora Johnson (later Genora Dollinger), at the time the twenty-three-year-old wife of striker Kermit Johnson, formed the Flint Women's Emergency Brigade.

While made up primarily of strikers' wives, the Emergency Brigade was far from the typical "ladies" auxiliary, consciously referring to their organization as made up of "women" and not "ladies". [34] The women of the Emergency Brigade wore the uniform of a red beret and armband, which Dollinger later revealed was chosen partly because "[i]t was the red flag, it's a socialist color." [35]

The Emergency Brigade could be mobilized on a moment's notice to defend the strike, carrying wooden sticks resembling baseball bats. As the New York Times noted at the time, the women of the Emergency Brigade "did not content themselves with passive resistance but used clubs the size of baseball bats, whittled down at the end to

make them easy to swing and handle.” [36] On more than one occasion, the Emergency Brigade faced off against the police—“taunting them to beat up or shoot at a group of women.

One of the Emergency Brigade’s most clever tactics was the “sound car” which was quickly dispatched when there was a sign of trouble outside the plant. The sound car would arrive to direct pickets in battle through its loudspeaker. This tactic proved indispensable in the strike strategists’ diversionary battle to sidetrack police by pretending to occupy the Chevy # 9 plant (while actually taking Chevy #4) on February 1. This strategy, while ultimately successful, nevertheless placed strikers’ lives at stake as they fought the police at Chevy #9. As researcher Janice Hassett described, “GM police exchanged blows with the strikers, and used clubs and tear gas to move them to the back of the plant. The Emergency Brigade, “always ready for emergencies’ was on hand, and used their own clubs to break the windows and let air into the factory.” [37]

The CP, due to its larger size and consistent attention to combatting racism in the 1930s, made inroads in building a multiracial organization during that era. Black Communist women began to organize systematically among Black working-class women during the 1930s. Harlem Communist women, as historian Erik S. McDuffie describes in *Sojourning for Freedom*, organized against the high prices of food in white-owned grocery stores, including the following demonstration in 1935:

*On June 3, 1935, “flying squads” of black women and children defiantly marched down Harlem’s 125th Street between Seventh and Eight Avenue, the neighborhood’s main commercial thoroughfare. They were one thousand strong. Chanting, “Prices of meat must come down!” they demanded a 25 percent reduction in meat prices. Protesters held spontaneous street corner meetings about high-priced food and other pressing community concerns around high unemployment, bad housing, and inadequate social services. They meant business. Groups of women darted into white owned grocery stores, confronting startled white merchants about why they sold high-priced, low-quality food to their black clientele.* [38]

McDuffie concluded, “The demonstration was successful. Later that evening almost fifty stores agreed to immediately reduce food prices by 25 percent.” [39] The Harlem Action Committee Against the High Cost of Living, led by West Indies-born Bonita Williams, organized this immediately successful protest. Williams and Audley Moore were two of the CP’s women grassroots leaders in Harlem, simultaneously organizing struggles against unemployment and evictions, rent strikes, and union organizing in this turbulent period.

Williams and Moore, like many Harlem radical activists, had first entered politics as part of Marcus Garvey’s movement in the 1920s, attracted by his message of nationalism and race pride. Both joined the CP through their involvement in the CP-led campaign to free the “Scottsboro Boys,” nine Black teenagers who had been falsely accused of raping two white women on a train in 1931. After Williams took part in a thousands-strong multiracial march through Harlem, she recalled thinking, “If they’ve got a movement like that, and they’re conscious of this thing [Marcus] Garvey had been speaking about, then this may be a good thing for me to get in to free my people.” [40]

As the examples above show, Socialist and Communist women led important struggles involving women in the 1930s without attempting to forge a movement for women’s rights. In the case of Williams and Moore, their struggles were more explicitly tied to Black liberation than women’s liberation. In a later interview with Hassett, Dollinger argued that a fight for “women’s liberation” would have been “historically immature” in the working-class movement of 1937.

But as Hassett concluded later of the Flint Emergency Women’s Brigade,

Despite the fact that the efforts of the women were not expressed in a “woman’s movement,” gender issues were a salient feature of the 1937 strike. Genora Johnson emphasizes that “it was a radical change. . . . To give women a right to participate in discussions with their husbands, with other union members, with other women, to express their views . . . that was a radical change for those women at that time . . .”

It was not a feminist action, and it was not a women's movement—it was a labor and class dominated phenomenon—but the events of 1936–1937 did show the nation, and the women themselves that they were not just what they had been taught to be, that they were capable of concerted, orchestrated, and sometimes even heroic behavior. There is reason to believe that none of them was ever again “just a woman.” [\[41\]](#)

## The 1940s and 1950s

Renewed interest in the politics of women's oppression began among women within the organized Left in the immediate aftermath of World War II. The war era had seen the mass induction of women into high-paying manufacturing jobs in the interests of maximum war production, only to be driven out at the war's end to make room for returning vets. Many white women returned to homemaking with or without the combination of part-time work, while Black women workers were driven back into the same full-time, low-paying domestic labor occupations they held prior to the war.

World War II had also exposed the racist hypocrisy of fighting to extend America's “democratic freedoms” that at home excluded Black Americans from the democratic process. The civil rights movement grew in strength in the 1950s and inspired a broad radicalization in the 1960s.

Women in and around the Communist and Trotskyist movements began to reexamine theories of women's oppression, with some incorporating the effects not only of class inequality but also of racism. In so doing, they began to develop a political groundwork that helped to pave the way for the future fight for women's liberation.

Communist Party leader Claudia Jones penned perhaps the most salient exposition of the interlocking oppressions suffered by Black women prior to the 1960s. Jones' article, “An End to the Neglect of the Problems of the Negro Woman!” published in 1949 in *Political Affairs*, first clearly asserts, “Negro women—as workers, as Negroes, and as women—are the most oppressed strata of the whole population.” [\[42\]](#)

Jones continues, “It is incumbent on progressive unionists to realize that in the fight for equal rights for Negro workers, it is necessary to have a special approach to Negro women workers, who, far out of proportion to other women workers, are the main breadwinners in their families.” [\[43\]](#)

Jones explicitly challenges “progressive white women” to recognize that this fight for equality of Negro women is in their own self-interest, inasmuch as the superexploitation and oppression of Negro women tends to depress the standards of all women . . . Persistent challenge to every chauvinist remark as concerns the Negro woman is vitally necessary, if we are to break down the understandable distrust on the part of Negro women who are repelled by the white chauvinism they often find expressed in progressive circles. [\[44\]](#)

In the same path-breaking essay, Jones emphasizes sexual assault as one of the key issues facing Black women:

*But none so dramatizes the oppressed status of Negro womanhood as does the case of Rosa Lee Ingram, widowed mother of fourteen children—two of them dead—who faces life imprisonment in a Georgia jail for the “crime” of defending herself from the indecent advances of a “white supremacist.” . . . It exposes the hypocritical alibi of the lynchers of Negro manhood who have historically hidden behind the skirts of white women when they try to cover up their foul crimes with the “chivalry” of “protecting white womanhood.”* [\[45\]](#)

Jones concluded that proper attention to the plight of Black women will allow their “active participation” in fulfilling the

“historic mission” of the “entire American working class:” “the achievement of a Socialist America” the final and full guarantee of woman’s emancipation.” [46]

Jones was unable to continue her work within the CP, due to the US government’s unrelenting political persecution. The Trinidad-born Jones was first imprisoned in 1948 for her political activities and jailed three more times in the following years. She was found guilty under the terms of the Internal Security Act of 1950, banning “aliens” from Communist Party membership. She was also found guilty, along with Gurley Flynn, of “un-American activities” under the Smith Act in 1951.

In 1955 the US government deported her, but the government of Trinidad-Tobago refused to accept her. The British government agreed to accept her on “humanitarian” grounds, and she lived there until her death by massive heart attack at the age of forty-nine. While Jones continued her close involvement in the antiracist movement in Britain until her untimely death, she did not return to the theoretical work on Black women’s oppression she had begun in the CP.

Other Black Communist women nevertheless continued to struggle throughout this period, campaigning for Rosa Lee Ingram and against the systematic rape of Black women—sometimes overlapping with and supporting civil rights activists such as Rosa Parks.

Moreover, the CP began organizing local women’s commissions to help encourage women’s active participation in the party. This included in a number of localities women’s education classes to help them prepare to take on leadership positions. These classes provided childcare and transportation to make it easier for working-class women to attend. In January 1947, for example, the Bronxville CP held a special women’s dinner meeting—“at which the women attendees enjoyed a lecture on “the role of women today” and discussed the problems they faced, while the men “cooked and served food, minded children, and washed dishes.” [47]

During the postwar period, Trotskyist women were also engaged in revisiting the issue of women’s oppression.

In 1952, then-Trotskyist Selma James coauthored the pamphlet, *A Woman’s Place* for the Trotskyist Johnson–Forest Tendency, [48] which addressed the weight of family responsibilities shouldered by working-class women of that era. James and her coauthor used pseudonyms to protect themselves from losing their jobs in the face of anticommunist hysteria, although James nevertheless lost hers.

The pamphlet included the following passage, presaging Betty Friedan’s observations in *The Feminist Mystique*, but with a working-class, not middle-class, wife in mind:

*Even though a woman works, it is assumed from the very beginning that the main responsibility of the house is the woman’s and the main job of support is the man’s. The husband is to go out and support you and the children. You are to make sure that the house is clean, the children are cared for, meals are cooked, laundry is done, etc. This seems a fair way of doing things. But soon you find that the job of staying home and taking care of the house is not the same as it is painted in the movies. Housework is a never-ending job that is monotonous and repetitious. After a while doing things in the house such as ironing or getting up early to make lunches or breakfast is not something that you want to do. It is something that you have to do.* [49]

In 1954, James wrote a biweekly column called “A Woman’s Place” in *Correspondence*, the newspaper of the Johnson–Forest Tendency. In one column, “Miss Universe,” James described her experience watching the beauty contest, expressing much the same sentiment as the women’s liberationists who would rally outside the Miss America pageant in 1968. James noticed, for example, “The contest was supposed to be not only for beauty, the MC kept saying. It was for poise and stature as well . . . But the most important outfit was the Catalina swimsuit in exactly

the same style for each of the young women.” [50]

James also observed that although the contest was global, the women who paraded before television and movie viewers all shared the facial features of white American women: “as I watched the finals, it struck me that though the women were different types, every one of them looked the same . . . Of course, there was a ‘type’ that wasn’t represented at all. There was not one Negro woman in the beauty contest.” [51]

Also in 1954, Evelyn Reed of the Socialist Workers Party (US), who frequently addressed women’s oppression in the pages of *Fourth International*, argued women’s responsibilities as mothers are assumed to make them inferior to men in all aspects of life:

*It is set forth as an . . . immutable axiom that women are socially inferior because they are naturally inferior to men. And what is the proof? They are the mothers! Nature, it is claimed, has condemned the female sex to an inferior status . . . It is not nature, but class society, which robbed women of their right to participate in the higher functions of society and placed the primary emphasis upon their animal functions of maternity. And this robbery was perpetrated through a two-fold myth. On the one side, motherhood is represented as a biological affliction arising out of the maternal organs of women. Alongside this vulgar materialism, motherhood is represented as being something almost mystical. To console women for their status as second-class citizens, mothers are sanctified, endowed with halos and blessed with special “instincts,” feelings and knowledge forever beyond the comprehension of men. Sanctity and degradation are simply two sides of the same coin of the social robbery of women under class society.* [52]

As historian Kate Weigand argued, “although the women’s movement of the 1960s and 1970s differed in many ways from what came before it, the movement did not emerge as a fully-developed entity in the mid-1960s. Rather, second-wave feminists built upon the work of various groups that preceded them, including the work of women who inspired and were inspired by the Old Left’s efforts to take women’s issues seriously after 1945.” [53]

In 1983, Black feminist and scholar Barbara Smith acknowledged in particular the influence of playwright Lorraine Hansberry for her early advocacy of lesbian sexuality. Hansberry, best known for authoring the acclaimed *A Raisin in the Sun* at the young age of twenty-seven was also a left activist and Black feminist thinker. In 1957, the same year she completed *A Raisin in the Sun*, Hansberry joined the Daughters of Bilitis, the first lesbian organization in the US. She contributed a series of letters to its publication, *The Ladder*, signing them only with the initials “L. H.” to protect her privacy.

In the introduction to her book, *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, [54] Smith quotes one of Hansberry’s letters:

*It is about time that “half the human race” had something to say about the nature of its existence. Otherwise—“without revised basic thinking”—the woman intellectual is likely to find herself trying to draw conclusions—“moral conclusions”—based on acceptance of a social moral superstructure that has never admitted to the equality of women and is therefore immoral itself. As per marriage, as per sexual practices, as per the rearing of children, etc. In this kind of work there may women to emerge who will be able to formulate a new and possible concept that homosexual persecution and condemnation has at its roots not only social ignorance, but a philosophically active antifeminist dogma.* [55]

Smith commented, “I would like a lot more people to be aware that Lorraine Hansberry, one of our most respected artists and thinkers, was asking in a lesbian context some of the same questions we are asking today, and for which we have been so maligned.” [56]

Some women from the 1950s “Old Left” became participants in and theorists of the women’s liberation movements in

the 1960s and 1970s. Gerda Lerner, for example, who was active around the CP in the 1940s and 1950s, emerged as an eloquent women's studies scholar who also championed the struggles of Black women against racial inequality. Selma James, after leaving the Trotskyist movement, went on to play a key role in theorizing women's domestic labor and founding the Wages for Housework campaign.

In 1970, Evelyn Reed used Engels' *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* for an outline of her argument, postulating that upon the rise of capitalism:

*Women were then given two dismal alternatives. They could either seek a husband as provider and be penned up thereafter as housewives in city tenements or apartments to raise the next generation of wage slaves. Or the poorest and most unfortunate could go as marginal workers into the mills and factories (along with the children) and be sweated as the most downtrodden and underpaid section of the labor force. [57]*

Like many socialist feminists, Reed distinguished between the reproductive roles of ruling-class vs. working-class families for the owners of the means of production: ruling-class families reproduce generational wealth through inheritance, while working-class families serve to reproduce labor power.

In the same article, Reed also challenged those from other political tendencies "who say they are Marxists but refuse to acknowledge that women have to lead and organize their own independent struggle for emancipation, just as they cannot understand why Blacks must do the same." Here, she first addresses socialists who mistakenly believe that independent organizations of the oppressed pose a threat to working-class unity, which ultimately requires "the combined anti-capitalist offensive of the whole working class" to win a socialist society.

She also notes that the struggle will have to continue after the revolution to fully achieve women's liberation. As she argues,

The reason is that no segment of society which has been subjected to oppression, whether it consists of Third World people or of women, can delegate the leadership and promotion of their fight for freedom to other forces—even though other forces can act as their allies . . . The maxim of the Irish revolutionists—"who would be free themselves must strike the blow"—fully applies to the cause of women's liberation. Women must themselves strike the blows to gain their freedom. And this holds true after the anti-capitalist revolution triumphs as well as before. [58]

Thus, many Marxists arrived at roughly the same theoretical starting point as many socialist-feminists by the late 1960s and early 1970s—and shared the same goal: using Marxist theory to better understand women's unpaid labor inside the family and its connection to women's oppression as a whole within capitalist society.

Source: [International Socialist Review No 93](#).

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[1] Quoted in Barbara Evans Clements, *Bolshevik Feminist: The Life of Aleksandra Kollontai* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1979), 155.

[2] See Sharon Smith, "Theorizing women's oppression - Part 1: Domestic labor and women's oppression," *International Socialist Review* 88, March 2013

[3] Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, [Manifesto of the Communist Party, chapter 1, \(1848\)](#).

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- [4] Hal Draper, "The Principle of Self-Emancipation in Marx and Engels," [Socialist Register 1971, 81–109.](#)
- [5] Leon Trotsky, "Against Bureaucracy, Progressive And Unprogressive," [Problems of Life \(Methuen 1924\).](#)
- [6] Richard Stites, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Russia: Feminism, Nihilism and Bolshevism 1860–1930* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), 282.
- [7] Hal Draper and Anne G. Lipow, "Marxist Women versus Bourgeois Feminism," [Socialist Register 1976, 179-226.](#)
- [8] August Bebel 1879/1910, [Woman and Socialism, chapter XV.](#)
- [9] Draper and Lipow, op cit.
- [10] Clara Zetkin, ["Social-Democracy & Woman Suffrage" \(1906\)](#)
- [11] Alix Holt, *Selected Writings of Alexandra Kollontai* (Westport: Lawrence Hill & Co., 1977), 59.
- [12] Ibid
- [13] Clara Zetkin, "Only in Conjunction With the Proletarian Woman Will Socialism Be Victorious," Speech at the Party Congress of the Social Democratic Party of Germany, Gotha, October 16th, 1896, Berlin, in Philip Foner, ed., [Clara Zetkin: Selected Writings, International Publishers.](#)
- [14] Ibid...
- [15] Ibid...
- [16] Ibid
- [17] Crista DeLuzio, ed., *Women's Rights: People and Perspectives* (ABC-CLIO/Greenwood, 2009), 105.
- [18] Ibid 106.
- [19] Ann Schofield, "Rebel Girls And Union Maids: The Woman Question in the Journals of the AFL and IWW, 1905–1920", *Feminist Studies* 9, no. 2 (Summer 1983), 338.
- [20] Ibid ] At the same time, IWW organizers were outspoken in fighting for working women's equality. The IWW made a point of encouraging women to take on leadership roles in strikes and other struggles, with tremendous success in the 1912 Lawrence textile strike. Flynn argued, "The IWW has been accused of putting the women in the front. The truth is the IWW does not keep them at the back, and they go to the front."[[Meredith Tax, *The Rising of the Women: Feminist Solidarity and Class Conflict, 1880-1917* (University of Illinois Press, 1980), 256.
- [21] Robin Blackburn, ed., *An Unfinished Revolution: Karl Marx and Abraham Lincoln* (London: Verso Books, 2011), 251–52.
- [22] Ira Kipnis, *The American Socialist Movement 1897–1912*, Haymarket Books, 2005, 278–79.
- [23] Ibid. 268.] As historian Ira Kipnis remarked, however, "women socialists seem to have carried on the fight for equal rights with little aid from the male members of the party." [[Ibid. 265.
- [24] Diane Feeley, "Antoinette Konikow: Marxist and Feminist," in Paul LeBlanc, ed., *Revolutionary Traditions of American Trotskyism* (New York, NY, 1988), 5. Reprinted from *International Socialist Review* 33 (January 1972), 19–23.

[25] Ibid.

[26] Ibid 6

[27] See Tax, op cit.

[28] Tax, 232.

[29] Stites; quoted in Noel Halifax, *Out, Proud and Fighting* (London: Socialist Workers Party, 1988), 17.

[30] Quotes in J. Lauritson and D. Norsad, *The Early Homosexual Rights Movement 1864–1935* (New York, 1974); cited in Noel Halifax, *Out, Proud and Fighting* (London, 1988), 17.

[31] V. I. Lenin, Speech at the Working Women's Congress, Moscow, 1919, Lenin's *Collected Works*, 4th English Edition, (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1965), [Volume 30, 40–46.](#)

[32] Clara Zetkin, "[Lenin on the Women's Question](#)" ([An Interview with Lenin on the Woman Question in 1920](#)).

[33] Leon Trotsky, "From the Old Family to the New," [Pravda \(July 1923\)](#).

[34] Janice Hassett, "Never Again Just A Woman: Women of the Auxiliary and Emergency Brigade in the General Motors Sit-Down Strike of 1937," from the [American Socialist Collection of Sol Dollinger, March 11, 1994](#).

[35] Ibid.

[36] Ibid.

[37] Ibid.

[38] Erik S. McDuffie, *Sojourning for Freedom: Black Women, American Communism, and the Making of Black Left Feminism* (Duke University Press, 2011), 1.

[39] Ibid 1.

[40] Ibid 79.

[41] Janice Hassett, op cit. 43

[42] Beverly Guy-Sheftall (ed.), *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought* (NY: The New Press, 1995), 109.

[43] Ibid 115...

[44] Ibid 117

[45] Ibid. p119–120.

[46] Ibid 120.

[47] Kate Weigand, *Red Feminism* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 74.

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[48] The Johnson-Forest Tendency was an organization founded by Marxists C. L. R. James and Raya Dunayevskaya, using the pseudonyms J. R. Johnson and Freddie Forest. They were soon joined by Grace Lee Boggs, under the pseudonym Ria Stone. Their tendency argued that the Soviet Union was a state capitalist society, rather than bureaucratic collectivist (as argued by the Workers Party) or a degenerated workers' state (as argued by the Socialist Workers Party-US). Between 1940 and 1950, the Johnson-Forest Tendency was first part of the Workers Party and then the Socialist Workers Party, finally breaking to form their own organization, Correspondence.

[49] Selma James, *Sex, Race and Class* "The Perspective of Winning: A Selection of Writings, 1952–2011 (Oakland: PM Press, 2012), 16–17.

[50] Ibid. 35.

[51] Ibid.

[52] Evelyn Reed 1954, "The Myth of Women's Inferiority," [Fourth International \(Vol.15 No. 2, Spring 1954\)](#).

[53] Weigand, op cit, 7.

[54] Barbara Smith, ed., *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (New York: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1983), xxxii.

[55] Quoted in Barbara Smith, ed., *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (New York: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1983).

[56] Ibid.

[57] Evelyn Reed, "Women: Caste, Class or Oppressed Sex," [International Socialist Review, September 1970, vol. 31, no. 3, 15–17 and 40–41](#).

[58] Ibid.