Early Communist Work Among Women: The Bolsheviks

The Soviet Union provides the classic illustration of Fourier's observation that the progress of any society can be gauged by the social position of the women within it. To the extent that the Bolshevik Revolution was victorious, Soviet women were liberated from their traditional, subservient social positions; to the extent that the Revolution degenerated, the position of the women degenerated. The fact that this degeneration has been incomplete—that Soviet women continue to enjoy advantages and opportunities unknown in the West—is precisely because the degeneration of the Soviet workers state has also been incomplete, i.e., capitalism has not been restored.

Part 1

The Old Order: "I Thought I Saw Two People Coming, But It was Only a Man and His Wife"

Russian folklore testifies to the fact that women in pre-revolutionary Russian society were commonly considered generically defective to the point of being subhuman. But such attitudes had *not* prevailed in Russia from time immemorial. In ancient times, women had had the right to rule their own estates, choose their own husbands, speak in the community councils and compete for athletic and military honors. Epic songs are still sung in some provinces about mighty female warriors called *polnitsy*—a word derived from the Russian *pole*, meaning "field" and, in a secondary sense, "battlefield." These women warriors, according to folk tradition, wandered alone throughout the country, fought with men whom they encountered on their way and chose their own lovers as they pleased: "Is thy heart inclined to amuse itself with me?" the so-called Beautiful Princess asks the Russian folk hero Iliia Muromets.

But the centuries which witnessed the growth of the patriarchal family, the rise of Byzantine Christianity with its doctrine of the debased nature of women, the brutal Tatar invasion and the consolidation of dynastic power, also witnessed the obliteration of these ancient privileges.

During these centuries Russian women were progressively excluded from politics, education and social life in general. Those of the lower classes became beasts of burden who might be driven with a stick if it pleased their husbands. Those of the upper classes were physically removed from society and imprisoned in the *terem* or "tower room"—an upper chamber of the house built expressly for the lifelong seclusion of women. Peter the Great (1672-1725), in his determination to transform Russia into a modern commercial and industrial state, holds the distinction of releasing women from the *terem* and compelling them to mingle with men at public social functions, as they did in the West.

The Empresses Elizabeth and Catherine the Great (1729-1796) continued to encourage more progressive attitudes toward women, and they constructed academies for their education. On the eve of the Russian Revolution, women constituted 30,000, or almost one quarter, of the 125,000 students enrolled in Russian universities.

Despite these reform measures, however, women continued to be severely oppressed in pre-revolutionary Russia. Not only was the number of educated women only a tiny fraction of the total population (the illiteracy rate for women was 92 percent in 1897), but the lack of educational opportunities had a much more stultifying effect on women than on their male counterparts, because they were far more isolated.

Peasant women grew old early from overwork and maltreatment. Even when elementary education was available to girls, it remained customary for them to stay at home to care for the younger children until they were old enough to work in the fields. Husbands were generally chosen by the fathers, who sold their daughters to the highest bidder. Tradition decreed that the father of the bride present the bridegroom with a whip, the symbol of the groom's authority over his new wife.

Those peasant women who sought to escape to the cities found that they were paid lower wages than their male co-workers and that all skilled trades were closed to them. Outside of domestic service and the textile industry, marriage constituted grounds for immediate discharge.

Life was somewhat more comfortable, of course, for women of the middle and upper classes, but not much more fulfilling. While educational opportunities were more accessible to them, the kind of education deemed appropriate for women was limited. Husbands, as among the lower classes, were chosen by the fathers, and the law bound women to obey their husbands in all things.

Equal Rights for Women

The radical notion of equal rights for women was originally introduced into Russia by army officers who had been stationed in France after the defeat of Napoleon and who brought back to Russia many of the new liberal, republican and democratic ideas to which they had been exposed.

Male intellectuals continued to participate in this

continued on next page

Bolshevik Work...

movement for the next hundred years. They championed higher education for women and entered into fictitious marriages with them in order to provide them with the passports they needed to study abroad. Well-known authors such as Belinsky, Herzen, Dobroliubov and Chernyshevsky encouraged women in their struggle for equal rights.

The active participation of men in the struggle for women's liberation and the fact that prior to 1906 the masses of Russian men and women *did* possess equal political rights—that is, no rights at all—meant that at a time when women's suffrage organizations were on the rise in the West, Russian women and men continued to engage in united political struggle.

Equality of political oppression broke down only after the Revolution of 1905. On 17 October of that year Tsar Nicholas II issued a manifesto which provided for the summoning of a state duma based on male suffrage only. A group of the newly-enfranchised men immediately appealed to the author of the manifesto, Count Witte, for female suffrage, but this was refused. Out of this defeat arose the first feminist organizations in Russia—the League of Equal Rights for Women and the Russian Union of Defenders of Women's Rights.

Like all feminist organizations, these groups sought to achieve their goals through reforming the social system. At the first meeting of the League of Equal Rights for Women, which was held in St. Petersburg (later renamed Petrograd and presently Leningrad) in 1905, a number of working women put forward a resolution demanding measures to meet their needs and the needs of peasant women, such as equal pay for equal work and welfare for mothers and children, but the bourgeois women who constituted the majority of the membership rejected this proposal in favor of one which called only for the unity of all women in the struggle for a republican form of government and for universal suffrage.

One of the League's first actions was the presentation to the First State Duma of a petition for female suffrage signed by 5,000 women. This petition was presented three times between 1906 and 1912 but was never accepted. Minister of Justice Shcheglovitov commented:

> "Careful observation of reality shows that there is a danger of women being attracted by the ideals of the revolutionaries, and this circumstance, in my opinion, obliges us to regard with extreme care the question of encouraging women to take up political activity."
>
> —Vera Bilshai, *The Status of Women in the Soviet Union*

Feminism or Bolshevism?

Side by side with the burgeoning feminist movement, the pre-revolutionary years witnessed the development of work among women by the Bolsheviks and other avowed socialists—work which was greatly accelerated by the entrance of masses of women into industrial production.

The programs and strategies of feminism and Bolshevism were counterposed from the outset. The feminists declared that women's most pressing need was political equality with men, including participation at every level of government. Only when women were in a position to influence all governmental policies, they said, would cultural and economic equality be

Bettman Archives, Inc.

Russian women demonstrate (1917). The banner says: "City guardians increase pay to soldiers' families!"

possible. To achieve their political goal, the feminists created multi-class organizations of women united around the struggle for equal rights.

Socialist organizations also struggled for equal rights for all women. "We hate and want to obliterate," said V.I. Lenin, "everything that oppresses and harasses the working woman, the wife of the working man, the peasant woman, the wife of the little man, and even in many respects the women from the wealthy classes." But socialist organizations from the beginning rejected the feminist reform strategy and insisted that full sexual equality could not be achieved short of a socialist society. Far from leading them to abandon special work among women under capitalism, however, this position encouraged them to pursue it more ardently in the knowledge that "the success of the revolution depends upon how many women take part in it" (Lenin).

As early as 1899 Lenin insisted that Clause 9 of the first draft program of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party (RSDLP) contain the words: "establishment of complete equality of rights between men and women." The program adopted by the Second Congress of the RSDLP in 1903 included this demand as well as the following special provisions:

> "With a view to safeguarding the working class from physical and moral degeneration, and also with the view to promoting its capacity for waging a struggle for liberation, women should not be employed in industries harmful to the female organism, they should receive four weeks' paid pre-natal and six weeks' post-natal leave; all enterprises employing women should have nurseries for babies and small children, nursing mothers should be allowed to leave their work for at least half an hour at intervals of not longer than three hours, and male factory inspectors should be replaced by women in industries with a female labor force."
>
> —*VKP(b) v rezoliutsiiakh*, quoted in William M. Mandel, "Soviet Women and Their Self-Image"

Throughout the entire pre-revolutionary period the Bolsheviks pressed their demands for complete sexual equality as they carried out educational and organizational work among women through every possible vehicle—cultural and educational organizations, evening schools, trade unions. Centers of Bolshevik agitation and propaganda also took the form of women's clubs. In 1907, such a club was opened in St. Petersburg under the name "The Working Women's Mutual Aid Society," while in Moscow a similar club was called "The Third Women's Club."

Through this special work the Bolsheviks were able to recruit many working women to communist politics. One of these recruits, Alexandra Artiukhina, later recalled:

> "When we began to attend the Sunday and evening schools, we began to make use of books from the library and we learned of the great Russian democrat, Chernyshevsky. Secretly, we read his book, *What Is to Be Done?* and we found the image of the woman of the future, Vera Pavlovna, very attractive.
>
> "The foremost democratic intelligentsia of our time played a considerable role in our enlightenment, in the growth of revolutionary attitudes and in women's realization of their human dignity and their role in public. They acquainted us with the names of Russian revolutionary women, like Sofia Perovskaya and Vera Figner.
>
> "Later, in underground political circles, we read the works of Marx, Engels and Lenin. We understood that the enslavement of women occurred together with the establishment of private ownership of the means of production and the beginning of exploitation of man by man and that real equality and real freedom for women would be found only in socialism, where there would be no exploitation of man by man. Therefore, the most reliable path for the liberation of women was the path of political struggle against capitalism in the ranks of the proletariat."
>
> —A. Artiukhina, "Proidennyi put," in A. Artiukhina et al. (eds.), *Zhenshchina v revoliutsii*

Women and the War

The outbreak of World War I in 1914 precipitated a dramatic transformation in the lives of Russian women, ripping them away from their private family roles and throwing them into entirely new social roles in factories, hospitals, at the front and in the streets.

During the very first months of the war, military mobilizations took approximately 40 percent of Russian working men out of industrial jobs, many of which had to be filled by women. Between 1913 and 1917 the percentage of women working in the metal trades in Petrograd rose from 3.2 percent to 20.3 percent. In the woodworking industries, the number of women increased sevenfold. In papermaking, printing and the preparation of animal products and foodstuffs their number doubled.

This entrance of large numbers of Russian women into industrial production was a profoundly progressive step because it laid the basis for their economic and political organization. By the time of the October Revolution, women constituted about ten percent of the membership of the Bolshevik Party and were represented at every level of the party organization.

While many female comrades took a special interest in party work among women, it was always clear that this important arena of work was the responsibility of the party as a whole and not solely of the women within it. This Bolshevik refusal to differentiate political functioning on the basis of sex is also illustrated by the fact that neither in the party nor in its youth section did women ever constitute a male exclusionist faction or caucus. There were, at times, women's commissions and departments to oversee special work among women, but these always remained under the control of higher party bodies composed of comrades of both sexes.

The absence of women's caucuses was not, of course, an indication that the party was entirely free of sexist attitudes; only that the struggle against such attitudes was carried out by the party as a whole on the basis of communist consciousness, which was expected to transcend sexual distinctions.

One of the foremost Bolshevik leaders in the struggle against reactionary attitudes toward women within the party was V.I. Lenin. In an interview with Clara Zetkin of the German Social Democratic Party, he said:

> ". . . Unfortunately it is still true to say of many of our comrades 'scratch a Communist and find a Philistine.' Of

continued on next page

Bolshevik Work...

course you must scratch the sensitive spot, their mentality as regards women. Could there be a more damning proof of this than the calm acquiescence of men who see how women grow worn out in petty, monotonous household work, their strength and time dissipated and wasted, their minds growing narrow and stale, their hearts beating slowly, their will weakened? Of course, I am not speaking of the ladies of the bourgeoisie who shove onto servants the responsibilities for all household work, including the care of children. What I am saying applies to the overwhelming majority of women, to the wives of workers and to those who stand all day in a factory.

"So few men—even among the proletariat—realize how much effort and trouble they could save women, even quite do away with, if they were to lend a hand in 'women's work.' But no, that is contrary to the 'right and dignity of a man.' They want their peace and comfort. The home life of the woman is a daily sacrifice to a thousand unimportant trivialities. The old master-right of the man still lives in secret. His slave takes her revenge, also secretly. The backwardness of women, their lack of understanding for the revolutionary ideals of the man, decrease his joy and determination in fighting. They are like little worms which, unseen, slowly but surely rot and corrode. I know the life of the worker and not only from books. Our Communist work among the women, our political work, embraces a great deal of educational work among men. We must root out the old 'master' idea to its last and smallest trace. In the Party and among the masses. That is one of our political tasks, just as it is the urgently necessary task of forming a staff of men and women well trained in theory and practice, to carry on Party activity among working women."

—Klara Zetkin, *Reminiscences of Lenin*

International Women's Day

A great deal of radical agitation and propaganda among working women centered around the observance of International Women's Day, a proletarian women's holiday which had originated in 1908 among the female needle trades workers in Manhattan's Lower East Side and which was later officially adopted by the Second International.

The holiday was first celebrated in Russia on February 23, 1913, and the Bolshevik newspaper, *Pravda*, devoted a great deal of space to publicizing it. Beginning in January, *Pravda* initiated a special column entitled "Labor and the Life of the Working Woman," which provided information about the various meetings and rallies held in preparation for the holiday and about the resolutions which were passed at them.

The first International Women's Day in Russia drew tremendous attention in St. Petersburg and Moscow. *Pravda* published a special holiday edition, greeting the working women and congratulating them upon entering the ranks of the fighting proletariat. In opposition to the Mensheviks, who wanted the celebration of International Women's Day confined to women, the Bolsheviks insisted that it was a holiday of the entire working class. Bolshevik speakers around the country took the opportunity to put forward the Marxist analysis of the oppression of women and to explain the Party's strategy for women's liberation through socialist revolution.

Bolshevik work among women was so successful in fact that by the winter of 1913 *Pravda* was receiving more correspondence than it could handle on the special problems facing working women. The solution, Lenin urged, was another journal aimed specifically at proletarian women. It was entitled *Rabotnitsa* (The Working Woman). *Rabotnitsa* played a crucial role in organizing women and rallying them to the Bolshevik Party. (For a detailed account of its development, see "How the Bolsheviks Organized Working Women: History of the Journal *Rabotnitsa*," *Women and Revolution* No. 4, Fall 1973.)

The Bolsheviks' major political competitors, the Mensheviks, attempted to counter the influence of *Rabotnitsa* with a women's journal of their own called *Golos Rabotnitsi* (Voice of the Working Woman), but it appeared only twice and failed to win much support.

Menshevik attempts to organize women through mass meetings seem to have fared badly also. Klavdia Nikolaevna, who later became an editor of *Rabotnitsa*, described one such meeting as follows:

"At the meeting there were many women and frontline soldiers. Suddenly, a group of Bolshevik working women burst into the hall and pushed their way to the speakers' platform. The first and second to reach the platform collided with it, but the third was able to gain a foothold on it, and she made such a fiery speech about the aims of the revolution, that all the women and soldiers left the meeting singing the 'International' and only one Menshevik was left in the auditorium."

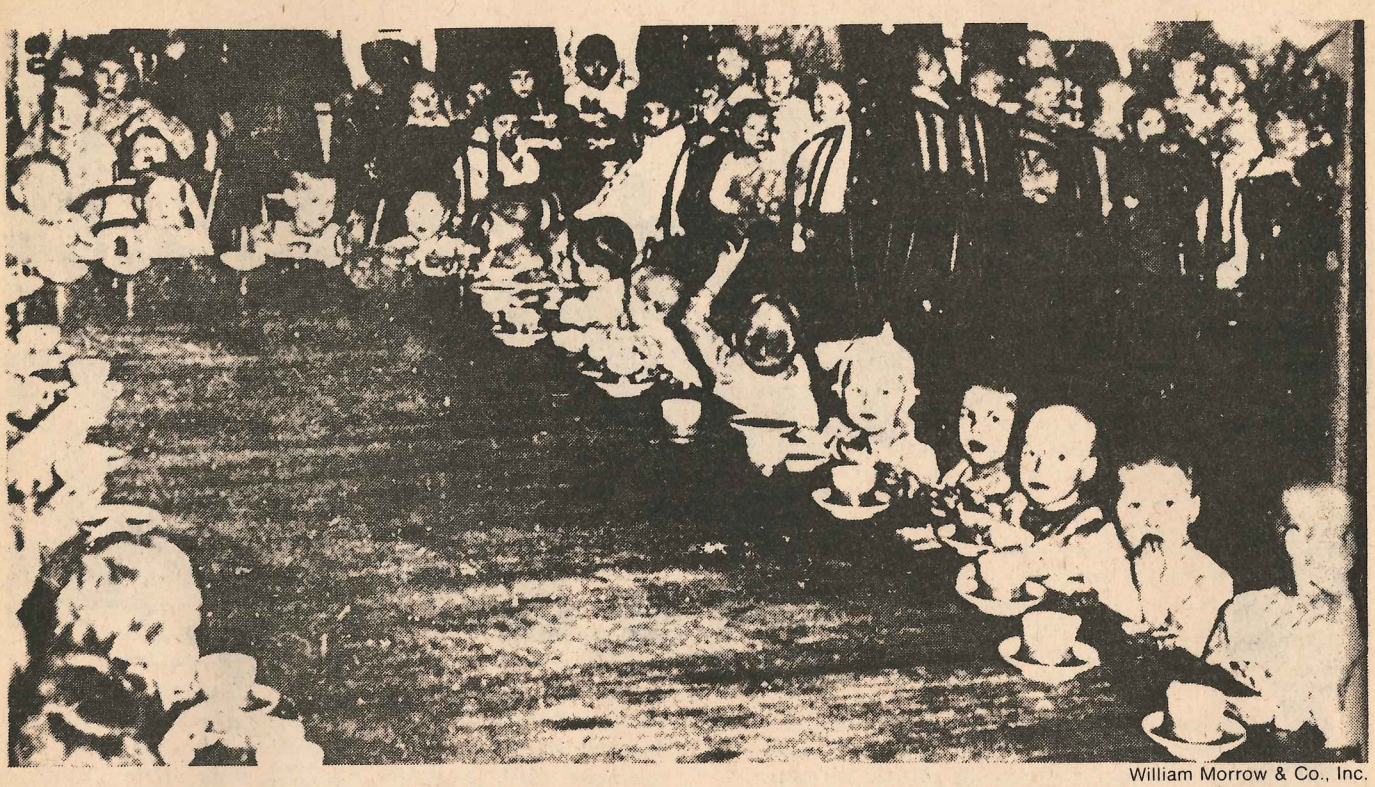
—K. Nikolaevna, "Slovo k molodim rabotnitsam," A. Artiukhina et al. (eds.), *Zhenshchina v revoliutsii*

"The First Day of the Revolution—That Is the Women's Day"

As the war dragged on, the daily life of the Russian working class grew steadily worse. By 1916, bread lines in Petrograd were often over a mile long with the women, who constituted the great majority of them, standing four abreast. In this situation of massive social unrest, the intervention of the Bolsheviks, who placed the blame for the war and the high cost of living squarely on the shoulders of the autocracy, evoked a deep response from the war-weary masses. The Bolshevik slogan, "Bring back our men!" was frequently found scrawled across factory walls, and Bolshevik proclamations, such as the following, appeared in underground newspapers and were posted on walls:

"The black scourge of war has destroyed... our workers' organizations.... The government has dealt treacherously with our deputies—class-conscious working women and working men—and our sons, husbands and brothers are bleeding profusely on foreign fields, paying with their lives to procure new markets, new lands for triumphant capital....

"Thus is it possible not to raise our voices in protest, the voices of hundreds of thousands of unfortunate mothers, wives and sisters, is it possible that we will shed only inaudible tears, sigh only secret sighs for the pain of the men? This cannot be, comrade working women. In all countries workers are rising up against their oppression by capital; we rise up and our voices demonstrate that we



William Morrow & Co., Inc.

Children receive free meals in early Petrograd commune.

are also able to defend our children, husbands and brothers....

"Enough bloodshed! Down with the war! A people's court for the criminal autocratic government."

—Bolshevik International Women's Day proclamation (23 February 1915), quoted in A.P. Konstantinov and E.P. Serebrovskaia (eds.), *Zhenshchiny Goroda Lenina*

Pitirim Sorokin, who was an eyewitness to the February Revolution, has written:

"If future historians look for the group that began the Russian Revolution, let him [sic] not create any involved theory. The Russian Revolution was begun by hungry women and children demanding bread and herrings."

—Pitirim Sorokin, *Leaves from a Russian Diary*

Sorokin is correct in pointing out the importance of the women in the streets in the series of events which led to the downfall of the autocracy, but this is only half the story.

Street demonstrations by women had been occurring in the major cities for several months, but they had generally been no more than local disturbances leading at most to the looting of one or two shops. The demonstrations of 23 February—International Women's Day—1917 were of another order. These were massive city-wide actions involving thousands of people who struck their factories, raised political banners, turned over railroad cars and attacked the police who attempted to restrain them.

All radical parties had intended to celebrate International Women's Day in the customary manner—that is, with rallies, speeches and the distribution of leaflets. Not a single organization had called for labor strikes. When on the eve of the holiday a group of working women met with a representative of the Bolshevik Party, V. Kayurov, to discuss the next day's activities, he specifically cautioned them to refrain from isolated actions and to follow the instructions of the party.

Despite his advice, however, a few hundred women textile workers assembled in their factories early on the morning of the 23rd and resolved to call a one-day political strike. They elected delegates and sent them around to neighboring factories with appeals for support. Kayurov happened to be engaged in an emergency conference with four workers in the corridor of the Erikson Works when the women delegates came through that plant. It was only by this chance encounter that the Bolshevik representative learned of the forthcoming strike action. He was furious:

"I was extremely indignant about the behavior of the strikers, both because they had blatantly ignored the decision of the District Committee of the Party, and also because they had gone on strike after I had appealed to them only the night before to keep cool and disciplined. There appeared to be no reason for their action, if one discounted the ever-increasing bread queues, which had indeed touched off the strike."

—V. Kayurov, *Proletarskaia Revoliutsia* No. 1, 1923, quoted in George Katkov, *Russia 1917: The February Revolution*

The strike was thus unauthorized by any political group. It was, as Trotsky said, "a revolution begun from below, overcoming the resistance of its own revolutionary organizations, the initiative being taken of their own accord by the most oppressed and downtrodden part of the proletariat—the women textile workers, among them no doubt, many soldiers' wives."

By noon of the 23rd an estimated 90,000 workers had

continued on next page

Bread lines before the Revolution often extended for miles. Novosti Press Agency

Bolshevik Work...

followed the working women out on strike. "With reluctance," writes Kayurov, "the Bolsheviks agreed to this."

As the striking workers, who came mostly from the Viborg District on the north side of the city, began their march into the center, they were joined by thousands of women who had been standing all morning in the bread lines, only to be informed that there was to be no bread in the shops on that day. Together they made their way to the Municipal Duma to demand bread.

For the remainder of the day the streets swarmed with people. Spontaneous meetings were held everywhere, and here and there hastily improvised red banners rose above the crowd, demanding bread, peace and higher wages. Other demands were scrawled on the sides of streetcars: "Give us bread!" and "No bread, no work!" One woman streetcar conductor later recalled:

> "...when we conductors turned in our money for the night, we saw soldiers with rifles standing to one side of the gate, and on the following day they were still in the conductors' room and walking about the yard. Leonov [a Bolshevik who had been one of the leaders of a successful streetcar conductors' strike the previous year] quietly said to us: 'This is all for us; you see today in Petrograd 200,000 workers are on strike!'
>
> "We began to leave the yard to embark in the municipal streetcars when suddenly we saw a crowd of workers coming at us, shouting: 'Open the gate to the yard!' There were 700 people. They stood on the rails and on the steps of the Gornyi Museum opposite the yard. The workers were from a pipe plant, a tannery and a paper factory. They told us that today all the plants in our city were on strike and the streetcars were not running. The strikers were taking the streetcar drivers out of the hands of management. From all sides we heard: 'Down with the war!' 'Bread!' and a woman shouted: 'Return our husbands from the front!'
>
> "The strikers swept over the city. A demonstration of workers from the Putilov Factory marched to the center of the city and into it, like a flood, merged again and again the crowds of workers...."
>
> —K. Iakovlevoi in *Vsegda s Vami: Sbornik posviashchennyi 50-letiiu zhurnala "Rabotnitsa"*

All in all, the day passed with relatively little violence. A few troops were called out to assist the police, but it was determined that they were unnecessary, and they were returned to their barracks. In the evening the audience at the long-awaited premiere of Meyerhold's production of "Lermontov's Masquerade" heard some gunshots through the red and gold drapes of the Alexandrinskii Theater, but there were no casualties and no one suspected that anything especially out of the ordinary was taking place.

They were mistaken. During the days which followed, the general agitation not only continued but assumed an ever more violent character until the hollow shell of the once-powerful Romanov dynasty crumbled.

One week after the strike which had set off this chain of events *Pravda* editorialized:

> "The first day of the revolution—that is the women's day, the day of the Women Workers' International. All honour to the International! The women were the first to tread the streets of Petrograd on their day."
>
> —Fanina W. Halle, *Women in Soviet Russia*

Toward October

"The Tasks of the Proletariat In Our Revolution: Draft Program for the Proletarian Party," written immediately

upon Lenin's return to Russia in April 1917, stated:

> "Unless women are brought to take an independent part not only in political life generally, but also in daily and universal public service, it is no use talking about full and stable democracy, let alone socialism. And such 'police' functions as care of the sick and of homeless children, food inspection, etc., will never be satisfactorily discharged until women are on an equal footing with men, not merely nominally but in reality."
>
> —V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 24

Throughout the spring and summer of 1917 the Bolsheviks intensified their work among women. The first working women's conference, which took place at Lenin's suggestion and which was attended by Mensheviks, Social Revolutionaries and feminists as well as Bolsheviks, demonstrated the influence which the Bolsheviks had gained among working women.

In her address to the conference, Konkordiia Samoilova, a leading member of the Bolshevik Party, proposed that all political work among women in industry be carried out henceforth under the guidance of Bolshevik organizations. Naturally, this proposal met with the fierce resistance of the representatives of other radical organizations. A Menshevik, Bakasheva, argued that the women's movement was independent and must not be subordinated to the influence of *any* political party. But although three or four women expressed solidarity with the Menshevik resolution affirming the non-partisan character of the women's movement, it was defeated, while Samoilova's proposal for Bolshevik leadership was accepted.

Under the mounting pressure of events in the months preceding October, animosities on the left became more intense than ever. In July an abortive uprising took place. Although the Bolsheviks had counseled against such a move at this time, when the class lines were drawn they took their places in the front ranks of the proletariat. A Russian working woman recalls:

> "I remember how we went to the July demonstration. Our organized working men and working women arose under the Bolshevik signs. Loudly and mightily our voices resounded: 'We who were nothing and have become everything shall construct a new and better world.'
>
> "As the demonstration approached the corner of Nevsky and Sadova, machine-gun fire was heard. People ran to the sidewalks, but, since the doormen all along the Nevsky had closed the gates, there was nowhere to escape, and the shooting continued. The Nevsky was strewn with the bodies of the demonstrators. At a corner of the Nevsky, a store was located on the basement level. When the machine-gun fire began, we descended a short flight of stairs to the door of the shop, which was closed. Working women disassembled the window pane and, helping each other, got into the shop and ran out through a dark passage into a yard and from there through an alley back again to the Nevsky.
>
> "The streets of Petrograd were running with the blood of workers and soldiers.... we buried them in a communal grave.
>
> "When on the morning of July 5, 1917 we returned to our plant, 'Novi Promet,' it was as if we did not know our co-workers. During the course of our two-day absence, the Mensheviks and SRs had spread the foul slander that the Bolsheviks were fully responsible for the shooting down of the workers. The atmosphere was tense. When we entered the shop, many working women jumped up and began to throw aluminum nuts with very sharp edges at us. I was taken by surprise and covered my face with my hands, and my attackers kept repeating:

continued on next page

Radio Times Hulton Picture Library

The Women's Battalion of Death guards the Winter Palace in Petrograd (1917). These soldiers were the last defenders of the Provisional Government against the Bolsheviks.

Bolshevik Work...

" 'Take that, Bolshevik spy!'
" 'What are you doing? The Bolsheviks gave their lives for the working class and you listen to the Mensheviks and SRs, the murderers of the working class....'
"The working women, seeing my face running with blood, became frightened. Someone brought water, iodine, a towel. The girls from my brigade were in a flood of tears. They told me how the Menshevik Bakasheva and others had set them against the Bolsheviks.
"The wavering of working women became apparent not only in our plant but also in other Petrograd enterprises during the July Days, when counterrevolutionary scum together with the Mensheviks and SRs carried on their filthy persecution of the Bolsheviks. The Mensheviks and SRs had started down the path of open counter-revolution."

—E. Tarasova, "Pod znamenem Bolshevikov," in A. Artiukhina et al. (eds.), *Zhenshchiny v revoliutsii*

In the final weeks before October, the Bolshevik party made an all-out effort to consolidate the support of the working women and enlist them in the imminent struggle. Party committees held working women's conferences at which they explained the problems of the party, dispelled the wild rumors which abounded, attacked counterrevolutionary positions and generally tried to raise class-consciousness among the women and draw them into revolutionary activity.

Coinciding with the October Revolution itself was the First All-City Conference of Petrograd Working Women, which was organized by *Rabotnitsa* and attended by 500 delegates elected by 80,000 working women. A major goal of the conference was to prepare non-party women for the coming uprising and to acquaint them with the program which the new Soviet government would pursue after victory. The women discussed various questions of government and worked out plans for the welfare of mothers.

The conference was temporarily interrupted by the outbreak of the armed uprising which had been under discussion. The delegates recessed in order to participate in the revolutionary struggle along with many other women who bore arms, dug entrenchments, stood guard and nursed the wounded. Afterward Lenin was to say of them:

"In Petrograd, here in Moscow, in cities and industrial centers, and out in the country, proletarian women have stood the test magnificently in the revolution. Without them we should not have won, or just barely won. That is my view. How brave they were, how brave they still are! Just imagine all the sufferings and privations that they bear. And they hold out because they want freedom, communism. Yes, indeed, our proletarian women are magnificent class warriors. They deserve admiration and love...."

—V.I. Lenin, quoted in Fanina W. Halle, *Women in Soviet Russia*

[TO BE CONTINUED]