Early Communist Work Among Women: The Bolsheviks

Part 2

Few people today, even among those who take a special interest in the history of women, have ever heard of the Russian League of Equal Rights for Women. Yet in the days following the February revolution it was this organization, a branch of Carrie Chapman Catt's International Suffrage Alliance, to which feminists in Russia and around the world looked for leadership in the struggle for women's liberation.

From its headquarters at 20 Znamenskaia Street in Petrograd the League waged an ardent struggle for women's rights—principally suffrage—through rallies, leaflets, newspaper articles and earnest petitions such as the following:

> "Defending the interests of women and maintaining that the realization of peace among the people will be incomplete without the full equality of women and men, the Russian League of Equal Rights for Women appeals to all women of all professions and calls upon them to join the League in order to quickly realize in practice the great idea of complete equality of the sexes before the law.
> "In Unity there is Strength."
> —*Den'*, 9 March 1917

On 15 April 1917 the League witnessed the realization of its long-sought goal as the Provisional Government granted all women over the age of 20 the right to participate in Duma elections. Over the next four months additional legislation enabled women to practice law, elect delegates to the forthcoming Constituent Assembly, run for election themselves, hold government posts and vote in all provincial and municipal elections. Social Revolutionary leader Catherine Breshkovskaia (later to be dubbed by Trotsky the "Godmother of the Russian Counterrevolution") wrote in exultation to the National American Woman Suffrage Association:

> "I am happy to say that the 'Women's Journal' can be sure we Russian women have already the rights (over all our country) belonging to all citizens, and the elections which are taking place now, over all our provinces, are performed together by men and women. Neither our government nor our people have a word to say against the woman suffrage."
> —Catherine Breshkovskaia, letter to the National American Woman Suffrage Association, 20 May 1917

It is notable, then, that the victorious Russian League has been relegated to historical near-oblivion, while the Bolshevik party is universally acknowledged—even by staunch anti-communists—as the instrument by means of which Russian women achieved an unparalleled degree of social equality. And this is as it should be, for in fact the League's paper victory had virtually no practical significance for the masses of Russian women. Not only did the new equal rights statutes leave untouched the most urgent problems of daily life—such as widespread starvation—but such reforms as were guaranteed were implemented, as in the West, in a purely tokenistic fashion. American newspaper reporter Bessie Beatty, who attended a Provisional Government political convention in Petrograd during this period, noted that of the 1,600 delegates in attendance only 23 were women. Not that women were absent from the proceedings; far from it. Numerous women served tea, caviar and sandwiches, ushered men to their seats, took stenographic notes and counted ballots. "It was so natural," said Beatty, "that it almost made me homesick."

Bolshevik Pledge: Full Social Equality for Women

Lenin had pledged that "the first dictatorship of the proletariat will be the pioneer in full social equality for women. It will radically destroy more prejudices than volumes of women's rights." With the Soviet seizure of state power and in the very teeth of the bitter struggle against counterrevolution and imperialist intervention the Bolsheviks proved their determination to honor this pledge.

The very first pieces of legislation enacted by the new Soviet government were directed at the emancipation of women in a way which far exceeded the reformist demands of the suffragists. The aim of this legislation was the replacement of the nuclear family as a social/economic unit through the socialization of household labor and the equalization of educational and vocational opportunities. These two goals were key to the undermining of the capitalist social order and to the construction of the new society.

In December 1917 illegitimacy was abolished in law, making fathers, whether married or not, co-responsible for their children and freeing mothers from the burden of a double standard which had punished them for the consequences of shared "mistakes." Subsequent legislation declared marriage to be a contract between free and equal individuals which could be dissolved at the request of either partner, established hundreds of institutions devoted to the care of mothers and children, legalized abortions, assured equal pay for equal work and opened up unheard of opportunities for women in industry, the professions, the party and government. And this legislation was backed by government action. Thus when Soviet working women, like working women in other countries, began to lose their jobs to soldiers returning from the front, the Petrograd Council of Trade Unions addressed the following appeal to all workers and factory committees:

"The question of how to combat unemployment has

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Workers and activists of the Tversk Regional Zhenotdel (1922).

come sharply before the unions. In many factories and shops the question is being solved very simply...fire the women and put men in their places. With the transfer of power to the Soviets, the working class is given a chance to reorganize our national economy on a new basis. Does such action correspond with this new basis?... The only effective measure against unemployment is the restoration of the productive powers of the country, reorganization on a socialist basis. During the time of crisis, with the cutting down of workers in factories and shops, we must approach the question of dismissal with the greatest care. We must decide each case individually. There can be no question of whether the worker is a man or a woman, but simply of the degree of need.... Only such an attitude will make it possible for us to retain women in our organization, and prevent a split in the army of workers...."

—Petrograd Council of Trade Unions, April 1918, quoted in Jessica Smith, *Women in Soviet Russia*

This petition was supported by other unions and government organizations, and mass dismissals of women from Soviet industry were in fact checked. Three years later, during another period of widespread layoffs, the government issued a decree providing that in cases where male and female workers were equally qualified they were to be given equal consideration in retaining their jobs, with the exception that single women with children under one year of age were to be given preference. In the event that such women had to be laid off, their children had the right to continue to attend the factory nursery or kindergarten. It was further stipulated that neither pregnancy nor the fact that a woman was nursing a baby could serve as cause for dismissal, nor was it permitted to dismiss a woman worker during a leave of absence for childbirth.

Surveying the Soviet government's work among women during its first two years Lenin was able to conclude that:

"A complete Revolution in the legislation affecting women was brought about by the government of the workers in the first months of its existence. The Soviet government has not left a stone unturned of those laws which held women in complete subjection. I speak particularly of the laws which took advantage of the weaker position of woman, leaving her in an unequal and often even degrading position—that is, the laws on divorce and children born out of wedlock, and the right of women to sue the father for the support of the child.... And we may now say with pride and without any exaggeration that outside of Soviet Russia there is not a country in the world where women have been given full equal rights, where women are not in a humiliating position which is felt especially in everyday family life. This was one of our first and most important tasks....

"Certainly laws alone are not enough, and we will not for a minute be satisfied just with decrees. But in the legal field we have done everything required to put women on an equal basis with men, and we have a right to be proud of that. The legal position of women in Soviet Russia is ideal from the point of view of the foremost countries. But we tell ourselves plainly that this is only the beginning."

—V.I. Lenin, quoted in Jessica Smith, *Women in Soviet Russia*

Zhenotdel

The transition was not an easy one for women (or for men), particularly in rural areas and in the Muslim East.

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Bolshevik Work...

Appreciating the difficulties which women had to overcome in breaking from reactionary traditions, the Central Committee of the Bolshevik party, although it was caught up in the turmoil of civil war, gave additional impetus to its work among women by calling for an All-Russian Conference of Working Women and Peasant Women to take place in Moscow in November 1918. This conference was preceded by the establishment of a bureau of convocation which sent agitators throughout the country, including frontline regions, to inform women about the forthcoming conference and to facilitate the election of delegates. Given the desperate conditions which prevailed, it was estimated that approximately 300 delegates would attend, but at the opening of the first session on November 16, 1,147 women delegates were seated.

Conference discussions addressed a variety of questions, including the problems of working women in Soviet Russia, the family, welfare, the role of women in the international revolution, organizational problems, the struggle against prostitution in Soviet Russia, the struggle against child labor and the housing question.

While affirming in principle that the struggle for communism and women's emancipation could succeed only through the united struggle of all sections of the working class and peasantry, and not through the building of an autonomous women's movement, the delegates also noted that women were often the least conscious elements in these sections and the most in need of special attention. In the light of this approach to special work among women, which had been developed by the German Social Democratic Party and carried forward by the Bolsheviks in the pre-revolutionary period, delegates to the conference affirmed the proposal by Bolshevik leaders Inessa Armand and Konkordiia Samoilova that the conference appeal to the party "to organize from among the most active working women of the party special groups for propaganda and agitation among women in order to put the idea of communism into practice." The Bolsheviks' response was the creation of a Central Committee commission headed by Armand for work among women. It was succeeded the following year by the Department of Working Women and Peasant Women—*Zhenotdel*.

Zhenotdel was to become a major vehicle for the recruitment of women to the Bolshevik party, but its primary purpose was not recruitment but the instruction of non-party women in the utilization of their newly-won rights, the deepening of their political awareness and the winning of their cooperation for the construction of the proletarian state.

While special work among women was carried out by many agencies, *Zhenotdel* was unique in that it offered women practical political experience. In annual elections women chose their delegates—one for every ten working women or for every hundred peasant women or housewives. These delegates attended classes in reading and writing, government, women's rights and social welfare, and they took part in the organization of conferences, meetings and interviews designed to arouse the interest of their constituents and draw them into political activity. They were entitled to representation on the Central Committee of the Bolshevik party, and those who were elected to represent *Zhenotdel* pursued a special program of political education which included reviewing the reports of district committees, co-ops, trade unions and factory directors. Some *Zhenotdel* delegates became full-time paid functionaries in government institutions or trade unions where they participated directly in the administration of the government.

Zhenotdel carried out extensive propaganda campaigns through its publications. By 1921, it was publishing a special page devoted to women in 74 weekly newspapers. In addition, it published its own weekly bulletin and the monthly journal *Kommunistka* (*The Communist Woman*), which had a circulation of 30,000. In addition, *Zhenotdel*'s literary commission supervised the publication of leaflets and pamphlets dealing with party work among women—over 400,000 pieces of literature during the first six months of 1921 alone.

Finding themselves confronted at every step by the enormous barrier of illiteracy among women, *Zhenotdel* delegates threw themselves into the work of organizing over 25,000 literacy schools in which they themselves were often the majority of the students. They also set up co-operative workshops for women, organized women who had been laid off from factories and established orphanages and colonies for homeless children.

Within a few years *Zhenotdel* had succeeded in creating out of the most backward sector of the working class and peasantry an organized, active, politically conscious stratum of women citizens devoted to the Soviet republic. Of these astonishing women delegates the Russian poet Mayakovsky wrote:

The First All-Russian Conference of Working Women and Peasant Women meets in the Hall of Columns, Moscow (16 November 1918).

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"They come
From the machines
From the land and washtubs
Under red kerchiefs
Tucking in the strands,
Hundreds of thousands
Of women-delegates
Chosen
To build and govern."

—Quoted in V. Lebedeva, "Zabota o materiakh i detiakh," in A. Artiukhina et al. (eds., *Zhenshchina v revoliutsii*

Women Rally to Soviet State

While the Soviet regime had its detractors, even among working women in the major cities, all evidence indicates that the great majority of working women, for whom there could be no going back to the life they had known under the old regime, remained loyal to the government through famine, epidemic and Civil War. Wearing red head bands, women marched through the streets of Petrograd, during its darkest days, singing that although typhus and counterrevolution were everywhere, the world revolution was bound to save them. One woman who spoke for many wrote:

"I am the wife of a Petrograd worker. Earlier I was in no way useful to the working class. I could not work.

"I sat at home, suffocating in the cellar and preparing dinner from garbage which the bourgeoisie had not found fit to eat.

"When working class rule began, I heard the call for us ourselves to rule and build our lives. Well, I thought, how can the generals and their daughters have yielded their places to us? I began to listen....

"They chose me for a Kalachinska District conference. I learned a great deal there. A literacy instructor was assigned to me....

"If life is difficult for us now, all of us will bear it and not one will give the bourgeoisie reason to celebrate that they can again keep all the people in chains. We may suffer for a while, but to our children we will leave an inheritance which neither moth will eat nor rust will corrode. And we shall all support strong soviet rule and the Communist Party."

—V. Tsurik, *Bednota*

But the clearest indication of support for the Soviet government was the enthusiasm with which women took up arms against the counterrevolution. Soviet women were members of Red Guard units from the first days of the October Revolution, and they fought side by side with men on every front during the Civil War. Like women in bourgeois countries, they initially volunteered as nurses, with the difference—as Alexandra Kollontai points out—that they regarded the soldiers not merely as "our poor soldier boys," but as comrades in struggle. Soon, however, they became scouts, engineers of armored trains, cavalry soldiers, communications specialists, machine-gunners and guerrillas. They also took the initiative in forming "stopping detachments," which captured deserters and persuaded them, whenever possible, to return to

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Students in leadership training course (1922). In the center is N. K. Krupskaya.

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their positions. Lenin praised these detachments, saying: "Smash the traitors ruthlessly and put them to shame. Eighty thousand women—this is no trifling military force. Be steadfast in the revolutionary struggle."

When the fighting ended, an estimated 1,854 women soldiers had been killed or wounded and many more taken prisoner. Sixty-three women were awarded the Order of the Red Banner for military heroism.

The Work Goes Forward

By 1921 it appeared as if a wholly new type of woman was about to make her appearance in Soviet Russia. According to Alexandra Kollontai's personal ideal, this woman would be self-supporting and would live alone; she would take part in social and political work and would engage freely in sexual love; her meals would be eaten in a communal restaurant; her children would be happy in a state nursery and her home would be cleaned, her laundry done and her clothes mended by state workers. Other communists cherished other visions of the fully emancipated socialist woman, but for all of them the future was full of promise—so much had been accomplished already.

It was too early to know that just ahead lay bitter defeats for Soviet women, for the Soviet working class as a whole and for the international proletarian revolution. The bureaucratic degeneration of the Soviet state, which arose in the first instance out of the backwardness, isolation and poverty of post-revolutionary Russia and out of the failure of proletarian revolutions in the technologically advanced countries of Western Europe, constitutes another chapter. The privileged, conservative bureaucratic caste which emerged out of these conditions reversed at will many of the gains which women had achieved through the Revolution: abortion was illegalized; the women's section of the party was liquidated; coeducation was abolished; divorce was made less accessible; and women were once again encouraged to assume their "natural" tasks of domestic labor and child rearing within the confines of the oppressive family.

But despite these defeats, the lessons of Bolshevik work among women have not been lost to succeeding generations of revolutionists, and the work goes forward. Just as Kollontai pointed out to Bessie Beatty during the first flush of the Soviet victory: "Even if we are conquered, we have done great things. We are breaking the way...." ■