

## International Women's Day

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International Women's Day (IWD), celebrated annually on March 8 in dozens of countries and on every continent, originated in the revolutionary socialist movement of the early twentieth century. Commemorated today with tributes to outstanding women past and present, even in some places with gifts to sweethearts and spouses, the socialist heritage of IWD may be forgotten. But IWD first entered public discourse on August 27, 1910 in the form of a resolution presented to the International's Socialist Women's Conference held at Copenhagen. Meeting in conjunction with the Second International, that is, the Socialist International founded in 1889 to succeed the defunct First International (as the International Workingmen's Association founded in 1864 by Karl Marx was known), the women's group was led by German socialist Clara Zetkin. With her comrades, Zetkin submitted the following resolution:

In agreement with the class-conscious, political and trade union organizations of the proletariat of their respective countries, the Socialist women of all countries will hold each year a Women's Day, whose foremost purpose it must be to aid the attainment of women's suffrage. This demand must be held in conjunction with the entire women's question according to Socialist precepts. The Women's Day must have an international character and is to be prepared carefully.

The resolution in Copenhagen actually followed the first celebration, for that event had occurred in New York City on Sunday, February 23, 1909, when American socialists met to commemorate a demonstration the preceding year by women of the Lower East Side of New York City for the vote as well as for an end to sweatshops and child labor. It has also been asserted that the date was selected to commemorate a much earlier event, a strike by women textile workers on March 8, 1857, and its fiftieth anniversary celebration in 1907; but historians have not been able to find any evidence of either supposed event and now consider the tale a myth.

The Copenhagen resolution, however, is well documented; and like the 1909 event in New

York, reflected a decision by men and women of the Second International to abandon their earlier position of dismissing campaigns for woman suffrage as mere reforms unable to assuage the condition of working-class women, for whom only socialist revolution could bring better lives. Suffrage campaigns were now reaching their peak, enrolling hundreds of thousands of women in countries around the world. In 1907 in Stuttgart, during the first meeting of the International Conference of Socialist Women, attended by women from 13 countries, an extensive discussion of woman suffrage had been held. The issue was complicated by the fact that universal manhood suffrage had not yet been achieved in countries with prominent socialist parties, such as Austria and Belgium. Zetkin and other socialists opted for limited cooperation with non-socialist women, always keeping in mind their socialist goals. Votes for women, they hoped, would serve their purposes by helping to educate working-class women to support the socialist movement.

Influenced by the 1907 conference, the Socialist Party of America created a Women's National Committee to Campaign for the Suffrage and held a mass meeting on March 8, 1908, stating, however, that "socialist women shall not carry on this struggle for complete equality of the right to vote in alliance with the middle-class women suffragists, but in common with the socialist parties, which insist on woman suffrage as one of the fundamental and most important reforms for the full democratization of political franchise in general." During 1909 and 1910, despite some resistance to cross-class collaboration, the American socialist women's groups cooperated with the National American Women's Suffrage Association, then led by Carrie Chapman Catt, to circulate suffrage petitions. More than 5,000 socialists joined the famous citywide suffrage parade held in New York in 1912, constituting, according to one description, "a brilliant mass of red sashes, banners, and red torches."

The first European celebration of IWD took place in Vienna on March 18, 1911, a date selected to commemorate the Paris Commune of 1871. There also, women marched with red flags. There are said to have been some 300 demonstrations that year by women in the Austro-Hungarian empire. Similar events took place in Germany, Denmark, and Switzerland. Russia first celebrated the holiday on February

## 2 International Women's Day

23, 1913, when both liberal feminists and Bolsheviks marked the occasion with meetings, lectures, and publications. (It should be noted that February 23 in the Gregorian calendar then used in Russia is the same day as March 8 in the western calendar.) France marked the occasion on March 8, 1914, with some 2,000 attending. The outbreak of war later that year created major problems for the socialists, who were caught between an internationalist ideology and patriotic defense of their homelands.

Nevertheless, some celebrations of IWD took place during the war years, including the most significant of all, that in St. Petersburg in 1917, which is considered by historians to be the event that launched the Russian Revolution. While in 1917, IWD was marked in Paris and Turin, and elsewhere, it was doubtless the events of late February (old calendar) in St. Petersburg that turned IWD into one of the leading national holidays of the Soviet Union, along with May Day and the anniversary of the Bolshevik revolution. Celebrated the last Sunday in February in 1913 and 1914, IWD in 1917 came amidst a bitter winter when, after several years of war, prices for food, fuel, soap, and other necessities had reached grossly inflated wartime prices that working people could not pay. During January and February many men and women workers protested by striking. On February 23, 1917 (March 8, new calendar), women workers at the textile factories defied a party order not to strike by staging a walkout and mass meeting in the street. Textile workers joined hungry housewives in the streets. Male metalworkers soon enlisted in sympathy. The theme of the IWD celebration was inclusive: "The War, High Prices, and the Situation of the Woman Worker." Along with middle-class feminists, women workers also demanded voting rights. Most remarkably, some women walked right up to the soldiers who had been called to control the demonstrations, took hold of their rifles, and said, "Put down your bayonets – join us." Other women attacked bakeries and grocery stores. Two days later, after the call "Give us bread" had escalated into "Down with autocracy," the tsar ordered one of his generals to shoot if necessary to stop the demonstrations. The women had provided an example of unstoppable civil disorder that was dangerous to the tsarist regime. By February 27, Nicolas II was forced to abdicate. The Russian Revolution was begun on IWD by hungry

women and children demanding food and looting shops.

After the war, everything had changed. The Bolsheviks cancelled an IWD celebration planned for 1918, partly in response to male leaders who opposed it. Lenin's government created a special "women's section" to pursue educational, health, and political work among women that lasted until 1930, when it was eliminated by Stalin. Elsewhere, scattered celebrations took place in 1918 and the following years, while the socialists of the Second International contended with, and were eventually eclipsed by, the new Communist Third International. In 1922 Lenin declared March 8 (new calendar) a communist holiday. The Chinese Communist Party followed suit. But although IWD continued to be celebrated in the USSR, its original impulse as a way to support women's rights was lost. While lauding notable Bolshevik women, party leadership used the occasion to stress the need for women to support government policies. In 1930 the IWD slogan in the Soviet Union was "100% Collectivization." In 1931 German socialist women used the occasion to demonstrate under the slogan "Against War and Nazi Terrorism, for Socialism and Peace." Scattered celebrations of IWD continued through the 1940s and 1950s in countries as widespread as France, Cuba, Puerto Rico, Australia, Germany, England, China, and Indonesia, with numbers recorded that ranged up to half a million in the latter case. In 1942, the Chinese revolutionary and feminist poet Ding Ling marked the occasion by addressing revolutionary women with a stirring speech about the conflicting demands they faced seeking to meet expectations of both new and traditional roles for women. "When will it no longer be necessary to attach special weight to the word 'woman' and raise it specially?" She hoped for "less empty theorizing and more talk about real problems."

Following World War II, celebrations of IWD lapsed in some countries, including the United States, perhaps because of its association with international communism. Its resurgence as a source of feminist interest seems to have started in the late 1960s, when a group of women at the University of Illinois, Chicago Circle, in 1967, commemorated the day by showing the film *Salt of the Earth*, which depicts a labor struggle by women workers in the American Southwest. The Chicago group is said to have included a number of "red diaper

babies," who had heard of IWD from their parents. In 1971 the day was marked by sit-ins by women in Boston and New York.

During the 1970s, as knowledge of the day's history spread, especially through burgeoning women's studies programs, it became the occasion for feminist events on many campuses. In 1976 a women's studies student at San Diego State University who was active in the National Organization for Women (NOW) successfully petitioned the city schools to designate April 18–24 as Women in History Week. In 1977 a student of women's history at Sonoma State University who sat on the Santa Rosa Commission on the Status of Women convinced the Sonoma County school system to proclaim the week that included March 8 as Women's History Week. By 1981 celebrations of IWD had spread across the nation, and Representatives Barbara Mikulski and Orrin Hatch helped then-Representative Barbara Boxer win support for a resolution on Women's History Week from the United States Congress. Expanded in 1987 into Women's History Month, Congress has

continued to pass similar resolutions every year since. Designated as a national holiday in numerous countries, March 8 is now recognized as International Women's Day by the United Nations, as part of a global effort to promote gender equality as a fundamental human right.

SEE ALSO: International Congress of Women at The Hague; Internationals; National Organization for Women (NOW); Russia, Revolution of February/March 1917; Socialism; Zetkin, Clara (1857–1933)

#### References and Suggested Readings

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