



Tower Hamlets workers strike to save jobs and services

A Tower Hamlets teacher writes about the joint strike by NUT and Unison in the London borough on 30 March

Despite the fact that the cuts are not yet hitting workers in specific schools, enough NUT and Unison members took strike action to cause almost every school in the borough to close either partially or entirely.

After picket lines were held, several hundred people assembled at Weavers Fields for a march to a rally at the London Muslim Centre.

I'd walked some of the way with my school through our neighbourhood.

Kids were on our megaphone all the way, other kids leaned out of windows to cheer us, cars beeped, and we got escorted off the premises of Canary Wharf to one of my kids leading a chant of "you've got loads of money".

We were en route to support workers at another school where the head had been leading a campaign of intimidation against strikers. We missed this school, but we met the workers of a Sure Start children's centre holding a formidable picket line — this was one of many high-lights, as we all cheered in riotous solidarity.

As the march went off, our numbers suddenly swelled. Before we knew it, about 2,000 people had taken to the streets, the majority of them women, many of whom had never struck or demonstrated before.

Suddenly the least likely staffroom inhabitants were

NUT and council Unison members, Tower Hamlets, 30 March

running off to be stewards, fighting over who was going to carry the union banners, doing interviews with socialist newspapers, or complaining about the

brief pause in otherwise vociferous chanting. The demonstration, full of school bands and workers with their kids marching as service users as well

as providers, felt massive, was incredibly loud and lively, and got loads of public support. Another of my kids appeared out of nowhere, clutched my

hand and said in an awestruck whisper "I've never seen anything like it."

The rally consisted of a top-table speaker panel made up of male union big-wigs — including Mark Serwotka, General Secretary of the Civil Service union PCS.

There was lots of fighting talk from the bureaucracy.

Hundreds of people made it to the rally — there was standing room only and the atmosphere was charged. There was lots of chanting demanding a general strike, a big vote in favour of combined public sector union action over pensions, and, I hope, a sense that we need to hold our tub-thumping "leaders" to account and demand action. I think everyone was

surprised at how numerous we were, and how good it felt to be taking action together.

Obviously a one-day strike by itself is going to win nothing, but this was a necessary experience for us, I think.

It gave us practice at organising, arguing, mobilising and demonstrating. It was a massive confidence boost to lots of us who are feeling our way for the first time with this stuff.

Perhaps most important, it allowed us to have solidarity with workers of different unions, in different schools, with parents and children — in short, our community.

Opportunities to build this solidarity are in themselves vital if we are going to be able to go on to fight a battle with a chance of winning.

Support Egyptian women's fight for equality

By Esther Townsend

Egyptian women face many of the same problems of women around the world, but in addition to the pervasiveness of conservative, patriarchal ideas, reinforced by religion, 90 percent of Egyptian women have experienced the barbaric practice of Female Genital Mutilation.

Like all democratic upheavals the Egyptian revolution has called every form of oppression into question. Women have been engaged in the struggle from the outset. In a recent interview (8 March) with a US trade unionist international solidarity campaign, Rahma Refaat,

of Egyptian workers' rights organisation the Centre for Trade Union and Workers' Services (CTUWS), suggested that women's participation in the movement has presented new possibilities for challenging gender discrimination and fighting for women's rights.

Refaat said: "this experience is helping [women] to express themselves, achieve their objectives, and confront discrimination".

The heightened level of women's involvement and activism has led to "gender-sensitive structures" in the new independent trade unions — "women's engagement and representation are enshrined in their constitutions".

Refaat described the "opening" of the road for goals of liberation — the potential is there, not just for winning women's rights, but for many other social and political changes.

She spoke of "changing labour laws, including trade union laws; putting an end to the artificial separation between professional unions and trade unions, which historically has weakened the Egyptian labor movement; changing the situation of Egyptian workers, who are represented officially, especially in the International Labor Organization, by the previous regime's follower federation; and meeting Egyptian workers' main demands for fair wages,

decent work, job security". There are also aims for a social insurance scheme that includes domestic and informal workers, and advocates broader equality and social justice.

However, Refaat cautioned against being too optimistic about the commitment of the opposition and democratic forces to gender equality. Despite the creation of a Women's Commissioner role, new amendments to the constitution, proposed by the military and passed in a referendum despite union opposition, prevent women becoming president.

Shortly after Refaat gave the interview the demo for International Women's Day (8 March), organised

by groups including Women for Democracy and the Egyptian Centre for Women's Rights, met with a shocking degree of hostility.

What began with heated arguments with other protestors ended with women being chased across Tahrir Square and assaulted, physically and sexually. Any breaking down of gender barriers in the protests that got rid of Mubarak has evidently been short-lived.

Refaat says: "A great deal still needs to be done before the Egyptian revolution is realised, and Egyptians [as a whole] have earned their lost rights and their democratic Egypt". That is especially true for women.

NOT MY SISTER: Hillary Clinton

By Becky Crocker

Hillary Clinton is a self-proclaimed feminist. For some, a feminist icon.

But, because I reject some "feminist" myths about women in politics, because I don't think individual women's success serves our general liberation, and because those at the top in a class-divided system are on the opposite side from the majority of women, I would say that Hillary Clinton is not my sister!

To debunk one obvious myth... Karen Kubby of the Emma Goldman Women's Clinic in Iowa predicted that if Clinton won the US presidency it would give us "a different kind of political process" because women "elicit social change and confront the system."

This is patronising because it ascribes and limits women to characteristics lumped on us by a sexist society. It is a delusion because it overlooks the political struggle involved in changing the political system. And there is nothing inherently revolutionary about a woman politician. It depends on her political outlook, her class perspective, who she sets out to serve.

Do Clinton's successes serve women's liberation in general? She has many to boast. She became the first woman Senator of New York in 2000. She won more nominations for President than any other woman in US history. She is now Secretary of State. She may have raised our aspirations. But she has served her own career. Individual women's success within this system do not challenge the structures holding the majority of women down.

But Clinton claims to be a feminist. So what kind of feminist is she?

On Walmart's Board of Directors, she pushed to get more women on the management team. Between 1987 and 1991 she chaired the American Bar Association's Commission on Women to tackle gender

bias in the legal profession. Hers is a bourgeois feminist outlook, concerned with elevating a narrow elite of women: liberation for some women within a capitalist framework, not liberation for all.

In fact, it is not just that her politics don't stretch to include working-class women; she is actively on the other side.

Politically, the Democratic Party serves the capitalist class. Clinton is hand-in-glove with corporate interests. She spent \$36 million — more than any other candidate — on re-election to the Senate in 2006. In a capitalist system divided by class, a collective identity for all women is an illusion: some women directly oppress other women. Clinton's personal wealth is around \$50 million. She sat on Walmart's Board of Directors for six years and was silent about their anti-union practices.

One million women are taking out the largest class action lawsuit in US history over Walmart's discriminatory practices. In these situations, was Clinton with the low-paid, working class women? No, she went along with the profit-makers.

In recent weeks, the spotlight has been on her as Secretary of State, defending US national interests abroad while paying lip-service to democracy in the Middle East. As recently as 2009 she said, "I really consider President and Mrs Mubarak to be friends of my family".

She has been criticised for delaying her support for protest movements in allied countries. She is Secretary of State for a major capitalist nation; she voted for the war in Iraq.

With someone like Clinton as a role model, we will never be free. Let's not limit our horizons to the icons placed before us by success within this system.

You are a strong woman, Hillary Clinton, but unless you are fighting for the liberation of all women then you are not my sister!

Fight to defend and extend reproductive rights

By Esther Townsend

On 28 February Radio 4's "PM" programme revealed that the Society for the Protection of Unborn Children (SPUC) have placed leaflets revealing the "real risks" of abortion in more than 1000 GPs' surgeries.

Women seeking advice and support surrounding pregnancy, abortion and contraception — already an emotionally challenging experience — can be misinformed that abortion causes breast cancer and breaks international human rights.

SPUC argues that all "unborn children" are entitled to protection. Their actions include lobbying MPs; creating "pro-life human chains" in UK cities each year; developing educational materials; and providing welfare support to "victims of abortion".

Religious, predominantly male, speakers dominated their recent international youth conference in Scotland, 18-20 March.

The activities of organisations like SPUC and the distribution of the leaflets contradict General Medical Council guidelines: "Doctors should not seek to impose their own beliefs on patients". Like any medical procedure, abortion carries risks (breast cancer is not one of them) but information about these should come from evidence based medical guidelines, not a religious pro-life organisation with a political agenda.

However, the SPUC leaflets also raise important issues about women's reproductive freedoms and liberation. The UK 1967 Abortion Act has many problems — principally, it does not make abortion legally available at the request of the woman.

Women must persuade two doctors to agree to an abortion — this allows doctors with personal disagreements to delay, obstruct or veto a woman's choice.

The Act does not apply in Northern Ireland: rich women can pay to have abortions in England or

Scotland but the majority of women seeking an abortion in Northern Ireland are forced to continue the pregnancy.

Women in countries where abortion is illegal are pushed to attempting to end pregnancy themselves, including using unlicensed internet "abortion pills"; alcohol; physical damage such as falls; or pushing substances, like soap or bleach, or objects into the uterus. They risk infection, septicaemia, severe bleeding, infertility, psychological damage and death.

The right to choose is central to the struggle for women's equality and liberation, and it affects working-class women the most — most rich women can pay to access safe abortions, even when they are illegal. The World Health Organisation estimates that 200 women die each day from unsafe, unsupported abortions — the majority of these women are working-class and poor.

Unsurprisingly, SPUC are also against same-sex parenting and argue that state school sex education involves "lurid materials" which "prime" young people for sex.

Sex education should be factual and encourage discussion, not promote religious values. Hiding what sex is can only lead to young people feeling confused, disempowered and put them at higher risk of STIs and pregnancy.

A lack of sex education also makes young people more vulnerable to abuse.

SPUC also suggests contraception promotes a "false sense of security" leading to

STIs, unplanned pregnancy and abortion.

Views like SPUC's are worryingly widespread. Christian teen pop idol Justin Bieber told *Rolling Stone* magazine that abortion is "killing a baby" and that "everything happens for a reason" when asked whether women who had been raped should have access to abortions.

Even in England, Wales and Scotland, where women can access free contraception and abortion, most women will have anecdotal accounts of judgemental reactions at sexual health clinics and GPs. All this without being handed a SPUC leaflet!

The right to choose has been won in some places. In Sweden, for example, women can choose abortion for any reason, although only until the 18th week of pregnancy. Yet in some countries abortion is not even legal to save a woman's life.

We must continue the fight for a woman's right to choose; to oppose restrictions; to increase women's autonomy; and improve access to, and the experience of, abortion and sexual health services.

We must oppose the imposition of judgmental, often religious values, like those of SPUC, on health-care.

Reproductive freedoms and access to contraception and education are key to allowing women to take control over their own lives and choices, to the struggle for our equality and our liberation.

Organising student women

Queen Mary University Students' Union established women's representation with a part-time Women's Officer in 2010. Since then they have set up the "51% Group: QMSU Feminists" and organised campaigns around issues ranging from lads' mags to violence against women. Women's Officer Wanda Canton spoke to Women's Fightback about their first big event.

"Festival51 — 5 Days, 1 Cause" was an entire week of events (14-18 March) to coincide with International Women's Month and celebrate women in all our diversity.

Each day consisted of a range of meetings and workshops; from Craftivist collective to self-defence to political audio. We sought to have a broad and accessible line-up to encourage students of all genders to take an interest in women's movements; both nationally and around the world. Encouragingly, and somewhat surprisingly, the largest turnout was for the socialist/anarcha-feminist session with Janine Booth (Alliance for Workers' Liberty and RMT), anarcha-feminist Una Byrne and Alice Robson (Feminist Fightback).

Political events have always had low turnouts at QM, which has been frustrating and difficult to rectify. I'm unconvinced this is genuine apathy, as students do appear engaged and interested when approached — perhaps the week was badly timed or not promoted heavily enough, but it had positive feedback.

We had hoped to hold a fundraising event to support Crossroads Women's Centre in Kentish Town. Unfortunately, the bureaucracy and must-please-management paranoia of the venue and Students' Union prevented this. With charges of over £500 and strict conditions, we were forced to cancel. Given that we were only allocated £150 for the entire week, our budget was already stretched.

Despite challenges, Festival51 was empowering and inspiring — demonstrating the strength of grassroots women's movements. The aim was to engage with students and encourage a stronger feminist presence on campus.

We did achieve this to some extent, though perhaps we learned to take on the world one festival at a time.

A tribute to Jayaben Desai and her role in the Grunwick strike of 1976-78



A showing of the film "The Great Grunwick Strike - A History" by Chris Thomas followed by a discussion of the strike with participants.

Sunday 17 April 2.30 to 5.00pm

At the Tricycle Cinema, 269 Kilburn High Road, London NW6 7JR [nearest tube Kilburn, Jubilee line]

Organised by Brent Trades Union Council: tickets £5 from info@brenttuc.org.uk or Brent TUC, 375 High Road, NW 10 2JR

Twilight men are bad news

By Lota Bantic

Like it or not, *Twilight* is a factor in the lives of millions of people.

Millions have read the "romantic", vampire-infested chronicles by Stephenie Meyer, and millions more have watched the films. Inevitably, it has given birth to a new type of fangirl: the *Twilight* fangirl.

These girls, situated in all corners of the globe, proudly proclaim their statuses as either "Team Edward" or "Team Jacob", and spend their lives dreaming about Robert Pattinson and his character Edward Cullen, until they can no longer differentiate between the two.

Twilight is apparently a story of "love". The heroine, Isabella "Bella" Swan, although she is independent, is lost and confused in her life until she falls madly in love with Vamp Edward Cullen. Now that she has found a man who will control her, who she can or cannot see, where she can go, what is "safe" for her to do and what is not, she is happy and fulfilled in life.

But there is another man in the picture, Jacob Black, a werewolf, and a sworn enemy of the vampires. He loves Bella but Bella loves Edward more.

When Bella and Edward get married and have a baby, Jacob "imprints" on the baby. Which means he's found his "soulmate", who was only about 15 minutes

Why can't she see how creepy he is?

old at this point (but it's "destiny", so that's not creepy). It all ends happily ever after, no one ends up lonely, and everyone ends up friends.

Twilight and feminism have been at loggerheads from the beginning. The root of the problem, I have concluded, is Meyer's version of a perfect man (Edward), and how he behaves towards the object of his affections.

Many teenagers (and, incredibly, many grown women), wish they had a man like him, so romantic and caring. I must confess, however, that I'm not too keen on men who'll remove my engine from my car, lock me up, stalk me and stare at me all night long while I sleep without my knowledge or consent. What can I say? I guess I'm just not into the "overprotective" type.

This "over-protectiveness" starts off right at the beginning of their relationship and gradually gets worse through the books.

Edward decides to tell the newly found "love of

his life" that he watches her while she sleeps from the tree outside her window, adding in a jokey tone that she "talks in her sleep". And like a rational human being, Bella is more worried about what she has said than the fact her boyfriend is a creepy stalker.

As the books progress, he gains more and more control of her life. For example, in *Eclipse*, when she wants to see Jacob, Edward says that he "can't allow that".

When she tries to sneak off without his consent, his psychic sister informs him of Bella's plan and he disconnects the battery cables in her car like a "true gentleman".

Additionally, we cannot forget that he blackmails her into marriage, insisting he will not sleep with her until they marry, and forcing things upon her that she doesn't want (albeit nice things, such as a new car).

We must note, however, that it is not only "Mr Perfect" Edward Cullen that is capable of blackmail. After

all, Jacob, who has been the nicer, less controlling and less manipulative man up until *Eclipse*, suddenly follows in Edward's footsteps by threatening to kill himself if Bella will not kiss him. So, of course, she does.

Bella is submissive to both of the main male characters in the books and allows herself to be manipulated to do what they want. She never stands up to Edward, even when Jacob tells her their relationship is abusive.

Moreover, it's not just through Bella that the books portray sexism. All the Werewolves in the books are male, until Leah Clearwater comes along. And she is portrayed as the outsider of the pack: the others are not comfortable with her, she is bitchy, bitter and emotional, and the overall sense is that she acts this way because she does not belong in this male dominated group.

The vampire women are no better. Yes, they participate in fights as much as the male vampires do (as does Leah with the werewolves), but they are not very independent.

Alice, who was the only well-written and interesting character in the first book, suddenly gets a passion for fashion, spends her life shopping and making sure everyone looks good. She also holds her friend Bella hostage against her will just because Edward told her to.

Rosalie is a "bitch" with a past, which, although sad, makes her "the victim". She is so bitchy because her life was cut short before she could have children and a nice big house, which is all she ever wanted.

Their mother Esme committed suicide after losing her baby in her human life, and that is why she was turned into a vampire. She serves no other purpose than to be the "maternal" figure, the wife of the head of the clan. She does everything her husband says.

What kind of message does this overwhelming sexism send to young women?

Most worrying, Edward's "over-protectiveness" sends out a message that abuse is OK. If Edward is a "perfect boyfriend," and he behaves in this way, than surely it is fine for girls' own boyfriends to behave likewise? Not in the real world, no. Thanks to Meyer, impressionable, vulnerable girls will not be able to know the difference between a healthy relationship and an abusive one.

I do not know if Meyer intentionally crammed so much sexism into her best-sellers, but intentional or not, it is there.

The message it sends out to young women is that they should let men blackmail them, lock them up, and control their lives. Not the kind of idea we should be encouraging.



Get active!

Feminist Fightback in East London is fighting cuts in Children's Services — a big proportion of overall cuts in local services in many places. We want to make links with nursery workers and service users in Tower Hamlets, which faces £30 million cuts in Children's Services.

Children's Centres are going to be hit hard; at least 39 jobs in Sure Start Centres will be axed.

This is on top of many other cuts to children's services in the borough, including after school clubs, adventure playgrounds and education support services.

• feminist.fightback@googlemail.com

The campaign Action for ESOL [English for Speakers of Other Languages] held a national day of action on 24 March, the day that University and College Union members in FE and HE struck around the country.

The Government is cutting eligibility for free ESOL education to only a few categories of benefit claimant. For example, students claiming income support, disability allowance and housing benefit will now pay up to £1,200 a year for English classes.

As FE colleges implement cuts ESOL teaching is being particularly hard hit.

The day of action included a teach-in of 500 people and a march to Downing Street.

• <http://actionforesol.org>

Support Zara

Senkan

Sat 23 April

10am-1pm, Victoria station

RMT member Zara was dismissed from her job at the Original Tour bus company after she complained about sexual discrimination at work.

The RMT is suing the company for unfair dismissal. We will leaflet Original Tour customers to make them aware of this.

Socialist roots of international women's day

By Janine Booth

8 March each year is International Women's Day; celebrated across the globe.

International Women's Day has its roots in socialist and trade union action. By the beginning of the 20th century, the capitalist system had thrown millions of women into factories, domestic service and other work. Women workers, both unionised and un-unionised, organised industrial disputes to win better conditions.

Although women had become part of public life as workers, they were still excluded from public life as citizens — they did not have the vote. Women's suffrage movements grew across Britain, Europe, America and elsewhere.

It was from this storm of protest and action that International Women's Day was born.

1907

On 8 March, women demonstrated in New York,

demanding votes for women and an end to child labour and sweatshops.

1908

On the same day a year later, 15,000 women marched through New York demanding shorter hours, better pay, union rights and the vote, packing out Rutgers Square in Manhattan's Lower East Side.

1909

Women shirtwaist makers staged a 13-week strike in 1909, known as the "Rising of the 20,000". Their fight won better conditions, and gave confidence to American workers for several generations to come.

The Socialist Party of America declared 28 February 1909 the first National Woman's Day (NWD), and socialist women held marches and meetings across the country to demand political rights for working women.

1910

Clara Zetkin proposed to

the International Congress of Socialist Women that "women the world over set aside a particular day each year to remember women and their struggles." More than 100 women from 17 countries unanimously agreed.

1911

International Women's Day (IWD) was held on 19 March, with more than one million women and men attending IWD rallies in Austria, Denmark, Germany and Switzerland, demanding women's rights to work, vote, be trained, to hold public office and end discrimination.

1918

In the West, International Women's Day continued during the 1910s and 1920s, but then died away, only reviving with the new wave of feminism in the 1960s. 1960 was the 50th anniversary of International Women's Day, and 729 delegates from 73 countries met in a conference in Copenhagen. It agreed a

declaration of support for the political, economic and social rights of women.

As feminism grew in the early 1970s, IWD saw a demonstration of 5,000 women in London demanding childcare, equal opportunities and easier access to safe abortion.

The United Nations designated 1975 "International Women's Year", then, in 1977, passed Resolution 32/142 inviting each country to proclaim, in accordance with its historical and national traditions and customs, any day of the year as United Nations Day for Women's Rights and International Peace. It has steered IWD away from its radical past, co-opting it into the political mainstream.

There is now a vast array of non-political IWD events, respectable public presentations, celebrations of high-flying women, and events promoting women's health, leisure and achievement; they are a world away from the protests that first inspired the Day, and

which are still needed.

Millions of women still work in sweatshops and other jobs with low pay and poor conditions — as well as unpaid in the home. The majority of the world's 1.3 billion absolute poor are women; three-quarters of the world's 960 million illiterates are women. On average, women workers are paid between 30 and 40% less than men.

The rise of religious fundamentalism has seen women lose freedoms and rights, whether that be attacks on abortion rights in the USA's Bible Belt, or acid thrown in the faces of women who refuse to wear the veil in Muslim countries. There is not a country in the world where women enjoy full equality with men.

We should return to the original purpose of International Women's Day: fighting for working-class women's demands, and celebrating the contribution that women make to the struggle for human liberation.

Kollontai, the Bolsheviks and the war

Part 2 of Elaine Jones' 4-part history of the role of women workers and socialist activists in the Russian Revolution.

The Social Democrats — as Marxist socialists used to be known — had a policy of organising working class women.

Most Social Democratic parties stood for such things as maternity services as well as public housing and health. They argued that overthrowing capitalism would bring the liberation of women. But Alexandra Kollontai thought that the Russian Social Democrats were making little practical effort to draw in working women — who made up 20-30% of the working class and suffered the worst conditions.

In 1906 Kollontai travelled to Germany to attend meetings of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) who were organising impressive work amongst working class women. The SPD produced *Die Gleichheit*, a paper for women workers, which at its peak in 1913 had a circulation of 112,000. They sent out agitators to organise working class women.

The women's section of the SPD had 190,000 members in the trade unions, and 82,000 in the party itself. The women's section was necessary because joint organisations of men and women were illegal. But it was also built by determined political activists.

Clara Zetkin's approach was to fight for reforms for women — the vote, legal equality, maternity and health reform — as well as winning them over to socialism.

When Kollontai returned to St Petersburg she organised lectures and discussion groups amongst women. Her work was not hindered by the party but they did not help it either. In 1907 Zetkin called for the establishment of women's bureaus in each national party. The International approved but the Russian Social Democratic Party thought the idea too close to "bourgeois feminism" — women would be freed by revolution and it was more important to win the whole working class to socialism.

Kollontai agreed with those priorities. She was in favour of a separate organisation to help involve working class women in struggle but one that would not

make alliances with bourgeois feminists. She thought that if women's issues were ignored, women would not join class struggle. She began to develop her political ideas.

All socialists at the time used Frederick Engels' *The family, private property and the state* and August Bebel's *Women and Socialism* as their basis for thinking about "the Woman Question".

Engels had said the destruction of private property would remove the basis for male supremacy and the economic foundations of the family. Women would work as equals and the care and education of children would become a public matter. Private relationships would be based on "sex love".

Women and Socialism sketched out a socialist society where there would be public provision of health, pregnancy and childbirth institutions, and public education. Under socialism the family would continue but parents, free of economic worries, would have leisure time to devote to their children.

In *The social basis of the woman question* (1909) Kollontai argued that women must throw off the contemporary, obsolete, coercive form of family — the bourgeois family — in order to be free. But she attacked the idea of "free love". That was, said Kollontai, a luxury that working class women could not obtain under capitalism.

For instance, poorly paid working class women could not deal with childcare responsibility if they had to bring up their children alone. First, the economic situation had to change — there needed to be public provision of health and education and an end to exploitation at work.

Kollontai then introduced a radical and new idea about childrearing (one put into practice by socialist-Zionists in the kibbutz movement). Kollontai said bringing up children shouldn't be the job of an amateur; children should be educated by trained people who had a collective socialist outlook.

Kollontai believed that only under socialism could any woman have truly free relationships. Until men and women were "re-educated" by new social conditions men would treat women as possessions and women would subordinate

Alexandra Kollontai

themselves.

Kollontai thought that marriage destroyed individuality, particularly for women; married couples thought they possessed each other — they gave up their privacy.

But Kollontai also thought a new morality should develop before the revolution, particularly between socialists. Relations should be based on solidarity and equality. For Kollontai, developing this ideology was part of the class struggle. The "new woman" (a common feminist idea of the time) was constantly leaving men because she made demands they couldn't meet — she demanded to be free. She saw this new woman as both as a sign of a new morality (a reflection of changing social conditions) and something that would be fully realised under socialism.

RABOTNITSA
The mainstream feminist Women's Mutual Society organised a congress in 1908. Kollontai organised delegate elections from the textile workers and the trade union bureau to attend the event.

At the congress the workers' group had 45 out of 1,000 delegates, the rest were middle class professionals. The group argued that only class struggle could free women, and put resolutions calling for legal and political equality and social reform. On the last day the workers' group walked out. Despite such interventions Kollontai still believed the party as a whole (she was yet to join the left Bolshevik group) wasn't doing enough work among working-class women. Why was this?

At the 1912 Bolshevik conference only 13 out of 394 present were women. From 1898-1912 only five out of 69 central committee

members were women. Women's work was not considered a priority and there was a tendency to brand any women's work as feminism. But many of the Bolshevik women also took a different tack to Kollontai.

In many accounts Kollontai is depicted as gradually winning people over. I'm not sure that this is correct. There were often big disagreements between Kollontai and the Bolshevik women in which, in my opinion, Kollontai was wrong.

Women in the Bolshevik party — Nadezhda Krupskaya, Inessa Armand — developed their own ways of work among women, often in opposition to Kollontai and Zetkin. And they too were able to organise and agitate effectively.

Konkordia Samoilova organised an illegal meeting on International Women's Day in February 1913. Its subject was factory conditions, prostitution, peasant life and the 1905 revolution. After the meeting several women were arrested. Samoilova suggested a special paper for proletarian women was produced in response to letters they had received following the meeting and the arrests. It was called *Rabotnitsa*.

Many Bolshevik women were against involving Kollontai in the project when she was still in the Menshevik group. They insisted that broad decisions on content should ultimately reside with the central committee.

The editorial board consisted of three groups of women. In St. Petersburg the group included Anna Elizarova (Lenin's sister) and her associates; in Cracow, Krupskaya and Lilina Zinoviev; in Paris, Lyudmila Stal and Inessa Armand. Armand drew up the outline of contents — theoretical articles would be written by her and Stal. Krupskaya said some articles should be of a general nature and not just focused on women. There would be agitational articles and letters. *Rabotnitsa* was largely driven by Inessa Armand.

Amazingly, the authorities in St. Petersburg granted permission for publication of the paper.

They hoped to publish in time for International Women's Day 1914. However, the state raided the women's organisations in the run-up to the day and

key women were arrested.

But *Rabotnitsa* came out, largely due to the efforts of Elizarova who had evaded arrest. She managed to produce seven issues of the paper (print run 20,000, each 16 pages long). It was sold in factories for four or five kopeks a copy.

Armand wasn't happy with *Rabotnitsa*. It wasn't as theoretical as she wanted. It included letters and poetry. It had printed a Menshevik account of Women's Day. These disagreements were a reflection of political tensions between the émigré leadership and comrades in Russia.

When Krupskaya proved unable to bring the editorial board under the control of the foreign editors she stopped contributing. However, *Rabotnitsa* won many women workers over to the Bolsheviks; it broke down stereotypes about the "backwardness" of women workers; and, despite a lack of enthusiasm among male Bolsheviks, it broke down the idea that "women's work" was separatism or a feminist threat.

INESSA ARMAND
In most books Inessa Armand is treated in a derogatory way; she is called "Lenin's book carrier and Girl Friday". Yet she carried out important party work, and was one of the people who represented the party internationally.

Armand was nominated by the party central committee in late May/June 1914 to be the Bolshevik delegate to the International Women's Secretariat.

She was the Bolshevik representative in European conferences. She was relied on to talk to wavering Bolsheviks. She translated and delivered party pronouncements. On many occasions these assignments brought her into conflict with many of the leaders of European socialism.

She was an organiser. She was entrusted with the reorganisation of the Paris émigré Bolshevik section. She intervened with the Ukrainian Social Democrats. When the executive of the International Socialist Bureau (ISB) called a conference in Brussels on 16 July 1914 to bring together the two wings of Russian Social Democracy she was a key Bolshevik delegate.

Talk of unity — and considerable pressure to bring it about — was overtaken

by events.

The First World War broke out at the beginning of August. Inessa Armand fled to Bern in Switzerland. The Second International collapsed, as most socialists supported the defence of their "own" countries and got behind governments' war efforts. Later, anti-war socialist conferences were held.

On 26 March 1915 a women's conference was held in Bern. The Bolsheviks wanted the conference to put out a revolutionary call — "turn the imperialist war into a civil war" — and to condemn the leaders of the Second International.

Clara Zetkin wanted to involve centrists and pacifists and called the conference in the name of the International Women's Secretariat so that it would be an official meeting. Armand tried to organise the election of Bolshevik sympathisers to the international delegations.

On the day, 27 delegates from eight countries met and just five were Bolsheviks. Zetkin put a conciliatory motion; the Bolsheviks put a separate one saying the only way to guarantee peace is through revolution. Armand spoke for the Bolsheviks. Zetkin wanted her to withdraw the motion to present unity. Armand refused.

However, the Bolsheviks agreed to vote for Zetkin's motion if the Bolsheviks' motion was printed and recorded. Despite these efforts Clara Zetkin was dismissed from her post at *Die Gleichheit*. The German SPD leadership were supporting the war. Zetkin was arrested.

Despite its conciliatory tone, this was the first international conference of socialists to oppose the war. It was an important step towards building working class opposition to the war.

On 5 September 1915 the (anti-war) Zimmerwald Conference was held and the Bolsheviks' tough anti-war stance was pushed forward further.

Meanwhile, Armand was doing what she did best: organising and agitating. She was in France working in the Confédération Générale du Travail (CGT) and the French Section of the Workers' International (SFIO) for the anti-war position.

Women's Fightback

Women's Fightback is a bimonthly socialist women's paper produced by members and supporters of the Alliance for Workers' Liberty.

We believe women's oppression is rooted in class society, and can only be ended by overthrowing capitalism. At the same time, we do not tell women — or any oppressed group



— to wait for the revolution. As socialist feminists, we see our job as reorienting the labour movement towards a fight for women's rights, and the women's movement towards class struggle.

Without the abolition of class exploitation, there can be no end to women's oppression. Without a mass movement of organised, mobilised women fighting for liberation, there can be no socialist revolution. Neither is possible without the other.

Workers' Liberty women are active in the fight to transform

the labour movement, and in many different campaigns — from reproductive freedom to migrant rights to the struggle against cuts. If you're a socialist feminist, please consider joining us — and, in the meantime, write for and distribute Women's Fightback to help win the biggest possible audience for socialist feminist ideas.

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