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a
socialist woman
special

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

by Alexandra
Kollontai



This pamphlet was written in 1920 for Russian working class women by Alexandra Kollontai. This is its first translation into English to mark the 100th anniversary of Kollontai's birth. The translation is by Alix Holt.

INTRODUCTION

- Alix Holt

March 8th 1972 is the 52nd International Women's Day. But how many women in England are aware of this or know what this day stands for?

International Women's Day was first organised to draw more women into political activity. It was called "Working Women's Day" and aimed at making working class women more conscious of the undemocratic nature of our so-called democracies and at developing in them the consciousness that there was some way in which this society could be changed.

Women socialists in every European country started calling meetings, writing pamphlets and organising working women. In the years before 1910, international conferences were held in Stuttgart and Copenhagen where the common aims and methods of agitation of the different national movements could be worked out. These conferences were successful in integrating the fight for the vote for women, in opposing the middle-class suffragettes who saw the franchise and property rights as the end of the struggle and in maintaining the socialist perspective of the international women's movement.

During the First World War the international links of the working class movements broke, as workers everywhere, instead of fighting together against their governments, began fighting for their governments and against each other. The national and international working women's organisations collapsed.

Then in Russia, in 1917, the workers and peasants overthrew the old ruling class. In February the Tsar was forced to abdicate, and men committed to a constitutional, parliamentary type of government took over the running of the country. But they could not cope with the economic and social disintegration produced by the war, by peasant rebellion and urban unrest. The people wanted bread to eat, land to live by, an end to the fighting and they therefore welcomed the second revolution and the establishment of the Bolshevik government that promised them these things.

The new Russia was to be a socialist Russia, ninety per cent of the population would no longer have to sweat every day for long hours to pay for the carriages and country houses of the idle ten per cent. Everyone would now work and all would work for the collective, for the new society.

Times were hard. The country was in chaos. There was hunger. Communications had broken down, civil war was in progress and troops from almost every country in Europe were fighting on Russian soil in an attempt to defeat the new government. But the revolution had done away with the old system of capitalism. From now on the factories and the land would be owned by the people. And so there was great hope about the future, about the new society that would be able to offer all people a better life. The new society had a lot to offer women. Women would be for the first time equal. They would be relieved of all the domestic tasks which had previously chained them to the home. Public canteens, laundries and other services would be set up. And they would no longer be burdened by all the cares of bringing up

children since creches, kindergartens, schools and other facilities were to be established.

Every woman would have the opportunity of helping create the new life. She would be a part of the collective, working to establish a public economy and she would take part in all social decision making and all social organisation. Equality would no longer be just a legal phrase - it would be a description of reality.

But women had never taken part in public life and it was not easy to educate them into taking the opportunities that the revolution offered. The new government set up special organisations in every town and village to do political work amongst women. The pamphlet "International Women's Day" was written in 1920 by Alexandra Kollontai as part of a campaign to teach women about the history of the working class movement and the struggle for women's equality, about the gains of 1917, how they must organise and fight to establish the new society which would guarantee their liberation.

Alexandra Kollontai was the Minister of Social Welfare in the first Bolshevik government, and was the only woman to hold such a post. Born in 1872 into a wealthy family and brought up in comfort and seclusion, Kollontai nevertheless became involved in the political questions of the time. At the age of 26 she had left her husband and gone to Switzerland to receive the university education still denied to women in Russia. Returning to St. Petersburg she took part in revolutionary activities. Threatened with arrest in 1909, she was forced to leave for Europe where she remained until March 1917.

Involved both in the international women's movement and in the organisation of working women in Russia, Kollontai had always been concerned with analysing the position of women under capitalism, their relationship to the revolutionary movement and the struggle for socialism. The oppression of women is a complex and many sided oppression, and Kollontai was therefore involved in discussing the family, the education of children, maternity and personal relationships. She shows how these questions are fundamentally connected with the total organisation of society, how an institution like the family adapts and changes to suit the needs of society.

The root of women's subordinate position lies in the economic organisation of society and thus although the liberation of women is an essential part of the fight for socialism it is a part of this general struggle.

The working class is for Kollontai the revolutionary class, the class that will be instrumental in bringing about a socialist society, and she thus devotes her energies to propaganda and organisation among working women. Peasant women, working women and the wives of workers are overburdened by their household cares and looking after their children, but they can only fight their position in the homes from a position outside the home. It is at their place of work that women come together and can be organised, and it is here that the fight for better conditions both in the home and in the factory will be fought for.

It is true that Kollontai later failed to carry on the fight for her ideas, and this a subject for another article. We do not think that this invalidates the ideas themselves or the importance of her earlier work.

The lessons that we can learn from the Soviet experience are many. In February 1917 the first large demonstration leading to the overthrow of the Tsar was on Working Women's Day (the old Russian calendar causes the discrepancy in dates) when the women demonstrated for the return of their men from the war and demanded bread for their children. This was the first of many strikes and demonstrations which led to the seizure of power in October 1917. And it was then that a start could be made on changing the lines of the working men and women of the new Soviet State.

And are conditions in 1971 Britain basically very different from pre revolutionary Russia? We have a society where power is vested in the hands of a few - (whatever the talk about a pluralistic society. Ask the one or two million unemployed in Britain how much power they have?) The workers are still exploited, their labour power is being used to provide profits for the few; poverty is still rife, opportunities for men and women are strangled from birth; housing is inadequate; over half the population - those who are women - are still burdened with the responsibilities of the home as well as being super exploited at work. These are the same women whose work is usually semi-skilled or unskilled, who are paid less than the men, and who still shoulder all the responsibilities for the children and the care of her husband.

Obviously for us to change this society, women as well as men must play a part in the change; they must participate in trade unions and political organisations.

Kollontai, in 1920, would probably have thought that by now life would be organised in such a way that a "Working Women's Day" would have no point.

But working women have yet to win this new life. They have yet to win a world where society relieves the working woman of material cares and leaves her time and strength to take part in the life of the community.

Working women must fight at their place of work for better conditions in the factory or office and for better conditions in the home.

The 6 million un-unionised women workers must join unions. The 2 million women already in unions must organise. Working women must organise to fight for equal pay, for equal work -- for workers' control over wages and conditions. Working women must organise to fight for the setting up of creches and other public facilities.

Working women must take an active part in the struggle of the working class against rent increases and rising prices.

If we read about "International Women's Day" in 1920 and consider our situation today we see more clearly what working women have got to fight for and how they must get together to start fighting.

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INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

Alexandra Kollontai

A MILITANT CELEBRATION

Women's Day or Working Women's Day is a day of international solidarity and a day for reviewing the strength and the organisation of proletarian women.

But this is not a special day for women alone. The 8th of March is a historic and memorable day for the workers and peasants, for all the Russian workers and for the workers of the whole world. In 1917, on this day the great February revolution broke out. It was the working women of Petersburg who began this revolution; it was they who first decided to raise the banner of opposition against the tsar and his associates. And so Working Women's Day is a double celebration for us.

But if this is a general holiday for all of the proletariat, why do we call it "Women's Day"? Why then do we hold special celebrations and meetings aimed above all at the women workers and the peasant women? Doesn't this jeopardise the unity and solidarity of the working class? To answer these questions we have to look back and see how Women's Day came about and for what purpose it was organised.

HOW AND WHY WAS WOMEN'S DAY ORGANISED?

Not very long ago, in fact about ten years ago, the question of women's equality, and the question of whether women could take part in government alongside men was being hotly debated. The working class in all capitalist countries struggled for the rights of working women: the bourgeoisie did not want to accept these rights. It was not in the interest of the bourgeoisie to strengthen the voice of the working class in parliament, and in every country they hindered the passing of laws that gave the vote to working women. Socialists in North America insisted on their demands for the vote for women with particular persistence. On the 28th of February 1907, the women socialists of the U.S.A. organised huge demonstrations and meetings all over the country, demanding political rights for working women. This was the first "Women's Day". The initiative in organising a women's day thus belongs to the working women of America. In 1910 at the second International Conference of Socialist Working Women, Clara Zetkin brought forward the question of organising an International Working Women's Day. The Conference decided that every year, in every country, they should celebrate on the same day a Women's Day under the slogan "The vote for women will unite our strength in the struggle for socialism". During those years the question of making parliament more democratic, i.e. of widening the franchise and of extending the vote to women was a vital issue. Even before the First World War, the workers had the right to vote in all bourgeois countries except Russia. Only women, along with the insane, remained without these rights. Yet, at the same time, the harsh reality of capitalism demanded the participation of women in the country's economy. Every year there was an increase in the number of women who had to work in the factories and workshops, or as servants or charwomen. Women worked alongside men and the wealth of the country was created by their hands. But women remained without the vote. But in the last years before the war the rise in prices forced even the most peaceful housewife to take an interest in questions of

politics and to protest loudly against the bourgeoisie's economy of plunder. "Housewives' uprisings" became increasingly frequent, flaring up at different times in Austria, England, France and Germany. The working women understood that it wasn't enough to break up the stalls at the market or threaten the odd merchant: they understood that such action doesn't bring down the cost of living. You have to change the politics of the government. And to achieve this, the working class has to see that the franchise is widened. It was decided to have a Women's Day in every country as a form of struggle in getting working women to vote. This day was to be a day of international solidarity in the fight for common objectives and a day for reviewing the organised strength of working woman under the banner of socialism.

THE FIRST INTERNATIONAL DAY

The decision taken at the second International Conference of Socialist Women was not left on paper. It was decided to hold the first International Women's Day on the 19th of March 1911. This date was not chosen at random. Our German comrades picked this day because of its historic importance for the German proletariat. On the 19th of March in the year of the 1848 revolution the Prussian king recognised for the first time the strength of the armed people and gave way before the threat of a proletarian uprising. Among the many promises he made, which he later failed to keep, was the introduction of the vote for women. After January of 1911 efforts were made in Germany and Austria to prepare for Women's Day. They made known the plans for a demonstration both by word of mouth and in the press. During the week before Women's Day two journals appeared: "The Vote for Women" in Germany and "Women's Day" in Austria.

The various articles devoted to Women's Day - "Women and Parliament", "The Working Woman & Municipal Affairs", "What has a housewife got to do with politics?" etc - analysed thoroughly the question of the equality of women in the government and in society. All the articles emphasised the same point: that it was absolutely necessary to make parliament more democratic by extending the franchise to women. The first International Women's day took place in 1911. Its success exceeded all expectation. Germany and Austria on Working Women's day was one seething trembling sea of women. Meetings were organised everywhere - in the small towns and even in villages. Halls were packed so full that they had to ask workers to give up their places to the women. This was certainly the first show of militancy by the working women. Men stayed at home with the children for a change, and their wives, the captive housewives, went to meetings. In Austria there was conflict with the police. During the largest street demonstration in which 30,000 were taking part, the police decided to remove the demonstrators' banners: the women workers made a stand. In the scuffle that followed, bloodshed was averted only with the help of the socialist deputies of parliament. In 1913 International Women's Day was transferred to the 8th of March. This date has remained the working women's day of militancy.

IS WOMEN'S DAY NECESSARY?

Women's Day in Europe and in America had amazing results. It's true that not a single bourgeois parliament thought of making concessions to the workers or of responding to the women's demands. For at that time the bourgeoisie was not threatened

by a socialist revolution. But Women's Day did achieve something. It turned out above-all to be an excellent method of agitation amongst the less political of our proletarian sisters. They could not help but turn their attention to the meetings, demonstrations, posters, pamphlets and newspapers that were devoted to Working Women's day. Even the politically backward working women thought to herself: "This is our day, the festival for working women", and she hurried to the meetings and demonstrations. After each Working Women's Day more women joined the socialist parties and the trade unions grew. Organisation improved and political consciousness developed.

Women's Day served yet another function, it strengthened the international solidarity of the workers. The parties of different countries usually exchange speakers for this occasion: German comrades go to England, English comrades go to Holland, etc. The international cohesion of the working women has become strong and firm and this means that the fighting strength of the proletariat as a whole has grown. These are the results of the working women's day of militancy. These results show that those who talk as if it's not worth holding a separate militant Women's Day are mistaken. The experience of these many years teaches something different. The day of working women's militancy helps increase the consciousness and organisation of proletarian women. And this means that its contribution is essential to the success of those fighting for a better future for the working class.

WOMEN WORKERS DAY IN RUSSIA

The Russian working women first took part in "Working Women's Day" in 1913. This was a time of reaction when tsarism held the workers and peasants in its vice-like grip. There could be no thought of celebrating "Working Women's Day" by open demonstration. But the organised working women were able to mark their international day. Both the legal newspapers of the working class - the Bolsheviks' Pravda and the Menshevik Iskra - carried articles about International Women's Day: they carried special articles, portraits of some of those fighting and taking part in the working women's movement, and greetings from foreign comrades such as Bebel and Zetkin. In those bleak years meetings were forbidden. But in Petrograd, at the Kalashaikovsky Exchange, those women workers who belonged to the Party organised a "Morning Teaching on the Woman Question". Entrance was 5 kopecks. This was an illegal meeting but the hall was absolutely packed. Members of the Party spoke. But this animated "closed" meeting had hardly finished when the police, alarmed at such proceedings, intervened and arrested many of the speakers. It was of great significance for the workers of the world that the women of Russia, who lived under tsarist repression, should join in and somehow manage to acknowledge with actions International Women's Day. This was a welcome sign that Russia was waking up and that the tsarist prisons and gallows were powerless to kill the workers' spirit of struggle and protest.

In 1914, "Women Workers' Day in Russia was better organised. Both the workers' newspapers concerned themselves with the celebration. Our comrades put a lot of effort into the preparation of Russia's "Women Workers' Day". Because of police intervention, they didn't manage to organise a demonstration.

Those involved in the planning of the "Women Workers' Day" found themselves in tsarist prisons, and many were later sent to the cold North. For the slogan of "struggle for the working woman's vote" has naturally become in Russia an open call for the overthrow of the tsarist autocracy.

WOMEN WORKER'S DAY DURING THE IMPERIALIST WAR

The first World War broke out. The working class in every country was covered with the blood of war. In 1915 and 1916 "Working Women's Day" abroad was a feeble affair - left wing socialist women who shared the views of the Russian Bolshevik party tried to turn March 8th into a demonstration of working women against the war. But those socialist party traitors in Germany and in other countries would not allow the socialist women to organise gatherings, and the socialist women were refused passports to go to neutral countries where the working women wanted to hold international meetings and to show that in spite of the desires of the bourgeoisie, the spirit of workers' solidarity lived on.

In 1915 it was only in Norway that they managed to organise an International demonstration on women's day; representatives from Russia and neutral countries attended. There could be no thought of organising a Women's Day in Russia, for here the power of the tsarism and the military machine was unbridled.

But then came the great year of 1917. Hunger, cold and the trials of war broke the patience of the women workers and the peasant women of Russia. In 1917, on the 8th of March (23rd February) on Working Women's Day, they came boldly out into the streets of Petrograd. The women - some were workers, some the wives of soldiers - demanded "Bread for our children" and "The return of our husbands from the trenches". At this decisive time the protest of the working women posed such a threat that even the tsarist security forces did not dare take the usual measures against the "rebels" but looked on in confusion at the stormy sea of the people's anger.

The 1917 Working Women's Day has become memorable in history. On this day the Russian women raised the torch of proletarian revolution and set the world on fire. The February revolution marks its beginnings from this day.

OUR CALL TO BATTLE

"Working Women's Day" was first organised ten years ago in the campaign as part of the campaign for the political equality of women and the struggle for socialism. This aim has been achieved by the working class women in Russia. In the Soviet Republic the working women and peasants don't need to fight for the franchise and for their civil rights. They have already won these rights. The Russian workers and the peasants women are equal citizens - in their hands is a powerful weapon to make the struggle for a better life easier - the right to vote, to take part in the Soviets and in all collective organisations.

But rights alone are not enough. We have to learn to make use of them. The right to vote is a weapon which we have to learn to master for our own benefit, and for the good of the

workers' republic. In the two years of Soviet power, life itself has not been absolutely changed. We are only in the process of struggling for communism and we are surrounded by the world we have inherited from the dark and repressive past. The shackles of the family, of housework, of prostitution, still weigh heavy upon the working woman. Working women and peasant women can only rid themselves of this situation and achieve equality in life itself, and not just in law, if they put all their energies into making Soviet Russia a truly communist society.

And to quicken this coming, we have first to put right Russia's shattered economy. We must consider the solving of our two immediate tasks - the creation of a well organised and politically conscious labour force and the re-establishment of transport. If our army of labour works well we shall soon have steam engines once more; the railways will begin to function. This means that the working men and women will get the bread, firewood and raw materials they desperately need.

Getting transport back to normal will speed up the victory of communism. And with the victory of communism will come the complete and fundamental equality of women. This is why the message of "Working Women's Day" must this year be: "Working women, peasant women. Mothers, wives and sisters. All efforts to helping the workers and comrades in overcoming the chaos of the railways and re-establishing transport. Everyone into the struggle for bread and firewood and raw materials."

Last year the slogan of the Day of Women Workers was: "All to the victory of the Red Front". Now we call working women to rally their strength on a new bloodless front - the labour front! The Red Army defeated the external enemy because it was organised, disciplined and ready for self-sacrifice. With organisation, hardwork, self-discipline and self-sacrifice, the workers' republic will overcome the internal foe - the dislocation transport and the economy, hunger, cold and disease. "Everyone to the victory on the bloodless labour front! Everyone to this victory!"

THE NEW TASKS OF "WORKING WOMEN'S DAY"

The October revolution gave women equality with men as far as civil rights are concerned. The woman of the Russian proletariat, who was not so very long ago the most unfortunate and oppressed, is now in the Soviet Republic able to show with pride to comrades in other countries the path to political equality, the complete liberation of women through the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat and soviet power. The situation is very different in the capitalist countries where women are still over-worked and underprivileged. In those countries the voice of the working women is weak and lifeless. It is true that in various countries - in Norway, Australia, Finland and in some of the states of North America - women had won civil rights even before the war.

In Germany, after the Kaiser had been thrown out and a bourgeois republic established, headed by the "compromisers", thirty six women entered parliament - but not a single communist!

In 1919, in England a woman was, for the first time elected a Member of Parliament. But who was she? A "lady". That means a landowner, an aristocrat.

In France, too, the question has been coming up lately of extending the franchise to women.

But what use are these rights to working women in the framework of bourgeois parliaments? While the power is in the hands of the capitalists and property owners, no political rights will save the working women from the traditional position of slavery in the home and in society. The French bourgeoisie are ready to throw another sop to the working class, in the face of the growing influence of Bolshevik ideas amongst the proletariat: they are prepared to give women the vote.

Mr. Bourgeois, Sir - It is too late!

After the experience of the Russian October Revolution it is clear to every working woman in France, in England and in other countries that only the dictatorship of the working class, only the power of the Soviets can guarantee complete and absolute equality, only the ultimate victory of communism will tear down the century-old chains of repression and lack of rights. If the task of International "Working Women's Day" was earlier, in the face of the supremacy of the bourgeois parliaments, to fight for the right of women to vote, the working class now has a new task: to organise working women around the fighting slogans of the Third International. Instead of demanding to take part in the working of the bourgeois parliament, listen to the call from Russia -

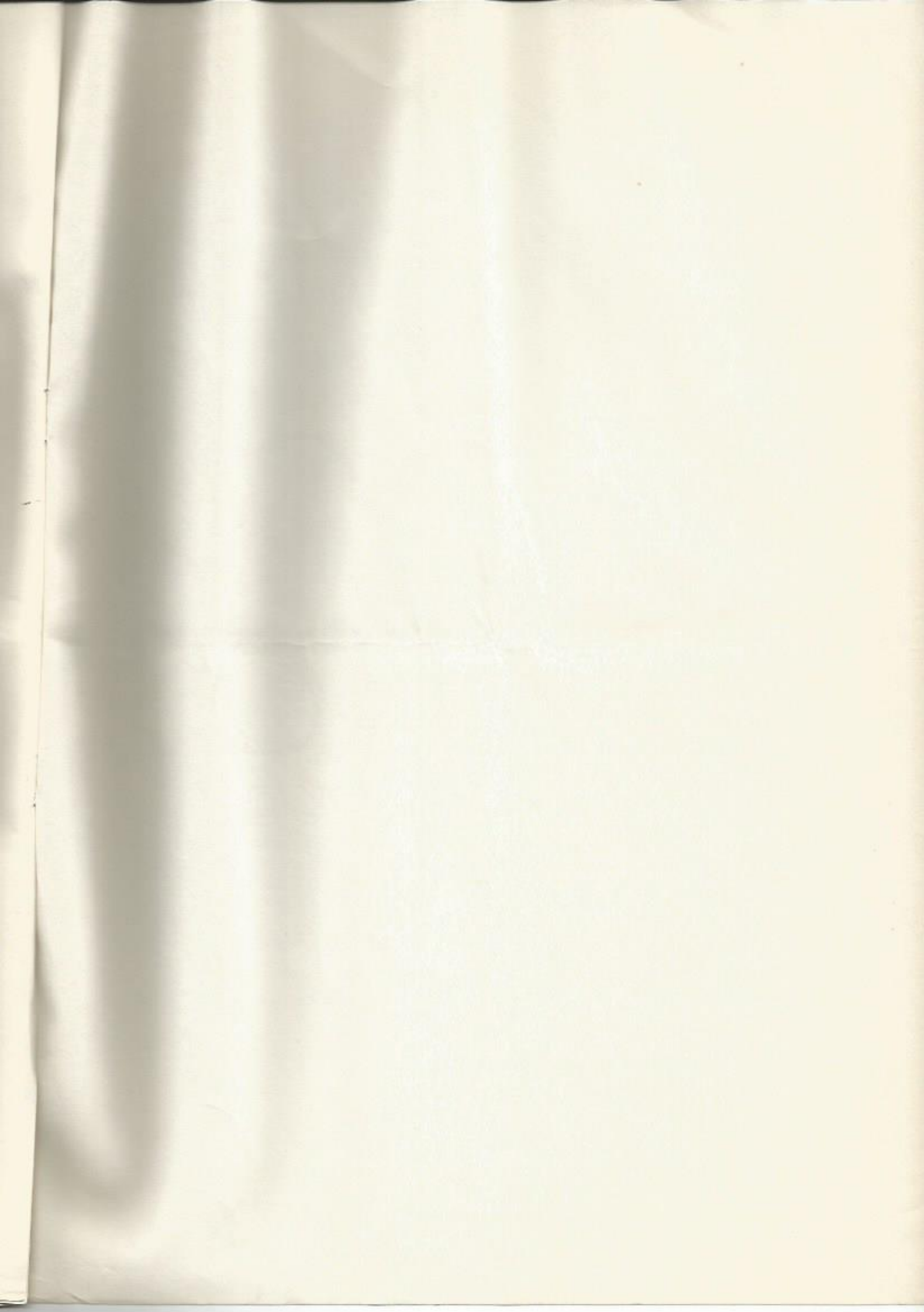
"Working women of all countries! Organise a united proletarian front in the struggle against those who are plundering the world! Down with the parliamentarianism of the bourgeoisie! We welcome soviet power! Away with the inequalities suffered by the working men and women! We will fight with the workers for the triumph of world communism!"

This call was first heard amidst the trials of a new order, in the battles of the civil war it will be heard by and it will strike a chord in the hearts of working women of other countries. The working women will listen and believe this call to be right. Until recently they thought it was worth getting the vote and they thought that if they managed to send a few representatives to parliament, their lives would be easier and the oppression of capitalism more bearable. Now they know otherwise.

Only the overthrow of capitalism and the establishment of Soviet Power will save them from the world of suffering, humiliations and inequality that makes the life of the working woman in capitalist countries so hard. The "Working Women's Day" turns from a day of struggle for the franchise into an international day of struggle for the full and absolute liberation of women, which means a struggle for the victory of the Soviets and for communism!

DOWN WITH THE WORLD OF PROPERTY AND THE POWER OF THE CAPITAL!
AWAY WITH THE INEQUALITY, LACK OF RIGHTS AND THE OPPRESSION OF
WOMEN - THE LEGACY OF THE BOURGEOIS WORLD!

FORWARD TO THE INTERNATIONAL UNITY OF WORKING WOMEN AND
WORKERS IN THE STRUGGLE FOR THE DICTATORSHIP OF THE
PROLETARIAT - THE PROLETARIAT OF BOTH SEXES!



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