

8th of March

International woman's day: in search for the lost memory

SOF – Sempreviva Organização Feminista¹

The main historical reference of the origins of the International woman's day is the second international socialist women's conference in 1910, in Copenhagen, Denmark, when Clara Zetkin proposed a resolution to officially create an international woman's day. In the resolution there is no allusion to the 8th March. Clara only mentioned the idea of following the example of the American socialist women. It is sure that it was from this moment on that the commemorations began to be of international character, expanding through Europe, motivated by the organisation and initiative of socialist women.

This and other historical sources intrigued the researcher Renée Coté to an extent that she published, in 1984 in Canada, her exciting research searching for the lost link(s) from the history of the International Woman's Day.

Renée, as part of her research, rediscovered the history of the American socialist feminists who tried to retrieve – from the whirlwind of history of the workers struggles during the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th century – the intense participation of women workers, and to make visible their demonstrations, their strikes, their capacity for autonomous organisation of struggles, highlighting the fight for the women's right to vote, in other words, universal suffrage. Using this rediscovery as a base, she hypothesises about why these historical records have been overlooked or why they have been lost with time.

What is clear, from Coté's research, is that the reference to an 8th March, or an American women workers strike, to a women's demonstration or to a women's day is not registered in any of the sources researched during that period, mainly in the newspapers and socialist press of the day.

There were strikes and repressions of workers in the period from the late 19th century to 1908, but none of those events is related to the death of women in New York, which is supposed to have given rise to women's day. Coté's conclusion from this research is that there was no heroic strike, be it in 1857 or in 1908, but a heroic feminism that struggled hard to strengthen itself between American woman workers. The search for the 8th March retraced the American women socialists' struggle for an autonomous existence.

The sources found, reveal the following:

The first "Woman's Day" was held on the 3rd May 1908, in Chicago, presided by Lorine S. Brown, documented by the monthly newspaper "The Socialist Woman". The commemoration was held in Garrick Theater, with the participation of 1500 women that "applauded the demands for economical and political equality of women, on the day dedicated to the female workers' causes." This day was dedicated to the female workers' causes, denouncing the exploitation and oppression of women, but defending, principally, the female vote. Equality between men and women, women's autonomy, and, consequently, the women's vote, was defended, inside and outside of the party.

In 1909, Woman's Day was an official activity of the socialist party and was organised by the women's national committee, celebrated on the 28th February. The press at the time talked of a "woman suffrage meeting", for the voting of women, in New York.

¹ Translation: Maria João Dornelas

Coté found that the American socialists suggested the last Sunday of February as Women's Day, but in the beginning, it ended up being celebrated on several different dates. Growing numbers of women workers adhered to the Day, including strikers, and women's participation continued to increase.

The newspapers mention New York's International Woman's Day the 27th February 1910, in Carnegie Hall, with 3.000 women, where the principal associations in favour of woman's vote gathered. This meeting was organised by socialist women but non-socialist women participated as well.

It is registered that there was a long strike of New York's shirtwaist makers that lasted from November 1909 to February 1910, in which 80% of the strikers were women. The strike ended 12 days before Woman's Day. This was the first woman's strike of great amplitude, denouncing the conditions of life and work of these women, and demonstrating the courage of these tailors, receiving mass support. Many of these workers participated in Woman's Day and enlarged the struggle for the right to vote (conquered in 1920 in all states in the USA).

Clara Zetkin, a German socialist, proposed that the Woman's Day or Women's Day become "a special day, a yearly celebration of women, following the example of our American sisters." Zetkin also suggests, in a newspaper article in the German magazine *Die Gleichheit*, of the 28th August 1910, that the main theme should be the struggle for women's right to vote.

In 1911, International Women's Day was celebrated by German women on the 19th of March, and by Swedish women together with the 1st of May, etc. In short, it was celebrated on different days.

In 1913, in Russia, under the Czarism regime, the first International Day of Women Workers for the right to vote was held. The Russian women workers participated in this meeting, in Petrograd, and were repressed. In 1914, all the organisers of the International Woman's Day in Russia were arrested, which made commemoration of the day impossible.

In 1914, the International woman's day in Germany was dedicated to women's right to vote. And it was celebrated for the first time on the 8th March, as far as we can understand, due to the convenience of the date that year.

The European Socialists coordinated the celebrations for the right to vote, connecting it to women's political emancipation, but the date was decided in each country, but in this continent during the war years, International Woman's Day was not given so much attention.

Another interesting reference, that indicates the origins of the 8th March as International Woman's Day, is the link between this date and the active participation of Russian women workers in actions that led to the Russian Revolution of 1917. A political action of Russian women workers on the 8th March – according to the Gregorian calendar – or the 23rd February – according to the Russian calendar – precipitated the beginning of the revolutionary actions that brought victory to the Russian revolution.

Alexandra Kolontai, a feminist leader of the socialist revolution, wrote about the fact and about the 8th March but, curiously, it disappeared from the history of the event. She wrote, "The Women Workers' Day on the 8th March 1917 was a memorable day in history. The revolution of February had just begun." The fact is also mentioned by Trotsky, leader of the revolution, in the *History of Russian Revolution*. In the text it is

clear that the women began the general strike, going bravely out into the streets of Petrograd, on International Woman's Day, against hunger, war and czarism. Trotsky wrote, "23 February (8th March) was International Woman's Day and meetings and actions were foreseen. But we did not imagine that this 'Women's Day' would inaugurate the revolution. Revolutionary actions were foreseen but without date. But in morning, despite the orders to the contrary, textile workers left their work in several factories and sent delegates to ask for support of the strike... which led to mass strike... all went out into the streets."

We can therefore see that the revolution began as a consequence of popular organisation that overcame the opposition of the party leaders. The initiative came from the most exploited and oppressed women workers: the textile women workers. The number of strikers was around 9.000, the majority women. From these reports, we understand that Women's Day was the victor, was massive, but without victims.

Renée Coté found 1921 documents of the Communist Women's International Conference where "a Bulgarian comrade proposes the 8th March as the official date for International woman's day, in remembrance of the Russian women's initiative."

After 1922, International woman's day is officially celebrated on the 8th March.

This history got lost in the official history records of both the socialist movement and history of the period. It is part of the historical and political past of women and of feminist movement of socialist origin in the beginning of the century.

Some European feminists in the 70s, unable to find the concrete reference to the textile workers in a fire in 1857, in New York, considered it a mythical fact. But this hypothesis was discarded due to the sheer number of facts and events linking the origins of International Woman's Day to left-wing American women.

Several hypotheses have been raised about the 8th March and missing links, in the search for deeper understanding.

It is a fact that in New York, USA, the textile workers had denounced their conditions of life and work and were also going on strike. This moment of women workers' organisation was part of a bigger historical process of social transformation that made it possible for women to fight for their rights, for equality and autonomy, participating in the social and political context that motivated the creation of an International Woman's Day that represented women's struggles, conquests and the need for organisation. It is therefore necessary to connect the threads of histories in this period together.

To this end, there is a report that needs to have its sources checked, synthesised by Gladys Gassen (in a text for FETAG² rural workers), indicating that, in March 1911, 18 days after woman's day and not in 1857, "in a badly ventilated textile factory that occupied the last three floors of a 10-story building of the Triangle Shirtwaist Company, NY, a fire started which involved 500 women – young women, Jewish women and Italian immigrants – that were working under precarious conditions, with the floor covered with materials and inflammable waste everywhere, no emergency exits, no fire hoses... To "prevent the interruption of work" the company had locked the door with a key. When the firemen were finally able to reach the floors where the women were the women were, 147 women had already died, carbonised or crushed on the pavement, where they had thrown themselves in desperation. After this tragedy, a Factory

² FETAG = Federation of Workers in Agriculture, Brazil

Investigation Committee was created in New York, a committee that had been requested 50 years previously. This is how the history of health and life protection laws began. The trade union leader Rosa Schiederman organised the presence of 12.000 women at the funeral of the women factory workers to express their sorrow and loss and to declare solidarity with all women workers.”

So, even though it is necessary to continue the search for lost memories, what is certain is that a whole cycle of struggle, in a era of great social transformation until the first decades of XX century, made International Woman's Day the symbol of women's active participation in the struggle for changes in their lives and in society.

We therefore celebrate on a yearly basis, as our ancestors did, our initiatives and conquests, evaluating our struggles and updating our agenda of struggles for the equality between men and women and for a world where all can live with dignity.

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