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International Women's Day founder Clara Zetkin on fascism, a lesson for today

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On many holidays recognizing people's struggles and their leaders — for example, the civil rights movement and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. — the present-day celebrations are both sweet and sour.

The only reason for formal recognition is that protests and struggle made it so — and this is a victory. But the other, “give it the side-eye” part is that the actual history of how they originated is covered up in pink ribbons.

The blood, sweat and tears that were shed have been washed away.

International Women's Day is like that. So much has been done to sterilize it, package it, market it, capitalism-it (my made up word) — foremost in the capitalist

West, of which the U.S. is the capital.

But the beating heart behind all of the fancy images and representations is still strong, red and has the potential to change the world. Its red tail pokes out from under all of the corporate debris.

The courage of the Black women workers at Amazon's Bessemer, Ala., warehouse standing up to Jeff Bezos, one of the richest men in the world — Indigenous women resisting gender violence, murder and plunderous oil pipelines — immigrant/migrant women fighting for their survival — teachers and nurses resisting COVID-19 — are the continuing heartbeat of International Women's Day.

So too are the women in Haiti taking to the streets despite rightwing violence; the women in India resisting Modi and fighting for the rights of poor farmers; and the women of Brazil, Argentina, Ireland and Poland fighting for control of their bodies — they are its heartbeat.

And no amount of praise can be spared for the women of Cuba, China, Zimbabwe, Iran, North Korea, Yemen and so many countries' women who are resisting sanctions and U.S. imperialism.

After all, International Women's Day was founded on the idea of international solidarity of working and poor women around the globe, and recognized first by the world socialist movement on March 19, 1911.

International Women's Day is 110 years old

[Clara Zetkin](#) was its original heartbeat, and she definitely had a red heart.

While advances in human history are never the product of one person or leader, but rather the result of social and material conditions that compel the intervention of masses of people, leaders and their organizations are an indispensable product of

that process.

They can't be separated from these earthquakes, placed above or below it, but rather play an indispensable role in guaranteeing its success. Intense struggle, in the form of huge strikes, protests in the streets, sit-downs at the workplace, occupations and ultimately insurrections and uprisings, are the engine of change.

In the case of International Women's Day, you could call Clara Zetkin the tireless driver of that engine.

During this period, women in Europe and other parts of the world were emerging from feudalism and slave-like conditions, where they were subjugated to sexual abuse, isolated in their homes and villages as serfs and peasants; only to be forced into a new kind of slavery, toiling alongside their children in the brutal sweatshops of capitalism.

In these new conditions, revolutionary socialist and communist women agitated and organized women workers to resist even when this meant doing so under illegal conditions, subjecting them to jail and exile.

The First World War compounded suffering in unimaginable ways. It brought death and starvation, but it also brought resistance, especially by women.

While the declaration of International Women's Day was made in Europe, Zetkin's aim as a revolutionary socialist and communist was that it would be international in scope, uniting women across all boundaries.

Inspiration from New York City

One of the earliest of women's protests that helped fuel the movement took place in the United States on March 8, 1908. Thousands of women garment workers, mainly immigrants, took to the streets demanding their rights.

This was followed a year later with the 1909 “Uprising of the 20,000,” also called the New York shirtwaist strike, a three-month garment workers’ strike.

Women kick off a revolution

But the unforgettable turning point that sealed the deal was when the women of Russia touched off a revolution.

On March 8, 1917, striking women textile workers joined other women attacking bakeries over high bread prices in Petrograd, Russia. They implored soldiers to put down their rifles.

Some 90,000 protesters took to the streets demanding “peace, land and bread.”

This was the opening salvo that toppled Russia’s hated czar and in less than a year, the workers, peasants and the poor led by the Bolshevik Party took power in November 1917.

While encircled and under attack by the imperialist powers, they formed the first socialist workers’ state. One of the very first things the new Soviet revolution did was codify women’s equality.

Zetkin the theoretician, organizer and doer

While Clara Zetkin dedicated much of her time and effort to the cause of working class women, she was simultaneously [a thinker and writer](#), what we call a theoretician, and as a revolutionary, a doer, organizer and participant.

Sometimes there were painful splits and conflict. Zetkin left the Socialist Party of Germany in 1916 because of its imperialist pro-war position and, along with Rosa Luxemburg, helped pave the way for the founding of the Communist Party of Germany.

She was jailed repeatedly for opposing World War I. Remarkably, [Lenin met with her](#) to strategize on the question of women.

Another part of Clara Zetkin's story — fighting racism

Zetkin was fiercely opposed to Jim Crow and lynching in the U.S. South.

She played a major role in building international support for the Scottsboro Case (1932) of nine Black teenagers falsely accused of raping two white women. They were found guilty and Alabama sought the death penalty for 8 members (the ninth member was only 12 years old). While they were eventually freed, it took years before the teenagers were released.

You can find Zetkin's call, "Save the Scottsboro Black Youth," in ["Clara Zetkin: Selected Writings"](#) edited by Philip Foner with a foreword by Angela Davis.

Zetkin and right-wing putsch at U.S. Capitol

As we continue to discuss the January 6, 2021, events at the U.S. Capitol, we can evaluate and learn from Clara Zetkin.

Zetkin understood the causes of fascism, connecting it to the decay of capitalism, urging socialist and working class unity. Rather than poorly summarize it for you, you should read and study Zetkin's report given on June 20, 1923, to the Communist International: ["The Struggle Against Fascism."](#)

Zetkin's writings, presentations and polemics were not abstract. She did not have the luxury of looking back but rather had to write in the middle of the maelstrom. This makes her contributions sharp and even more remarkable.

At the age of 75, gravely ill and nearly blind, she spoke for an hour in the German Parliament (Reichstag) on August 30, 1932, as Nazis yelled death threats at her.

When Hitler came to power, Zetkin was forced into exile and lived her last days in the Soviet Union. She was 76 when she died on June 20, 1933.

Clara Zetkin lived an amazing life, filled with hardship and struggle. She endured the murder of her close friends and comrades Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, but she also witnessed the birth of the Soviet Union and saw genuine advancements for women.

This real history cannot be shoveled underground.

Zetkin's red heart will remain with us.

