

# In Honour of International Women's Day

Susan Pashkoff discusses the origins of International Women's Day. This article was originally published by [International Viewpoint](#).

The purpose of this piece to highlight the first wave of feminism and to provide some historical context to the creation of International Working Women's Day in the the period of the first and second decades of the 20th century. While International Women's Day is still celebrated around the world, it is only recently that its socialist roots are being reinvigorated due to a new wave of women's strikes and struggles over violence against women, the struggle for reproductive justice and women's bodily autonomy and the issues surrounding both the economic exploitation of women and the specific conjunction of oppressions that women face daily due to racism, disablism, sexism (and misogyny) and class.

One would think that in this day and age the struggle over women's reproductive rights would have stopped being a struggle; alas that is not true. While both Ireland and North Ireland now allow for legal (and hence safe) abortion, that is not the case throughout Europe as abortion is illegal in Malta, Andorra, Vatican City, San Marino and Lichtenstein. In Latin America, abortion is legal in Uruguay, Cuba, Guyana and now Argentina. Many countries around the world still ban abortion, some only allow it if the mother's life or physical or mental health is endangered by the pregnancy.

The victory in Argentina for the right to abortion was a hard fought struggle over more than a decade and the struggle itself was part of a broader struggle for women's rights

across many issues such as violence against women, femicide, LGBT+ struggles, and women workers' rights.

Understanding and celebrating both the victories and bitter losses in the history of our struggles can provide not only pride at what was done, but also clarification of how to move forward the struggles for the elimination of racism, sexism and misogyny and economic exploitation that had divided and oppressed the vast majority of people living on this planet.

As Terry Conway states in "[Solidarity Across Continents for Women's Reproductive Justice](#)"

*The National Campaign for Safe and Free Legal Abortion (Campaña Nacional por el Aborto Legal Seguro y Gratuito) was set up in 2005 to campaign on these issues and has seeded a whole number of supporting groups. The network of teachers for the right to abortion (Red de Docentes por el Derecho al Aborto -RDDA) campaign for every child to have access to comprehensive sex education while the Network of Health Professionals for the Right to Decide (Red de Profesionales de la Salud por el Derecho a Decidir ) argue that access to legal abortion is a matter of public health. Perhaps the most important network is the socorristas, feminist 'lifeguards' who provided practical and emotional support to women needing abortions. And the campaign itself is the child of a wider feminist movement – a Green Tide as it is known – of which Ni Una Menos (Not One Less)- the movement against femicide- is by far the best known outside the country.*

The bill which passed in the Argentine upper house on the 29th of December 2020 legalised abortion until the 14th week of pregnancy. The first Argentine President to support the legalisation of abortion, President Alberto Fernandez introduced the bill to the Congress in November 2020. On Friday morning, 10th of December 2020, the bill passed the Lower House by a vote of 131-117.

Martina Rodriguez ends her article "[The Green Tide in Argentina Fighting for Abortion Rights](#)" by saying:

*Countries in Latin America are fighting for reproductive rights and feminist movements have their own agency (so ditch the white saviour complex, please). Nevertheless, the demand must be as an international force. We need to put on pressure, not only in our countries where there's a lack of substantial rights, but we must also defend them in every corner of the world and ensure that the laws meet our demands and are implemented justly. After all, it really is about our autonomies, our sexual freedom and our rights to choose something other than the destiny they want to box us in as human vessels. We won't stop until we have the law and a cultural change. It will be legal #SeraLey.*

## **The History of International Women's Day**

International Women's Day (8 March, IWD) was originally called International Working Women's Day. It was a socialist holiday established in 1911 by the Socialist International and is celebrated by women's groups around the world. In many countries, it is a national holiday and has recently been officially recognized by the United Nations. However, up until the 1970's, with the advent of a new women's movement, the radical working class roots of IWD had been practically forgotten. Due to its socialist leaning, it was excised from the United States memory, much as Labor Day replaced May Day, except in small immigrant enclaves or radical union groups. In Europe and the rest of the world, it continued to be widely celebrated, but tended to honour women in name only, mostly with flowers or by simply putting a woman's face on a male agenda. IWD, in fact, was the culmination of a century of women working in the labour, feminist, socialist, and anti-slavery and segregation movements to bring together the common interests of the working class and women's rights advocates.

There were several major trends that led to the establishment of IWD:

The first was a revolutionary fervour in Europe and the United States toward socialism, democratization and the vote. In Europe it was exemplified by a movement for working class men without property seeking the vote to further a socialist government, paralleled by a movement for middle class women to get the vote. This situation was mirrored in the United States by the struggle to gain the vote for black men and white women. The contradictions between these two types of suffrage movements were evident (should we fight for the non-propertied or black men to get the vote, even if women were excluded?). The solution, of course, was to get the vote for both groups.

Clara Zetkin was among the early socialists to see working class women as the driving force towards universal suffrage (everyone gets the vote independent of property qualifications to which it had been historically tied) since they bridged the divide, yet retain the principle of a revolutionary socialist agenda. It was Clara Zetkin who advocated for the merging of the working class socialist movement and the women's movement through the establishment of International Women's Day as a way to forward the goals of both labour and women. Zetkin opposed the stagist approach by the mainstream Women's Movement in Britain which advocated first getting women over a certain age with property the vote (the centenary of the Representation of the People Act of 1918 which gave all British men over 21 the vote and women of property and over 30 getting the vote in Britain) and then later that women without property be granted suffrage. It took another decade, 1928, for women without property to gain the franchise.

In 1906, Zetkin addresses why socialists should support Women's suffrage and Universal suffrage:

*We must always press on the question of Woman Suffrage when we are agitating about the Suffrage. We have always argued in*

*the Suffrage agitation that it was a question of equal rights for men and women, and we must continue to do so till we succeed. We must be united. We know that we shall not attain the victory of Woman Suffrage in a short time, but we know; too, that in our struggles for this measure we shall revolutionise hundreds of thousands of minds. We carry on our war, not as a fight between the sexes, but as a battle against the political might of the possessing classes; as a fight which we carry on with all our might and main, without hatred of the other sex; a fight whose final aim and whose glory will be that in the broadest masses of the proletariat the knowledge shall arise that when the day of the historical development shall have made sufficient progress then the proletariat, in its entirety, without distinction of sex, shall be able to call out to the capitalist order of society: "You rest on us, you oppress us, and, see, now the building which you have erected is tottering to the ground (Social Democracy and Women's Suffrage, 1906).*

The first clear victory in which the leadership of working class women following the establishment of IWD was the organization of the textile workers and women's suffrage in the United States and the second victory was Russian Revolution in 1917 which began with a massive strike by women textile workers in Petrograde (St. Petersburg) on International Women's Day. This strike was called against the orders of the Unions and left-wing political parties. The strikes lit the match of a country on the verge; they doubled in size to 200,000 workers and over the next few days, 66,000 men of the local army garrison joined forces with the strikers. The February Russian revolution began and the Tsar was forced to abdicate.

The second important factor was the increased numbers of women in the labour movement, particularly in the textile industry, as more and more women were pulled into factories and out of homes with the rise of industrial capitalism. Their struggle

to free themselves from the patriarchal home and obtain decent work conditions in the marketplace instead of being viewed as cheap labour is exemplified in the call for both "bread and roses." The textile strikes beginning in 1857 and the massive strikes between 1908 and 1915 were the activist expression of women's struggle for power. This was especially true after the horror of the Triangle Shirtwaist factory strike where mostly women workers, but also children and a few men were killed in a horrific sweatshop fire soon after a strike of textile workers (The Uprising of the 20,000) in New York city demanding trade union recognition, better wages, working conditions and health and safety measures.

While initially the feminist movement focused on human rights issues for women such as suffrage, many of the women felt allied to working class struggles for decent wages and rights and took up the call that freedom and equality for one group meant freedom and equality for all. While the anti-slavery movement seems distinct, the end of slavery pushed all workers, black and white into the same labour struggle as wage labourers. Once this occurred, it was up to anti-racist groups to fight for equality within the labour movement. This, of course, always raised the question of equality for the other major group excluded from equality in the labour force – women.

These movements, occurring in a short period between the end of the civil war and the end of WW1, provided the activist and theoretical base to try to unite diverse groups into the revolutionary struggle. The formation of IWD was an explicit effort to unite the interests and theories of women and male labour (including workers of colour that was implied in the socialist agenda) under a Revolutionary Socialist agenda in support of universal suffrage and economic equality. The following excerpts (which we hope you will read, view, sing-along- with, explore and enjoy) are just a sampling of some of the actions and words of some prominent working women and

movements.

We need to go back to the rise of the post-Civil War labour movement and the first wave of feminism to see the inevitable class contradictions that arose between women of the bourgeoisie and women of the working class. The differences in approach are obvious when we look at the issues. Bourgeois women advocating women's suffrage linked it to property qualifications and argued that women as a group should be enfranchised without looking at how this left blacks and many non-propertied workers without the vote. The birth control movement also wound up linking to eugenics groups that were aligned to repugnant issues targeting the poor, the disabled and people of colour.

To win equality for all people, women of the left argued that the economic and social exploitation endemic to the capitalist system be eliminated by the triumph of socialism. While suffrage and access to birth control were clearly important reform issues, they would not in and of itself enable all women's, or for that matter, all people's equality. However when reformist men chose to limit their call for the vote to blacks and non-propertied working men – forgetting that this still excluded women – the dynamics shifted and the call for socialists to specifically include women in their demand for the vote was born.

*This is an extract from an article on the **Daily Kos** [“ACM: In Honour of International Women's Day – In the Words of our Founding Mothers”](#). The authors said: “What we decided we wanted to do was to allow women to speak for themselves, so we reproduced some quotes from these women. We wanted to discuss not only women that were known as leaders or that were heralded during their times; we also want to remind people of the voices of those who fought on the shop-floors, those that became “leaders” due to circumstance. Their actions and speeches inspired and moved others and they are still relevant.” For those quotes please go to the original article.*