

How Socialist Women Built Feminism for All

In the late 1800s, working-class German women challenged the common sexism in the early socialist movement to assert autonomy – proving that they didn't need fathers, husbands, or rich women to speak for them.

Speaking at a [Social Democratic Party](#) (SPD) party conference in Halle in 1890, Emma Ihrer told her male counterparts in no uncertain terms: 'We have the right to be treated as fully equal comrades.' This was the first legal party conference after the lifting of the Anti-Socialist Laws (1878–1890) in the recently unified German Reich. But while men were now again able to organise legally in workers' associations, Prussian law continued to prohibit women from joining political organisations or participating in political gatherings until 1908.

That did not prevent women like Emma Ihrer, Helma Steinbach, or Clara Zetkin from finding ways to organise within the party — but first they had to overcome male resistance within the workers' organisations. Complaints about sexist behaviour and a lack of support were commonplace. At the Gotha SPD conference in 1896, Luise Kähler from Hamburg protested: 'Many male comrades treat the women's question so facetiously that we must wonder whether they really support equal rights at all.'

In comparison to the workers' movement, the proletarian women's movement was still a relatively new phenomenon in the early 1890s. Women had begun organising in trade unions in the 1880s; for example, the Society for the Protection of Women Workers' Interests and the Trade Association for Berlin Coat Seamstresses were both founded in 1885. The shared experience of criminalisation, persecution, and exile under the Anti-Socialist Laws brought the two movements closer together. Especially in its early years, the [German workers' movement](#) was characterised by anti-feminism. While important progress had been made by the time of the Halle party conference in 1890, anti-feminist attitudes and patriarchal structures continued to represent an obstacle to the proletarian women's movement.

The Problem of Proletarian Anti-Feminism

The historian Werner Thönnessen coined the term 'proletarian anti-feminism' to characterise the early period of the German workers' movement. It applies above all to the General German Workers' Association (ADAV), founded in 1863 by Ferdinand Lassalle. The ADAV called for a ban on women's paid employment, arguing that women workers were undercutting wages and accelerating the dissolution of the family. The question of women's political rights was not taken seriously, and the organisation believed that only men should have the right to vote.

These demands were rooted in ideas that largely reduced women to the roles of wife and mother. Reinhold Schlingmann drew on the hierarchical gender models prevalent among the bourgeoisie when he argued at an ADAV meeting in Berlin in 1866 that women should not work because they were 'physically different, weaker, their forms soft and round, less muscular; their bodies are not capable of physical exertion.' Because women were also intellectually different, he argued, there existed a 'natural' division of labour: the man went to work in the factory while the woman attended to the housework. It was capital, Schlingmann asserted, that forced women (and children) into the factories, alienating them from 'their true vocation', by which he meant housework and child-rearing, the work of reproduction.

There is more to the story, however, than the programmatic and ideological dimension of proletarian anti-feminism described by Thönnessen. Historians like Thomas Welskopp point to the sociohistorical origins of the German workers' movement, which lay outside the industrial proletariat. In fact, the social base of the [early workers' movement](#) was concentrated in the old craft milieus of masons and journeymen. Welskopp argues that the principal root of proletarian anti-feminism lay in the misogynist culture prevalent in those circles. Examining the issues through the lens of social history and cultural sociology allows us to look beyond the (very real) sexist behaviour within the movement,

as described in the classical works on the women's movement, to identify the structural roots of proletarian anti-feminism.

The working men's associations represented the only social context in which male workers were able to freely express and develop their personality. As Welskopp puts it, here they were able to 'appear 'dignified,' display habitual 'respectability,' and debate as equals; they were active protagonists in public and political life.' Drinking and debate in smoke-filled meetings cultivated an exclusively male habitus. The 'flip side was the exclusion of women, in the course of the transformation and universalisation of an originally misogynous journeymen culture.' In that sense, the exclusion of women was a constitutive condition for the emergence of a militant male citizen.

The goal of proletarian anti-feminism was to preserve patriarchal gender relations (i.e., the male 'breadwinner' and the woman in her supposedly 'natural' role as housewife and mother). The demands of the proletarian anti-feminists could also be interpreted as a rather futile response to the progressive dissolution of the family in the course of industrialisation. In reality, it was never about banning all paid employment for women — it was about keeping women out of 'male' professions. Proletarian anti-feminism was a complex phenomenon, with cultural as well as programmatic and ideological aspects. The failure of the bourgeois revolution of 1848 was followed by a phase of reactionary restoration. New laws prohibited women from organising politically and excluded them from the press, thereby fostering propitious conditions for proletarian anti-feminism during this formative period of the workers' movement. It took time for the movement to deal with this anti-feminist legacy.

Marxism's Emancipatory Programme

It took a long, hard struggle for the social-democratic women's movement to prevail over proletarian anti-feminism and secure the space to flourish. The most important contributions to Marxist theory were August Bebel's [Woman and Socialism](#) (1879) and Friedrich Engels's [The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State](#) (1884). While these two works on the so-called woman question were hugely influential within the workers' movement, they long remained the only major socialist analyses of the issue. Social-democratic periodicals continued to discuss the woman question, but substantial theoretical advances were few and far between.

Bebel discusses the 'shortsighted' demand for a prohibition on paid employment in detail in his *Woman and Socialism*: 'Opposing women's work is as futile as fighting the introduction of machines, or attempting to halt the decline of small-scale industry through reactionary — and inadequate — measures.' Instead, Marxist theory showed that women's employment was a precondition for liberation through the workers' movement. As Engels put it: 'The emancipation of woman will only be possible when woman can take part in production on a large, social scale, and domestic work no longer claims anything but an insignificant amount of her time.' He regarded industrialisation as the driving force of this process.

These positions, this break with the so-called craftsmen's communism of the preindustrial workers' movement, did not simply appear out of nowhere. The new ideas initially took root in parts of the movement that were more strongly influenced by liberalism, such as the Social Democratic Workers' Party founded in 1869 by August Bebel and Wilhelm Liebknecht. The liberal influence is unmistakable in the early editions of *Woman and Socialism*. Only in later printings — of which there were many — did Bebel sharpen the Marxist slant of his argument.

It was these two works that shaped socialist debates on women's emancipation in subsequent decades. Clara Zetkin drew on Bebel and Engels in her speech at the founding conference of the [Second International](#) in 1889 in Paris, published as a pamphlet the same year. Zetkin sketched out a [programme of action for the proletarian women's movement](#), which she expanded in the course of the 1890s. All three contributions were written for the movement and were of central importance for sidelining anti-feminist ideas in the party — although they certainly never disappeared entirely.

Creating a Space

Following the repeal of the Anti-Socialist Laws in 1890, the proletarian women's movement organised within the organisations of Social Democracy, despite facing a multitude of obstacles. In

order to be able to operate at all in the sexist milieu of the workers' movement, they developed what I would call a *spatial practice*. These organising concepts were not designed by theorists but rather emerged through a multifaceted practice revolving around autonomous structures within the SPD — which were also vital to get around the repressive legislation targeting all Social Democrats.

In the early days, so-called agitation committees were used to avoid the ban on women joining political organisations. These committees had no statutes, standing orders, leadership, or formal membership. At the Halle conference in 1890, women members harshly criticised the dearth of space allotted to women in the party's newspapers. Helma Steinbach from Hamburg protested that the social-democratic newspaper *Arbeiterblatt* refused to publish her articles, and demanded her 'bit of white paper'. Beginning in 1892, the periodical *Die Gleichheit*, edited by Clara Zetkin, became the unchallenged voice of the proletarian women's movement.

The agitation committees grew and spread throughout Germany. The Cologne SPD conference in 1893 gave the Berliner Agitation Committee a central organising role, but a wave of state repression starting that year dashed their plans. The committees were declared formal organisations and dissolved one after the other, until by 1895 the model was no longer a plausible option. A new concept was needed to channel the work into more dependable structures.

The socialist women's movement now operated through a system of contact persons who organised groups of activists both small and large. At their meetings they discussed issues, developed positions and organised strikes. Over time an increasingly dense network of emerged, led from 1900 to 1908 by Otilie Baader. The number of contact persons grew from 25 in 1901 to 407 in 1908. A regional structure was introduced to account for the rapid growth, which the SPD officially recognised in 1905. The importance of the social-democratic women's conferences, which were held in advance of the regular party conference every two years from 1900 to 1908, remains seriously underestimated to this day. At these meetings, representatives of the proletarian women's movement from across Germany met to debate current problems and the solutions to them.

The establishment of these autonomous structures represented a significant step forward for the proletarian women's movement under the specific conditions of the time. But this practice also generated tensions between the aim of organising men and women together, and the reality of largely separate structures. The concept of expediency emerged: the separate structures were to be tolerated as long as external conditions prevented joint organisation. It was thus no surprise when, after the state ban on women joining political organisations was lifted in 1908, the SPD rapidly set about dismantling the autonomous structures of the proletarian women's movement and integrating them into the party — in some cases, against the will of their members.

At the women's conference in Nuremberg in 1908, Luise Zietz insisted: 'These conferences have made an exceptional contribution to our having so many experienced female comrades today. [...] It would be a great setback for the women's movement if the women's conferences were abolished.' Despite such resistance, the next regular conference formalized the integration of the women's organisations into party structures. The network of contact persons was abolished, along with separate election of conference delegates by women's meetings. Although the women's conferences still formally existed (a last one met in Jena in 1911), they were subsequently only held at the regional level and subject to the party leadership's control.

What Remained?

Did the German proletarian women's movement fail? At least until World War I, it was regarded as a flourishing model for the parties of the Second International. It is notable that its pre-1908 spatial practice inspired socialists internationally. [Alexandra Kollontai](#) wrote in her autobiography about attending the Mannheim women's conference in 1906: 'Meetings and discussions with Clara Zetkin, with the worker Otilie Baader . . . and others convinced me of the validity of my efforts to create an apparatus within the party for the work with women.'

The [Communist Women's International](#), founded in 1920 in Moscow, took up the tradition of spatial practice. It immediately established its own official organ and a secretariat to coordinate the work of women's sections in the Communist parties across the world. The International Women's Secretariat operated autonomously for six years before it was incorporated into the Executive Committee of the Communist International in 1926 in the course of Stalinisation.

Altogether, the process of integrating the proletarian women's movement into the structures of Social Democracy was riddled with contradictions. But in 1908, the SPD leadership buried a democratic space that had great potential in building the fight for women's liberation.